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'Urrgh.. will they stop going on about their relationships': An Examination of Self-disclosure by Travel Influencers on Consumer Outcomes

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In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful

"Allah (the God) makes the way to Paradise easy
for those who treads the path in search of knowledge"
(Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of self-disclosure by Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on consumer outcomes with particular reference to travel influencers. It is until now unknown whether intimate self-disclosure by SMIs is beneficial or detrimental to the influencer-consumer relationship. Adopting a pragmatic stance, this thesis employs a mixed methods explanatory design—two experimental studies and one interview study—to provide a nuanced understanding of the impact of influencers' self-disclosures. Study 1 found that high depth and breadth of self-disclosure negatively impact consumer purchase intention and WOM intention. This relationship was mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure, trust, and product attitude, supporting the (ISDM) Influencer Self-disclosure Model. Study 2 confirmed the critical role that appropriateness played in the relationship between social self-disclosure and consumer outcomes. Study 3 found that followers consider travel influencers' social self-disclosures less desirable than travel self-disclosure or travel content; but not all social self-disclosure negatively impacts consumers' perceptions. In fact, within specific bounds (i.e., no more than 20% of content being social self-disclosure, separation of social self-disclosure from promotional content, appropriateness of delivery and content, and authenticity), social self-disclosure can provoke positive reactions from followers. Theoretical contributions to the areas of digital marketing, social media communicative norms, and travel literature; and practical implications for influencers, marketing firms, and salespeople are provided.

Chapter 1: Introduction

How much do social media influencers (SMIs)' disclosures of their personal lives matter to us? Do we, as followers of SMIs, regard them as friends or as salespeople? And Hence, do we want them to disclose to us like friends or do we prefer that they act professionally like salespeople and refrain from disclosing personal information to their followers?

Self-disclosure refers to sharing and revealing personal information to others (Winum & Banikiotes, 1983), such as personal circumstances, thoughts, feelings, experiences, and future plans (Cozby, 1973). Self-disclosure is not a new phenomenon and its beneficial impact on interpersonal relationships has long been understood (Altman & Taylor, 1968). However, the impact of self-disclosure by Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on the consumption behaviour of their audiences—the prospective consumers of the things they promote—is as yet poorly understood. Do followers really like it when influencers share details of their relationships, for example, or do they think that is TMI (too much information)? For businesses influencers are marketers, while for their followers they are most likely seen as both friends and marketers? Yet, it is undefined yet when does occupying each role (i.e., marketer and/or friend) generate favourable consumer behaviour? The overarching aim of this research is to provide an understanding of that impact of self-disclosure by an influencer on the 'influencer-consumer relationship' during a social media advertising campaign—and specifically, how does this play out in the context of Instagram travel influencers.

This chapter introduces the work developed in this thesis to understand influencers' self-disclosures and their impact on consumer outcomes. First, a case is made for the importance of influencer marketing, with special attention to the travel context. Second, the theoretical grounding is presented. Third, the research gap is discussed. Lastly, the outline of this thesis is presented.

The Importance of Social Media Marketing

Social media influencers (SMIs) are increasingly becoming a popular means of brand promotion; a practice known as 'influencer marketing' (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2020), influencer marketing has continued to grow as an industry over the last few years. It became a $4.6 billion industry in 2018 and is expected to continue growing this year to $6.5 billion. Since 2016, 86% of marketers have used influencer marketing, and budgets for influencer marketing are increasing year after year. While the overall spend on influencer marketing reached $1.6 billion in 2018, in 2020 the spend on Instagram influencers alone is estimated to reach $9.7 billion. The global spend on influencer marketing is projected to reach $15 billion by 2022. Marketers have found the return on every $1 spent on an influencer marketing campaign to be $5.78 on average (ibid.). Thus, 67% of marketers already plan to increase their budget for influencer marketing. According to the BBC News (2020), influencer marketing is becoming more integral to the overall marketing industry, with more and more brands striving to work with influencers.

One post by a SMI can increase sales significantly and in some cases causes the advertised goods to be sold out in hours. For example, in 2015, Lord & Taylor hired 50 fashion influencers on Instagram to post pictures of themselves in the new dress the company was launching. The dress was sold out in days online and from all branches, which made it the most successful marketing campaign in the company's 190-years history (Griner, 2015). Revolve Group Inc. went from the brink of bankruptcy to a billion-dollar valuation through collaborations with SMIs (Fortune, 2019). With a fan base of 28 million followers on Instagram, Huda Kattan started her cosmetic brand 'Huda Beauty' from her home and promoted it through her account; it is now worth a billion dollars (CNBC, 2018).

Furthermore, the Digital Marketing Institute (2020) has found that influencer marketing has surpassed print marketing, with an ROI rates 11 times that of online ads, and that 6 in 10 teenagers prefer advice from influencers over celebrities. 40% of consumers have purchased something after seeing it on social media platforms like YouTube or Instagram.

According to Digital Marketing Institute (2020), Instagram's most lucrative industry for influencer marketing is travel, as the advertising industry for travel as a whole is worth millions of dollars. Travel influencers get paid more than any other sector for their sponsored posts. Many travellers use social media travel influencers as a primary information source. Tourism trends are heavily shaped by influencer marketing in the travel space (Dickson, 2019), as Instagram functions as both a travel guide, and a source of inspiration. 86% of people (and 92% of Gen Z) said they've become

interested in a specific location after seeing user-generated content (Macdonald, 2019). New Zealand's South Island in 2015 experienced a major spike in tourism due to Instagram influencers (Dickson, 2019).

According to Forbes (2018), *"the Instagram factor clearly plays a major role when it comes to the decisions that millennials make when choosing travel destinations."* In fact, 40% of millennials think about the "Instagrammability" of a location before booking a trip (MediaKix, 2019). MediaKix (2019) offers a case study of successful travel influencer marketing. In October 2018, Hilton launched their "Seven Urban Wonders of the World" marketing campaign, which crowdsourced top metropolitan destinations through various SMIs with a combined audience of more than 3.5 million. The selected influencers posted at least two Instagram posts each, including indoor and outdoor locations, as well as Hilton hotel rooms and suites tagged with @hiltonhotels and the hashtag #SevenUrbanWonders. As a result, Hilton on Instagram reached 2,720,000 Instagram followers, and the brand's Instagram achieved 110,302 Likes, 1,892 Comments, and an overall average 4.62% increase in engagement rate. It is clear from these examples that influencer marketing has been an important and effective marketing tool, especially in the case of travel (Gretzel, 2018).

Theoretical Grounding

A number of disciplines have addressed the impact of self-disclosure on relationships in general. The theoretical foundations of this research were drawn from socio-psychological literature on self-disclosure, information systems literature on dyadic

and public self-disclosure in Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), marketing literature on salespeople's self-disclosure, and lastly digital marketing literature on SMIs.

Self-disclosure is "the act of revealing and sharing personal information with others" (Jourard, 1971). Specifically, Fisher (1984) defines self-disclosure as "*Verbal behaviour through which individuals truthfully, sincerely and intentionally communicate novel, ordinarily private information about themselves to one or more addressees*". Self-disclosure has two main dimensions; depth (quality) and breadth (quantity) (Jourard, 1971; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Depth refers to the level of intimacy of the disclosure (superficial vs. intimate; Kim & Song, 2016). Whereas breadth refers to the number of areas that are disclosed (wide vs. narrow range of topics, e.g. work, family, political orientation; Utz, 2015; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Personal liking has been found to positively correlate to their amount of self-disclosure (Kahn & Rudestam, 1971), and greater disclosure builds trust and closeness more than low disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Individuals who disclose personal information about themselves are generally perceived as more attractive than those who disclose very little (see e.g., Berg & Archer, 1983; Archer, Berg, & Runge, 1980; Winum & Banikiotes, 1983).

Although the interpersonal relationships and the CMC literatures generally affirm that the disclosure of personal private information positively impacts relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kashian, Jang, Shin, Dai, & Walther, 2017; Utz, 2015), a different pattern is found in the marketing literature, which indicates that a salespersons' self-

disclosure of personal information unrelated to the sale negatively impacts consumer-seller relationship (Andersson, Gustafsson, Kristensson, & Wästlund, 2016; Jacobs, Hyman, & McQuitty, 2001). However, note that only two articles in the marketing field have explicitly focussed on self-disclosure, and those were in the context of in-store sales personnel.

Jacobs et al. (2001) categorized self-disclosures in a business setting as *exchange-specific* and *social* self-disclosures. Exchange-specific self-disclosure is a disclosure of information necessary to the product or service, and as such is considered relevant to the pending exchange—for example experiences and feelings in relation to the product or service. On the other hand, social self-disclosure is the disclosure of personal information beyond what is relevant to the exchange; for example, a frontline employee may disclose social information about their personal background to establish friendship. The authors recommended that a salesperson should minimize their social disclosures and maximize their exchange-specific disclosures, because social self-disclosures in this context are likely to negatively impact the customer's trust and liking.

Research Gap

Following the above, little is known about the effect of marketers' self-disclosure on consumers beyond the traditional relationship between a salesperson and a consumer. To the best of my knowledge, no studies have examined the impact of self-

disclosure's key dimensions (i.e., depth and breadth) on an influencer-consumer relationship.

However, the paradox about SMIs is that they are not only acting as marketing professionals on social media platforms, but are also forming social relationships with their followers. Marshall & Redmond (2016) explained that influencers acquire and build an audience through self-presentation techniques, and use of intimacy to appeal to others. They generally interact with their followers through publicly disclosing personal information, including details of their thoughts, dreams, food consumption, and relationships details. McCorquodale (2019) suggests that there is a proximity that influencers have with their followers, due to the relationship being set up like a friendship. Yet, the author affirms that "*regardless of how this relationship is framed, theirs is not a friendship and the entire construct exists for business reasons*". However, this research has focused more on the influencer perspective, while the consumer perspective, i.e., how consumers themselves perceive and experience the relationship, has not been studied. Thus, to fully understand the relevance and value of this relationship in marketing, the consumer perspective is important.

Due to the unique context of SMIs, who present both professional and social (friend-like) personas, it is hard to predict what the results of a public self-disclosure on consumer behavior would be. It is unknown whether their followers regard them more as marketers or as friends—so therefore it is unclear what are followers' expectations, perceptions, and behaviours towards influencers' self-disclosure?

Increasingly personal forms of public self-disclosure are becoming the norm in influencers' communications (Colliander, Marder, Falkman, Madestam, Erik, and Sagfossen, 2017) and companies are devoting heavy marketing budgets to be spent on influencer marketing (linqia, 2017). This research addresses the research gap arising from the lack of understanding on the impact of SMI's self-disclosure on followers, as potential consumers.

Specifically, the current research examines followers' reactions to social self-disclosure by an influencer and its impact on their transactional intention, specifically in the travel influencer context. To investigate this a mixed method approach is applied; two experiments and an interview study will be conducted. Specifically, the empirical work aims to test and support a conceptual model for predicting desirable consumer outcomes from SMI's social self-disclosures. This model is developed in the literature review chapter, and describes the following chain of causation; social self-disclosure (higher vs. lower) impacts on perceived appropriateness, which subsequently influences trust, product attitude and the downstream outcomes, word of mouth (WOM) and purchase intent.

Overall, this thesis aims to unravel the impact of SMIs' social self-disclosures, synthesising what appear to be contradictory schools of thought on the impact of such disclosure for 'friends' vs. salespeople. In doing so this thesis broadly intends first, to contribute valuable knowledge on influencers' self-disclosures, which is of critical importance given the prominence of influencers within modern day marketing. It also intends to provide specific knowledge on self-disclosure by travel influencers,

important for Tourism scholars. Finally, it intends to provide a number of research-led best practices for social disclosure by influencers during marketing campaigns, for marketing practitioners, travel managers and influencers themselves, in order to help increase influencers' effectiveness as marketers.

Outline of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follow: chapter 2 will provide a multi-disciplinary review of the literature around self-disclosure, along with the conceptual framework and related hypotheses. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of the methodology of this research, with specific focus on the philosophical stance, and the details of the mixed method approach adopted is discussed. Chapter 4 covers the first experimental study, which establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between self-disclosure and consumer behaviour. Chapter 5 covers the second experimental study, which validates the critical mediating role appropriateness plays in the relationship between self-disclosure and consumer behaviour. Chapter 6 covers the third qualitative study, which explains and validates the quantitative results. Chapter 7 will provide a discussion, bringing the results of the three studies together. Lastly, chapter 8 concludes by presenting the theoretical and practical contributions, the limitations of the work, and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will present a multi-disciplinary review of research around self-disclosure. First, a general overview of the concept of self-disclosure, its definition, and dimensions will be presented. Second, the impact of this behaviour on interpersonal relationships will be discussed with special attention to the social norms governing the appropriateness of self-disclosure in different settings and contexts. Then, the application of self-disclosure in computer mediated communication (CMC) will be discussed—whether in a dyadic private setting, or a public setting. Afterwards, a review of the marketing literature that examines self-disclosure in a business setting will be presented. This will lead to the discussion about self-disclosure by social media influencers (SMI) and its impact on their followers. Then, special attention will be given to the application of self-disclosure in the case of travel influencer. Finally, the conceptual model of the empirical studies will be formulated.

Self-disclosure

Since Jourard's pioneering work (1959, 1971), substantial empirical and theoretical work on self-disclosure has been done. Though born out of social psychology, the concept has been explored across many other disciplines including information systems (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011), marketing (Andersson, Gustafsson, Kristensson, & Wästlund, 2016), and education (Mazer, Murphy & Cheri, & Simonds, 2007), which revealed its broader application in other areas of life. The term self-disclosure has become a psychological term for the process of making the self known to others (Jourard & Lasakow, 1957).

Conceptually, self-disclosure refers to sharing and revealing inner personal information to others (Winum & Banikiotes, 1983). Because the information revealed include personal circumstances, thoughts, feelings, personality, experiences, and future plans, Cozby (1973) defined it as an act of 'sharing' oneself with others.

The definition of self-disclosure has evolved over time and several definitions have been proposed in the literature. Some definitions of self-disclosure are broader and more inclusive, but at the risk of vagueness. For example, Wheeles (1976) defines self-disclosure as any message about the self that a person communicates to another. Derlega and Grzelak (1979) defined it as any communication that refers to aspects of the self, such as personal states, dispositions, past events, and future plans. On the other hand, some definitions are more specific and suggests some boundaries. For example, Chelune (1975) specifies that this personal information must be an intentional act typically communicated through verbal behaviours describing the person. Fisher (1984) further delimits the definition, requiring that to qualify as self-disclosure, a communication must be: true, sincere, intentional, novel, private, and voluntary.

Thus, this research is more aligned with Fisher (1984) definition of self-disclosure as "*Verbal behaviour through which individuals truthfully, sincerely and intentionally communicate novel, ordinarily private information about themselves to one or more addressees*".

Dimensions of Self-disclosure

As self-disclosure is “the act of revealing personal information to others” (Jourard, 1971), consequently personal information may vary in the degree of self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994). Self-disclosure is a complex multidimensional concept (Kim & Song, 2016), and the majority of self-disclosure scholars highlight two dimensions in particular; depth (quality) and breadth (quantity) (e.g., Jourard, 1971; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Depth refers to the intimacy level of the disclosure, the superficial-personal dimension (Kim & Song, 2016). Whereas breadth refers to the number of areas that are disclosed (e.g. work, family, political orientation) (Utz, 2015).

Altman & Taylor (1968) developed the Social Penetration Theory (SPT), also known as the ‘onion theory’. The theory viewed the self as an ‘onion-skin’ structure consisting of several layers representing the depth dimension. The theory suggests that to really know a person, it is necessary to explore them from outer to inner layers, as in peeling an onion. As mentioned earlier, depth refers to the degree of intimacy in a specific area of an individual’s life (Collins & Miller, 1994). The outer layers include superficial information such as biographical information (Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973). As one progresses toward central layers and increases depth of the disclosure, there are more fundamental and core characteristics of the self (Rubin, 1975).

The theory characterises the self as an indefinite number of “items”—such as belief, values, thoughts, and feelings. These items are grouped into areas or categories, such as: religion, interests, hobbies, gender and family, reflecting the breadth dimension

(Altman & Taylor, 1968). Breadth is a is a mono-dimensional construct which refers to the number of different topical areas (items) disclosed (Utz, 2015). Within this dimension there are levels for the breadth of disclosure (wide range of topics vs. narrow range) (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). This places the person who exposes very few aspects of their personal life to another person at one extreme (low breadth), and the person who reveals many sides of their personal life at the other (high breadth) (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993)

Within each of these categories—for example, family—there are items ranging from relatively superficial things (e.g., family size) to extremely intimate matters (e.g., hostile or fearful feelings toward parents) (Altman & Taylor, 1968). The innermost layer of personality includes needs, values, feelings, fears, and self-concept (Derlega et al., 1993). The central aspects of depth dimension (high depth) are increasingly vulnerable (Jourard, 1971); the greater the depth, the greater the probability that it represents a vulnerable aspect of personality. Examples include beliefs regarding real or imagined inadequacies and weaknesses held about one's self, emotionally threatening experiences, and feelings of significance to one's self-concept and self-worth (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Utz (2015) observed that disclosure at the early stages of a relationship normally concerns fairly superficial information about only a few areas. As the relationship matures and grows, so do the breadth and depth of the disclosures made.

Self-disclosure in Interpersonal Relationships

Self-disclosure has been found to play a critical role in the development and maintenance of social relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). This has been confirmed

in different types of ‘strong tie’ relationships such as friends, best-friends, romantic partner, spouse, and relatives (Ibid).

Self-disclosure is likely to alter the recipient’s perceptions about the speaker (Fisher, 1984; Lin & Utz, 2017). Collins & Miller (1994) explain that a person’s disclosure may produce a positive, neutral, or negative impression, and that although the quality and quantity of the information disclosed play a major role in forming perceptions about the discloser, the impact is not simply a function of the absolute level of disclosure. Rather it depends on a variety of additional variables, including: the nature of the interaction, the relationship between the discloser and the recipient, the gender of the discloser and the recipient, the appropriateness of the disclosure in the context, whether the disclosure appears personalistic and selective (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), whether the recipient generally have positive beliefs about individuals who make disclosures or about the value of receiving disclosure (Derlega et al., 1993).

Generally speaking, self-disclosure is understood to have positive impact on interpersonal relationships, because people form more positive impression of others who are willing to share information about themselves, compared to others who are less open (Winum & Banikiotes, 1983). The positive impacts of self-disclosure on relationships included greater trust, intimacy, mutual liking, more satisfying social encounters (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Worthy et al., 1969), attraction (Archer, Berg, & Runge, 1980), closeness (Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013), and solidarity in disclosive relationships (Wheeles, 1976).

Furthermore, self-disclosure has a strong but complex relationship to mental health (Gitter & Black, 1976). Jourard (1964) considered a person's ability to self-disclose as an indicator of a healthy personality, with unusually low or high levels of self-disclosure being related to maladjustment (Cozby, 1973).

According to Goffman (1982), judgments about one's degree of psychological adjustment are based on the appropriateness of behaviour in a particular social situation. The social penetration theory (SPT) suggests that for any social-situational context there is an appropriate level of self-disclosure, and that those who self-disclose in accordance with the context will be perceived as more adjusted than those who don't (Altman & Taylor, 1968). Chelune (1975) agrees that perceptions of a discloser's mental health depend on their ability to differentiate contextual variables (that is, who, when, and where), and adapting one's disclosure accordingly.

Violation of social standards for appropriate disclosure may lead to less favourable impressions about the discloser (Wilson & Rappaport, 1974). Disclosing intimate information about oneself at the wrong time or to the wrong persons may reflect maladjustment (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974a; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b; Derlega et al., 1973). On the other hand, nondisclosure when self-disclosure is appropriate may also be indicative of a maladjusted person (Caltabiano & Smithson, 1983; Chelune, 1976).

Self-disclosure flexibility has been defined as the ability to adjust or adapt the disclosure according to the social situation (Winum & Banikiotes, 1983). Chelune (1975) found that individuals who are flexible in their disclosure may be viewed as more attractive and adjusted than those who always manifest the same level of self-

disclosure irrespective of the social situation, as those were found to be the least liked (Jourard, 1959). High levels of disclosure flexibility resulted in more positive perceptions of social adjustment than did low disclosure flexibility (Winum & Banikiotes, 1983; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b).

We can see that self-disclosure plays a crucial role on the formation of social ties, subject to certain social norms. In the next section, the literature on those norms is considered.

Social Norms Governing Self-disclosure

Relatively little research has been conducted on the norms governing appropriate self-disclosure (Barnett Pearce & Sharp, 1973), possibly due to the subjectivity of the concept. From a normative lens, disclosure appropriateness is interpreted according to the extent that the disclosure complies or deviates from existing cultural expectations and social norms (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). If a disclosure violates social norms because it is shared in the wrong place or at the wrong time, it leads to unfavourable perceptions of a discloser (Altman & Taylor, 1973), such as when someone makes disclosure at the start of a conversation with a new acquaintance (Bazarova, 2012)

Social norms are a set of written or unwritten rules that determine acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in a certain context (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Self-disclosure is subject to social norms which govern interactional behaviour (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979); namely: incremental disclosure over acquaintance time, the norm of

reciprocity, symmetrical reciprocal disclosure, and equity (Berg & Archer, 1980; Chelune, 1976; Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980).

Most research on self-disclosure have been focused on dyads. Self-disclosure is by nature particularly appropriate for dyadic interaction (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). In such settings, it usually occurs incrementally during the acquaintance process (Morton, 1978), characterised by Altman & Taylor (1968) as developing through gradual increases in the depth and breadth of self-disclosure, becoming more intimate as relationships develop, with the norms of disclosure changing accordingly (Jacobs, Hyman, et al., 2001). Altman & Taylor (1968) suggested that revealing intimate information at an early stage of a relationship can have a backlash effect, as it might be viewed as too much too soon. People who act in this way are less likeable and viewed as maladjusted (Ibid).

The norm of reciprocity (also known as “dyadic effect”, Jourard, 1971) has been a consistent finding in self-disclosure literature. Social norms dictate reciprocal exchange of intimacy in dyadic interactions (Chittick & Himelstein, 1967); when personal information about the self is revealed, only personal information in return from the recipient can satisfy the norm (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974a; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b). The importance of this "reciprocity norm" is proven in studies that find reciprocity of self-disclosure occurs even when the discloser is not liked (Cozby, 1973; Derlega et al., 1973).

According to the Social Exchange Theory developed by (Worthy et al., 1969) the reception of self-disclosing information from another is rewarding because it implies

that one is trusted, and the recipient then reciprocates to indicate mutual liking (Brewere & Mittelman, 1980; Chalkin & Derlega, 1974a). Hence, a norm of equity is said to be operating such that the recipient of a disclosure feels obligated to reciprocate (Worthy et al., 1969). Though, (Cozby, 1972) argued that in the context of highly intimate social relationships, costs like anxiety over sharing highly sensitive private information become salient.

Furthermore, reciprocity is usually symmetrical—as disclosure by one person in a dyad increases, so does that by the other (Altman & Taylor, 1968; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Chittick & Himelstein, 1967). Under this view, people match the level of intimacy in their disclosure to the level of intimacy they receive to maintain equity of exchange (Berg & Archer, 1983), even when reciprocity entails highly intimate disclosures (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Disclosure by one member of a dyad establishes the context for appropriateness of the level of disclosure by the other member (Brewere & Mittelman, 1980). Thus, the member of a dyad who receives a disclosure may be more sensitive to normative requirements than the member who initiates the disclosure (Davis, 1977). Chaikin and Derlega (1974a) found that the person who violates the norm by revealing intimate information following the other's disclosure of superficial information is regarded by observers as maladjusted. On the other hand, the norm violator who follows intimate disclosure with superficial information was rated as cold. In addition, both norm violators were less liked and rated as inappropriate (Ibid).

There are times where self-disclosure can be perceived inappropriate (Collins & Miller, 1994). Particularly, high disclosure to a stranger violates the norms of social

penetration which prescribe that relationships proceed from nonintimate to intimate areas of exchange via self-disclosure (Cozby,1973). Chelune (1976) found that high disclosure to a stranger was viewed as less emotionally healthy than low disclosure. A similar, finding has been achieved by Chalkin & Derlega (1974). They found that revealing highly intimate information about personal problems to a stranger, even when the stranger will not be seen again, is counter-normative, indicating a norm prohibiting intimate disclosure to a stranger. In addition, Archer & Berg (1978) found that subjects did not reciprocate a stranger's high disclosure if it was perceived to place them under obligations that they did not consent to, unless the stranger explicitly restored the subject's control over their own level of disclosure.

Despite that, it has been observed that people sometimes disclose themselves quite intimately to total strangers, such as seatmates on a bus, train or plane, known in the literature as the "stranger on the train" phenomenon (Rubin, 1975). As Simmle (1950) notes, *"The stranger who moves on often receives the most surprising openness."* The stranger who will never be seen again may be the recipient of intimate self-disclosure because the context ensures that the dyadic boundary will not be violated, especially when a stranger does not have access to the disclosers inner network of friends and acquaintances (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977).

Although intimate disclosures to strangers may be perceived as inappropriate, it may also be well-received (Lin & Utz, 2017), building closeness (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), familiarity-based liking (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), positive impressions, and social attraction (Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013).

The next section considers research that elaborates on the findings above by investigating the roles of level of intimacy, valence, and content in the determination of responses to self-disclosure.

The Impact of Level of Intimacy, Valence, and Content

Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak (2018) found that perceptions about the discloser are highly impacted by the positive or negative valence of the disclosure and depth (intimacy level) of the information disclosed. In addition, the content of the disclosure has been found to influence perceptions of disclosure appropriateness (Muscanell, Ewell, & Wingate, 2016).

The level of intimacy in self-disclosure has an important influence on reactions toward and perceptions of the discloser (Derlega et al., 1973). Liking a person has been found to positively correlate to their amount of self-disclosure (Kahn & Rudestam, 1971). Greater disclosure builds trust, closeness and liking than low disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Worthy et al., 1969; Sprecher et al., 2013). In addition, researchers (e.g., Archer, Berg, & Runge, 1980; Berg & Archer, 1983) found that those who disclose personal information about themselves are generally perceived as more attractive than those who disclose very little.

However, the level of the intimacy may reach a higher level than is normatively acceptable. Collins and Miller's (1994) meta-analysis suggest that the positive impact of self-disclosure on liking may break at extreme levels of intimacy as it may be evaluated as inappropriate as it violates social norms, especially in the case of strangers. However, they were not able to test this due to the difficulty comparing

results across studies. They explain that such highly intimate disclosure might be viewed more of a social burden than a reward, because it can leave the recipient uncomfortable and unsure how to respond. Chaikin & Derlega (1974a, 1974b) report that intimate disclosure may be perceived as inappropriate. In addition, Cozby (1972) found that increasing disclosure to highly intimate levels decreased liking for the discloser.

Prior research, furthermore, (e.g., Taylor & Altman, 1966) found that high intimacy negatively impacted the social desirability of the discloser. Norton, Frost, & Ariely (2007) explain this in the light of their “less is more” hypothesis, that in a majority of initial interactions obtaining more information about another person may lead to perceptions of dissimilarity, decreasing liking toward the discloser.

On the other hand, Winum & Banikiotes (1983) found that medium high disclosers are the most attractive when compared to low and high disclosers. Other researchers found that disclosers are often seen as more likable when they share superficial or moderately intimate information (Cozby, 1972; Jourard & Friedman, 1970). Thus, Cozby (1973) predicted that liking would be highest when the level of disclosure is moderate and lowest when the level is extremely low or extremely high.

Another determinant of perceptions of disclosure appropriateness is the content of the disclosure (Muscanell et al., 2016). Information perceived as “deviant” or less normative is seen as less appropriate (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b). Derlega et al. (1973) also found that liking for the discloser varied with the disclosure content; a

discloser of intimate but deviant information was liked less than the discloser of either intimate but nondeviant information or nonintimate information.

The valence of the disclosure has also been found to impact perceptions toward the discloser (Muscanell et al., 2016). Negative information is seen as less appropriate (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b; Derlega et al., 1973). Likewise, Caltabiano & Smithson (1983) found that positive rather than negative information in disclosures was rated as appropriate, and the positive discloser was viewed as more adjusted and emotionally stable.

The research discussed so far, however, primarily concerns disclosures made in dyadic face-to-face contexts. Next, findings as to how this translates into computer-mediated contexts are examined.

Self-disclosure in Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC)

Self-disclosure is essential to the development and maintinance of relationships in offline and online communication alike (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak, 2018). Joinson (2001) and Walther (1996) found that people tend to disclose more intimately in computer mediated communication (CMC) than face-to-face interaction (FtF). Jiang et al., (2011) ascribes the more intense impressions and relationships in CMC compared to FtF to increased interpersonal attributions, meaning that the receiver attributes the disclosure to their unique relationship with the sender. Bazarova (2012) found, likewise, that disclosures made privately on Facebook were appreciated and considered more intimate. These findings support the notion that people are perceived

more favourably if they appear to be selective about to whom they disclose (Collins & Miller, 1994).

In dyadic computer-mediated communication, the effect of disclosure intimacy on relational outcomes is well established. In fact, private self-disclosure on CMC has been found to positively associate with online relationship and friendship development (Parks & Floyd, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), leading to greater liking (Carpenter, Green, & Laflam, 2018; Jiang et al., 2011; Kashian et al., 2017), feelings of connection (Utz, 2015), closeness, familiarity, and social attraction (Lin & Utz, 2017). This therefore supports the transferability of self-disclosure's positive impact on interpersonal relationships from offline to online (Jiang et al., 2011; Utz, 2015).

However, with the current trend of public self-disclosure on Social Network Sites (SNS) (Carl, 2008), the transferability of these results to public self-disclosure is attracting scholarly attention. Boyd & Ellison (2007) characterise SNSs as online 'bounded systems' which allow users to create wholly or partly public profiles and connect to a list of other users. SNSs function as novel platforms for the exchange of personal updates and disclosures (Bazarova, 2012), as they make it easier to make and engage with such disclosures at a high level of frequency (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak, 2018). SNSs encourage people to live their lives publicly (Carpenter et al., 2018), creating a context where public self-disclosure is considered the norm (Colliander et al., 2017). As a consequence, SNSs are characterized by a high degree of self-presentation and self-disclosure (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Celebrities, athletes, and even politicians have been found to reveal personal life events on social media (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Small, 2010; Stever, Stever, & Lawson, 2013).

Although SNSs provides private communication styles via private messaging and chat, the majority of SNS-mediated communications are done publicly. Users have much of their biographical information on their accounts, such as pictures, education, birthplace, occupation, relationship status, and sometimes even their home address (Utz, 2015). Moreover, users can easily share descriptive information such as what they have done today and/or evaluative information such as their feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Lin & Utz, 2017), in contrast to the principle of incremental and gradual disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In fact, a visit to a person's Facebook page may reveal more about them than years of previous acquaintance (Lin & Utz, 2017).

Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin (2008) explain that initially SNSs messages were visible by default to every logged-in member, or sometimes even non-members. Utz (2015) identifies this as one-to-many communication, also called mass personal communication. However, even when people have the chance of one-to-one interaction, many often have one-to-many interactions because it grants them opportunities for strategic self-presentation, impression management, self-expression, and entertaining others (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008).

On SNSs public self-disclosure is broadcasted to an entire network of followers, composed of a diverse audience, often unknown and ill-defined (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Hence, Burke & Kraut (2014) found as a result of this, recipients might not feel personally addressed by such self-disclosures, resulting in smaller effects on their relationship with the discloser. Utz (2015) argues that Social Penetration Theory (SPT)

mainly holds for private communication, and reports finding that the reciprocity effects of self-disclosure doesn't hold for public communication on SNSs. Also, Carpenter et al., (2018) found that most users of SNSs do not expect responses to their public posts, as they are not directed to a single person but simultaneously to several people (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

By contrast, relatively little research has considered responses to others' public self-disclosures. Bazarova (2012) found that subjects received greater relational intimacy from disclosures made privately than from those made publicly on SNSs. On the other hand, Utz (2015) found that public self-disclosure that is positive on SNSs can increase feelings of connection. In addition, Lin & Utz (2017) found that it is possible to develop a level of familiarity and closeness towards strangers who disclose frequently on social media.

Even in more professional settings, public self-disclosure was found to have positive outcomes. Mazer, Murphy & Cheri, & Simonds (2007) found that high amounts of public self-disclosure by a teacher on Facebook increased students' levels of motivation and learning and creates a positive classroom climate. Moreover, Batenburg & Bartels (2017) found that while employees that publicly self-disclose in platforms are regarded as more likeable regardless of the valence of the disclosure, those who make only positive self-disclosures are viewed more respectfully than those who make both positive and negative disclosures.

Although Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has claimed that the public disclosure of personal information is the new normal (NYtimes, 2010), the appropriateness of

disclosures remains an urgent question, particularly in the light of the mass-personal nature of SNSs. Bazarova (2012) argues that the interpretation of a disclosure cannot be based on the content alone, but also the context in which it occurs. As such, the nature of the context provided by SNSs, and its effect on such interpretations have not yet been adequately explored.

Due to the relative novelty of SNSs, the norms of SNS-based communication are mostly implicit in nature (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). Utz (2015) explains that environments in SNSs are characterized by quick changes in usage norms. Yet, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) suggests that the social norms of appropriateness found in SNSs could mirror larger societal norms. Social contexts that used to be separate are collapsed on SNSs due to blurry boundaries between private and public communication (Archer-Brown, Marder, Calvard, & Kowalski, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011).Thus, public self-disclosure may create a greater risk of being perceived as inappropriate (Muscanell et al., 2016).

As such, the norms governing the appropriateness of different disclosures in SNSs contexts remains in flux (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak, 2018). For instance, the disclosure of public information in a Facebook status may be acceptable, but for more private information private messaging may be more appropriate (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Thus, Bazarova (2012) found that while subjects perceived low-intimacy disclosures as equally appropriate in any context, highly intimate disclosures were considered less appropriate when shared publicly than when shared privately. They also found this difference accounted for the effects of public versus private contexts on the subject's liking of a discloser. Lin & Utz (2017) found that the role of disclosure intimacy on

closeness and social attraction was constrained by perceived appropriateness; when perceived as inappropriate, it can be detrimental for perceived social attraction. Hence, public self-disclosure can have both costs and benefits; it may increase social intimacy, but if perceived as inappropriate, it may decrease social attraction.

Studies on public self-disclosures indicate a norm of positivity around self-disclosure on SNSs. Utz (2015) found that individuals who adhere to this norm are positively perceived as more likeable. On the other hand, public disclosure of negative feelings and experiences are more likely to be perceived as inappropriate and less likable than when disclosed through private messages (Bazarova, 2012). Specifically, Carpenter et. al (2018) found that it was less appropriate for others to share important and/or negative information publicly, while unimportant and/or positive information was considered appropriate for public disclosure. Furthermore, McLaughlin & Vitak (2012) found that highly emotional and support seeking status updates are perceived as inappropriate for Facebook public communication. However, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) suggest that the appropriateness mechanism behind the positivity bias of self-disclosure in SNSs might be context-sensitive. They explain that the communication of negative feelings and emotions might well be tolerated on some networks while being precieved as inapporpiate on others, such as is the case on Facebook. Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak, 2018) found when the information participants wished to disclose was both negative and private, they were least likely to commuicate by mediated means such as SNSs, and most likely to choose them when the information they wished to disclose was both public and positive. The findings indicate that individuals making stigmatized disclosures (those which are both negative and confidential) feel

the greatest need to maximise their control of the context, and are most influenced in their choice of modality by considerations of appropriateness.

Using an online survey, Muscanell, Ewell & Wingate (2016) examined disclosure categories that are perceived as appropriate for SNSs, in order to understand the norms of self-disclosure on SNSs. The results of their study revealed that general disclosure (i.e., everyday activities, hobbies) and information relating to interpersonal relationships or support were perceived to be the most appropriate and elicited the most favourable reactions and positive behavioural intentions. Many categories were found to be perceived moderately appropriate for public disclosure, except for overtly risky, polarizing, or offensive categories, such as sexual content, alcohol or other substance related, which elicited strong negative way. Their findings are in line with previous research by (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974b; Derlega et al., 1973) who also found that deviant information is perceived as less appropriate.

Carpenter et. al (2018) explored the perceived appropriateness of public self-disclosure on Facebook and found that there might be a potential mismatch between norms and behaviour. They found that subjects willingly disclose important events and thoughts publicly, yet subjects felt that it was less appropriate and less likeable for others to share important and/or negative information publicly, indicating that participants' judgements of others' disclosures may not match their own disclosure behaviour. Also, Ziegele & Reinecke, (2017) found that despite the positivity bias in public SNS self-disclosure, a considerable amount of users still broadcast negative content to their network. These results signal a mixed reaction towards public self-

disclosure that merits further investigation. Hence, more work is needed on appropriateness of self-disclosure on SNSs.

While it is clear that the reception of self-disclosure is complex and subject to many factors, it will be seen in the next section that the relevant norms in interpersonal relationships are different from those that apply in the context of a salesperson-customer relationship.

Salespeople's Self-disclosure

Relational marketing scholars have emphasized the importance of communication in personal selling, and consider it a central construct in persuasion and sales (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013) However, only a few marketing researchers studied self-disclosure and its impact in a business context. Anderson et. al (2016) explained that researchers should be careful in transferring psychological findings, (such as those related to self-disclosure) to business contexts and hope for an automatically similar positive response, such as increased liking. They assert that behaviour that is natural when developing relationships among friends could be perceived as manipulation and malicious in a business context.

Research efforts to evaluate the effects of self-disclosure as a concept on consumer-buyer interactions were initiated by Jacobs et al. (2001). The authors categorized self-disclosures in a business setting into *exchange-specific* and *social* self-disclosures. Exchange-specific self-disclosure is a disclosure of information necessary to the product or service, and as such is considered essential to the pending exchange—for example experiences and feelings in relation to the product or service (Jacobs et al.,

2001). Anderson et al. (2016) considers such disclosures a useful information source for decision-making, because it facilitates interactions regarding the product or service. On the other hand, social self-disclosure is the disclosure of personal information beyond that needed to make an exchange, i.e. incidental to the pending exchange (Jacobs et al., 2001). Either the consumer and or the salesperson may make such a disclosure. For example, frontline employees may disclose social information about their personal interests to establish friendship and be more likeable (Jacobs, Evans, Kleine, & Landry, 2001).

Jacobs et al. (2001) argued that exchange-specific and social self-disclosure may affect the customer-salesperson relationship differently. They recommend that a salesperson maximize customers' social disclosures and minimize the customer's exchange-specific disclosures, for the purpose of gaining customers' commitment to future business. On the other hand, the salesperson should minimize their social disclosures and maximize their exchange-specific disclosures. They indicate that a salesperson's social self-disclosure might negatively impact the customer's trust and liking.

In like manner, Gilliam & Zablah (2013) found that stories by salespeople regarding the product compared to personal self-disclosures are more efficient in enhancing consumer purchase intentions. More recently, Andersson et. al (2016) found that social self-disclosure by a frontline employee was negatively associated with consumers' reciprocal behaviour. This negative impact was mediated by satisfaction and social impression (i.e. liking, competency, superficiality) — that is to say, satisfaction and social impression are variables which are impacted by self-disclosure,

and impact customer reciprocal behaviour, and this chain of causation explains the relationship between disclosure and reciprocation.

Violation of social norms of how to behave in a business encounter could explain this negative effect of social self-disclosure. Anderson et al., (2016) found that when a frontline employee discloses personal information, they might be perceived as superficial, unserious, and less competent, which in turn leads to decreased encounter satisfaction. Likewise, Gilliam & Zablah (2013) attributed the negative results associated with social self-disclosure to the consumers' belief that the relationship exists for business reasons and that any personal matters were secondary. Hence, to effectively influence a sale they recommend that the salesperson use a colder, less disclosing, more impersonal strategy (Jacobs et al., 2001).

In sum, very few studies have explored the phenomena of self-disclosure from a marketing perspective. These studies on the impact of sellers' self-disclosures on consumers confirms that such disclosures negatively affect consumer behaviour and their perception of the salesperson, in contrast to the general positive effects of self-disclosure found when studied in the context of interpersonal relationships and CMC. This is an interesting contradiction, which motivates further exploration of how public self-disclosure by social media influencers (SMI's) will impact consumer's behaviour.

Specifically, SNSs make the maintenance of boundaries between private and professional life more complicated (Archer-Brown et al., 2018; Batenburg & Bartels, 2017), which blurs the role of influencers in the eyes of their followers. As SMI's are

social but also commercial and sell through forming an emotional engagement with the follower, it is unclear whether they are regarded as friends or as marketers by their followers. In addition, it is unknown what impact influencers' social self-disclosures have on consumer/followers' behaviour. The next section will talk about influencers' marketing.

Influencers' Marketing

Since the 50's scholars have confirmed the powerful impact of opinion leaders and word-of-mouth (WOM) on driving consumer behaviour towards desirable business goals. Opinion leaders are information gatekeepers who spread a mass media message to their personal networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1995). WOM is an *"oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, product, or a service"* (Arndt, 1967). WOM is a powerful force in the marketplace in advertising and promotion because the information is filtered through trusted peers, reducing risks and uncertainty in decision making (Carl, 2008). Peers are seen as unbiased sources of information because presumably they are not selling anything or tied to a corporate entity (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Thus, opinion leaders are known to have a stronger influence in shaping individuals' preferences and behaviours, because they are perceived as more credible than direct media messages (Arndt, 1967).

Following consumers' involvement in interactive computer mediated platforms, WOM campaigns have increased online (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Consequently, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become a significant element of consumers' decision-making processes (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan Lin, & Chiang, 2013). eWOM is

defined as *"positive or negative statements made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet"* (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). SNSs have reduced barriers to entry and opened a new door for consumers' voice to be heard through user-generated-content (UGC) (Ribeiro, Fonseca Amaro, Seabra, & Luís Abrantes, 2014). Consumers can generate reviews of products and services on SNSs that are globally accessible and highly influential (Stubb, Nyström, & Colliander, 2019). Hence, eWOM has become a powerful marketing and branding tool to persuade and influence consumers (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018).

With the vast popularity of SNSs and the way they have empowered consumers and created outlets to reach mass audiences (Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin, & D'eugenio, 2018), new players have emerged in the arena of marketing: Social Media Influencers (SMI). Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg (2011) defined them as *"a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through their social media accounts".* SMIs are individuals that gained internet fame native to their presence on social media, are highly followed, and have some kind of expertise in a specific field (e.g.: fashion, tourism, makeup ..etc.) (Marshall & Redmond, 2016). They are known as 21st century micro-celebrities and opinion leaders; they view themselves as public personas and regard their audience as fans (Jalilvand, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

While a traditional celebrity is someone who is already famous on traditional outlets such as TV and who influences others because of their popularity (Social Publi,

2017), fame on the internet has different terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. The term ‘influencer’ is used interchangeably with the titles content creator, blogger, Instagrammer, youtuber (McCorquodale, 2019), as the definitional boundaries between these terms are blurry. There are terms that are associated with the platform the influencer has become known within, such as youtuber and Instagrammer. Likewise, a blogger is someone who has a website called a blog where they publish their own original content (Joanne, 2017). Some bloggers over time have evolved into influencers with the increased popularity of SNS platforms and the decreased popularity of blogs (Blog Tyrant, 2020). The term influencer encompasses other terms because it is symbolic of a new kind of media mogul – one who is independent, industrious and has capitalised on their media popularity (McCorquodale, 2019). The influencer industry emerged as a result of the waning popularity of traditional media and the growth of social platforms, where many consumers chose to follow individuals documenting their own lives, rather than turning to traditional media for inspiration and information (Ibid).

Influencers are broadly categorised depending on their following statistics as nano, micro, and macro influencers. A nano influencer is generally defined as having 1,000 to 10,000 followers, while micro influencers generally have between 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Dugo, 2019), and macro influencers have more than 100k followers (Barker, 2019). The differences, however, are not only in terms of follower count, but also relevance and engagement. According to Dugo (2019), a micro influencer focusses their SNS presence on their passion, creating a community with the same interests as they have. Although they have limited reach, they have higher engagement rates.

Because of their ability to connect with a highly relevant audience, it is especially beneficial for brands to work with micro-influencers when they need to segment the audiences in their campaigns (Ibid). On the other hand, Barker (2019) explains that it is beneficial to work with macro-influencers when the brands aim is to reach hundreds of thousands of individuals at a time, as they have massive reach.

The prestige SMIs gained resulted in fans admiring them and following their advice (Jalilvand, 2017). Because they can affect the behaviour, decisions, and attitudes of others (Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Manière, & Stankeviciute, 2013), they exercise significant power over how brands and companies are perceived, because they are perceived as authentic brand advocates (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), whose marketing is inseparable from the natural flow of their day-to-day lives. Consequently, businesses have begun to rely on SMIs, as consumers are more likely to believe the authenticity of a claim made by a personal acquaintance (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

However, given the reach and influence of SMI, there are ever more abundant opportunities to monetize their status as companies seek to influence them (Yuan & Lou, 2020). As potential consumers perceive online reviews by SMIs as no longer neutral, but rather as influenced by lucrative third party sponsorship, the potential compensation raises questions regarding influencers' credibility, and as such their ability to influence others (Carr & Hayes, 2014). For the followers, one of the most attractive aspects of following an influencer is the friend-like nature of the relationship. McCorquodale (2019) affirms that while the relationship may feel like a friendship to the followers, to the influencer it is a business, commercialised through promotions

and sponsorships. This contradiction renders the influencer/follower relationship unavoidably precarious. The author suggests that regardless of how it looks, interviews with influencers have revealed that influencers want to create content and get paid for it and brands ultimately want to sell their products. However, the customer perspective was not taken into account. Hence, this current research fills this gap in knowledge.

As can be seen, a tension exists between SMIs and their audiences, in regards to the friend-like rapport experienced by their audiences and SMIs need to promote goods and services for remuneration. In the next section, an exploration of the application of self-disclosures by influencers on SNSs is presented.

Self-disclosure by Social Media Influencers

SMIs emerged through self-presentation techniques and the use of intimacy to appeal to others. They claim to be authentic and 'being themselves' through revealing their 'daily lives' (Marshall & Redmond, 2016). Specifically, SMIs interact with their followers through revealing intimate details of their thoughts, dreams, food consumption, and sex lives, presenting personas that are less controlled (Ibid).

McCorquodale (2019) - a practitioner-led piece of research based solely on interviews with influencers -characterises SMIs as independent media brands specialised in covering one thing in depth: their own lives. Although the author did not conduct interviews with followers, however, she suggests that through sharing their achievements, admitting mistakes, and documenting the mundane details of their lives, they give their followers access to relatable details of their lives creating an

illusion of a direct, friendship-like connection (Ibid). However, the author suggests that paid promotions render this relationship *"shining a light on the uncomfortable reality of the relationship between an influencer and their audience: the latter's devotion allows the former to make money".* She affirms that regardless of how this relationship is framed and despite significant interaction, theirs is not a friendship and the entire construct exists for business reasons as the results of the interviews with influencers revealed that most influencers care about the financial gains. However, the interviews looked at the relationship from an influencer angel, it did not take into account the audience/followers perspective.

To fully understand the relevance and value of the phenomenon in marketing, the consumer perspective is important. Närvänen, Kirvesmies, & Kahri (2021) found that parasocial relationships existed between influencers and their followers. Specifically, followers reported feelings of attachment, closeness, and friendship with some of their favourite influencers. This was found to be an unconscious decision that occurred through days, months, and years of following the influencer. However, there were requirements for these parasocial relationships to exist, which are: the influencer needs to portray something real and relatable; they need to be transparent about their branded collaborations; they need to be true to themselves, and choose carefully which brands they collaborate with and personalize their endorsements.

Although celebrities are distinctly different from influencers, as they are already publicly 'known', the results of their self-disclosure behaviour on SNSs are interesting and worth mentioning. Kim & Song (2016) distinguished between celebrities'

professional self-disclosures on SNSs (that is sharing aspects of their work-related life), and personal self-dislosures (sharing aspectss of their personal life, such as friends and family). They found that both types of self-disclosure enhanced fans' feeling of social presence; that is, they felt as if those celebrities were socially present in their life, which facilitated parasocial interaction. Parasocial Interaction is when fans develop an imaginary interpersonal relationship with celebrities as if they were friends in their real life. Young consumers admire SMIs and consider them as friends (De Jans et al. 2018). In particular, because the consumers have been following the influencer for a long time they are believed to form parasocial relationships with these influencers (e.g. Chung and Cho 2017; De Jans et al. 2018; Lueck 2015), creating a feeling of knowing them in person, even though they have never met.

Given that influencers' success is largely based on how followers respond, self-disclosure in an influencer-follower relationship needs to be further studied. While it is known how social self-disclosure by a salesperson impacts sales effectiveness, less is known about the impact of social self-disclosure by SMIs on followers' consumption behaviour. The case of an SMI's self-disclosure is distinctively different from a salesperson-consumer interaction and accordingly one must be wary of assuming that the same results might apply. Specifically, (Jourard, 1971) affirms that there is no expected reciprocity in certain situations. Particularly, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) found that public self-disclosers on SNS usually don't expect a response. In addition, the traditional marketing assumption that a consumer must first start with an exchange-specific self-disclosure, and then the salesperson adjusts their reciprocal disclosure accordingly is not applicable, because on SNSs self-disclosure is initiated by SMIs and broadcasted publicly without expectations of reciprocity, where the

prospective consumer is mostly passive. Thus, unlike self-disclosure in a salesperson and consumer setting, the followers' self-disclosure is not required as an antecedent to their trust.

Most studies addressing self-disclosure on SNSs are focused on the standpoint of the disclosing party. There is relatively little research on followers'—as prospective consumers—reactions to receiving an influencer's social self-disclosures on SNSs. The exception is a study by Huang, (2015) that concerned a blogger's self-disclosure and its impact on the receiver's reciprocal behaviour i.e., feedback intention. Consistent with marketing studies, he classifies self-disclosure in a blog setting into social self-disclosure and product evaluation. Similar to the definition given by Jacobs et. al., (2001) he defines social self-disclosure as personal information provided in the blog that is irrelevant and unrelated to the products or services being evaluated, such as personal lifestyles, values, and expressions of daily life. On the other hand, Huang (2015) coins the term 'product evaluation self-disclosure' as a synonym to 'exchange-specific self-disclosure', which he suggests is more suitable to the context of a blogger. Product-evaluation self-disclosure relates to product information and evaluations, offering both objective product knowledge, together with subjective evaluations, and experiences with consuming the product or service (e.g. thoughts and feelings about consumption).

The results of Huang's study show that the different types of self-disclosure led to different forms of trust: cognitive and affective trust. Cognitive trust is confidence in the trusted individual's competence and reliability (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Affective trust is emotionally based on the confidence placed in the other person, generated by

the level of care and concern they demonstrate (Ibid). Huang's findings showed that greater product evaluation self-disclosure increases blog readers' cognitive trust, because it satisfies their need for information about the product. On the other hand, social self-disclosure was found to induce affective trust, because when bloggers share more personal information, their readers gain a sense of familiarity and emotional attachment to them. This in turn led to positive attitudes towards products described in blogs and an increase in readers' feedback intention towards the blogger.

Thus, Huang (2015) argues that bloggers' product evaluation self-disclosures are critical to trust formation, and should therefore be presented with great care. On the other hand, he advises bloggers seeking deeper, more intimate interpersonal relationships with their readers to pay attention to social self-disclosures and giving engaging descriptions of their lives.

The results of this study on bloggers and their readers suggest there might be soft positive results to social self-disclosure on consumer behaviour. This contrasts with the results in marketing research on the impact of self-disclosure on salesperson-consumer interactions (Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2001). Although the study is valuable, it is a correlational survey that relied on self-report judgments, making it difficult to determine causation without experimental manipulation. Without accounting for the depth, breadth, and perceived appropriateness of the social self-disclosure, it seems questionable to expect that all social self-disclosure will positively impact followers. By experimentally disentangling the role of breadth and depth, the current work is proposed as a contribution to a better

understanding of the processes underlying the relationship between social self-disclosure by SMIs and consumer/followers' behaviour.

To the best of my knowledge, no studies at present examine the impact of the different levels of social self-disclosure by SMI on consumer outcomes. Hence, this current research intends to fill this gap in knowledge. Although a blogger is not necessarily very different from a SMI, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) have indicated that norms of appropriateness might differ from one SNS platform to another. Hence, the context of SNSs and the public disclosure of SMIs presents a unique relationship and form of interaction that might yield different results.

In the next section, a particular category of SMI is considered—travel influencers.

Travel Influencers

The tourism industry is highly influenced by SNSs and travel influencers on these outlets. According to (Forbes, 2017), millennials' travel choices are substantially influenced by the "Instagrammability" of prospective destinations; with the results that the travel influencer industry projected to be worth 10 Billion USD in 2020. Travel influencers are either paid to post, or receive free trips, products or services. For example, a travel influencer called Murad Osmann (@muradosmann on Instagram) is one of the top travel influencers according to Forbes. He has around 4 million followers on Instagram with only 600 posts. He and his wife Natalia became iconic with their signature pose – Natalia holding Osmann's hand, facing the scenery with her back to

the camera. His photography ranges across such destinations as Times Square and Art Basel.

Instagram profile of a travel influencer: Murad Osman

Example photos from Murad Osmann's profile featuring their signature pose.

Travellers use SNSs as a key source of information about destinations, which impacts the image of a destination and their motivation to visit (Llodra-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015). Furthermore, travel influencers have been found to positively impact attitudes and engagement toward destinations, thereby

driving sales (Huertas, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2014). Yılmaz, Sezerel, & Uzuner (2020) assert that travel influencers can affect the trajectories of tourism consumption as they have a great impact on followers' impressions and the creation of brand image. They explain that people need such information from travel influencers to decide on going to a destination they might have never been to before. Hence, such messages are important for travellers' decisions regarding the consumption of tourism products and services.

There has been no attention to self-disclosure by travel influencers in the travel literature. At present only one early study by Lin, Zhang, Gursoy, & Fu (2019) provides knowledge loosely on self-disclosure in the context of a tourist-to-tourist interactions.

They found that self-disclosure is an important component of tourist-to-tourist interaction as it increases engagement. However, no studies until now have attempted to explore the impact of a travel influencer's social self-disclosure on followers' behaviour as prospective consumers.

We have now considered a broad cross-disciplinary body of literature on self-disclosure in general, in CMC, in sales and marketing, and by SMIs; it is now possible to draw that research together to provide a guiding conceptual framework for the present work.

Conceptual Framework

The current research primarily contributes to the influencer self-disclosure literature by teasing apart the apparent contradictions between the interpersonal relationship literature and the marketing literature on the topic of the impact of self-disclosure. The interpersonal and CMC self-disclosure literature generally suggests that self-disclosure positively impacts relationships (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2018; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016; Lin & Utz, 2017; Mazer et al., 2007; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002), while marketing literature suggests that social self-disclosure negatively impacts the commercial relationship between a seller-buyer (e.g., Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013a; Jacobs, Evans, et al., 2001). From the previous discussion, it is clear that there has been a considerable increase in self-disclosures by SMIs on these platforms. With influencers, it is unclear whether they are considered more as friends or as salespeople and how this in turn might impact consumer outcomes.

As a default exchange-specific disclosure is what consumers are looking for, however it seems to be difficult to predict whether the different levels of depth and breadth of social self-disclosure will lead to positive or negative outcomes in the unique context of SMIs self-disclosure. Hence, with a purpose of narrowing the scope the conceptual model was only concerned with social self-disclosure to enable investigation in a controlled setting that manipulated its different dimension. This work contributes to closing this research gap and offers a better understanding of social self-disclosure and its effect on consumer outcomes in a travel influencer-follower context.

According to Duck (1994), researchers should attend to the recipients' perception of the behaviour, rather than just the behaviour itself. He argues that the meaning of self-disclosing behaviour depends on how it is interpreted by the receiver. The impact self-disclosure is likely to have on the recipient can be a function of multiple factors such as the depth and breadth of the disclosure, its appropriateness in the context (Collins & Miller, 1994), whether it is selective (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), the relationship between the discloser and the recipient, the nature of the interaction, and the gender of the discloser and the recipient (Derlega, et. al., 1993). Thus, consistent with a receiver-oriented view of social interaction, the current research intends to address followers' perceptions towards a SMI's social self-disclosure, taking into account issues of gender and the depth, breadth, and perceived appropriateness of the disclosure within a travel influencer context.

Collins & Miller (1994) argue that to address recipients' perceptions of others' self-disclosure, one must treat self-disclosure as an independent variable (Collins & Miller, 1994). Social psychological theories such as social penetration theory regard disclosure's intimacy (depth) as the main driver of relational outcomes (Altman & Taylor, 1973); a finding which marketing scholars appear to have ignored. In addition, Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak (2018) called for future research in SNSs to explore the breadth and depth of disclosures. Thus, building on this literature review, depth and breadth are identified as independent variables to be manipulated in the present work. Also, the gender of the discloser is manipulated as an independent variable, as gender-specific studies in relation to self-disclosure have been called for by marketing scholars (Andersson et al., 2016). To the best of my knowledge, the effects of the following four self-disclosure strategies (high depth-high breadth, high depth-low

breadth, low depth-high breadth, low-depth-low breadth), along with influencers' gender, on consumer's purchase intent and WOM intent have not been investigated yet.

Based upon the preceding conceptualization and discussion, the following rationale was developed. This study first introduces the impact of the depth and breadth of self-disclosures by SMIs and the gender of the discloser on perceptions of appropriateness, and consequently on trust in the influencer and the information provided by them and product attitude and eventually on purchase intent and WOM intent. The conceptual model and hypothesis are formulated without predictions of the initial direction of the relationships between the independent variables and the perceived appropriateness. Therefore, it is hypothesized that when a SMI discloses personal information, it influences the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure in either a positive or negative manner. While the variables manipulated differ across study one and two, the nomological model tested across the two studies remains the same. Hence, several of the study hypothesis are the same across the two studies. The integrated model named (ISDM) Influencer Self-disclosure Model is shown in figure 2.2 below.

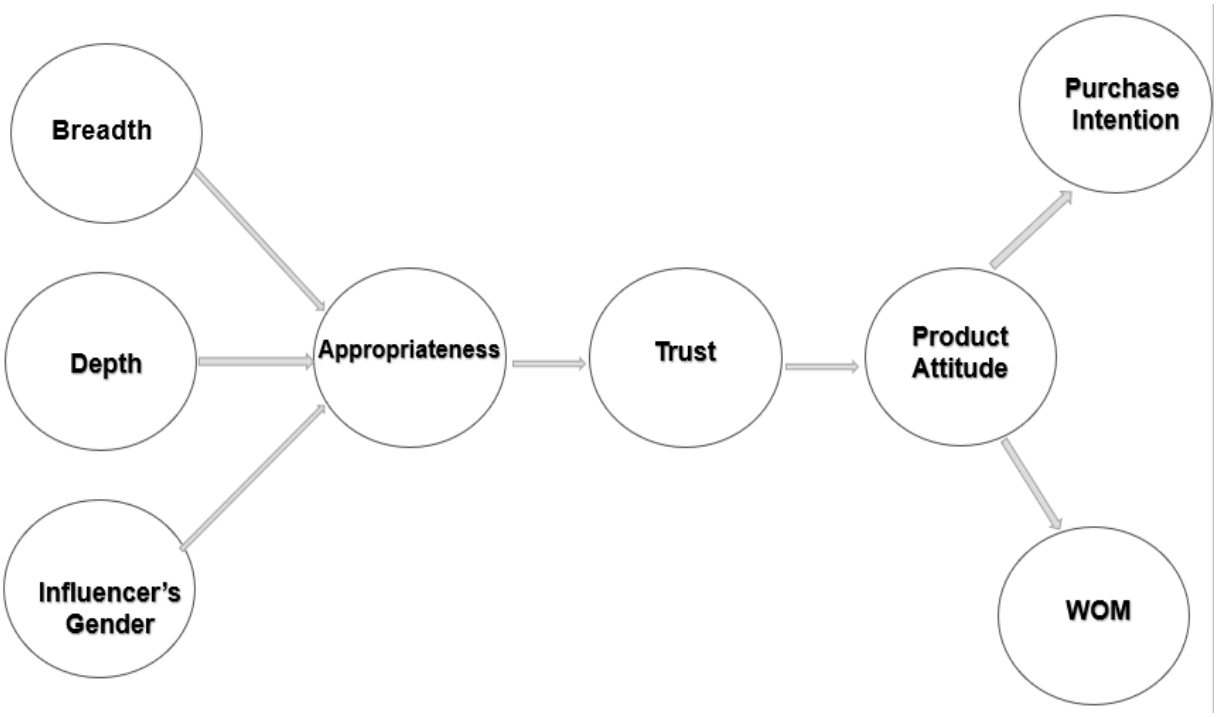

Figure 1.2: Conceptual Model- Influencer Self-disclosure Model (ISDM)

In the next section, I will formulate hypotheses on the relationship between the three independent variables and perceived appropriateness.

Self-disclosure and Appropriateness

The self-disclosure literature has not presented a unified definition for the concept of appropriateness of self-disclosure. For this study appropriateness is initially defined as: *Behaving according to the accepted social norms in a certain situation and context*.

The social psychology literature suggests that depth and breadth directly impact the receiver's perceptions of the appropriateness of self-disclosures. Despite this, marketing studies concerned with marketers' self-disclosures did not consider the perceived appropriateness of disclosures. Anderson et. al (2016) tried to explain that

the negative impact they found in their study might be caused by considerations of the appropriateness of the disclosure, and that future studies should address that. Thus, answering the call of Anderson et al. (2016), appropriateness has been included in this study.

In previous research, the importance of perceived appropriateness of messages on social media was highly associated with disclosure intimacy (depth); the higher the intimacy of public disclosure the more inappropriate it is perceived to be (Bazarova, 2012). The researcher argues that the mismatch between a public context of disclosure and its intimate content can further intensify perceptions of disclosure inappropriateness. Also, Lin & Utz (2017) found that the role of disclosure intimacy (depth) on closeness and social attraction was constrained by perceived appropriateness. In their study the subjects in high depth condition perceived the disclosure as slightly less appropriate than those in the low-depth condition.

In addition, breadth of the disclosure has been found to impact participants' perceptions towards the discloser. In particular, Lin & Utz (2017) found that a higher amount (breadth) of public self-disclosure increases the recipient's feelings of familiarity and closeness towards the discloser on SNSs. Also, Kahn & Rudestam (1971) found a positive correlation between personal liking and the amount (breadth) of their self-disclosure. Trust, closeness and liking are all better facilitated by broad disclosure than narrow disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Kahn & Rudestam, 1971; Sprecher et al., 2013; Worthy et al., 1969). Researchers (e.g., Archer et al., 1980; Worthy et al., 1969) found a positive correlation between perceptions of personal attractiveness and higher amount of disclosure of personal information. These positive

correlations indicate implicit approval of such disclosures on the part of the recipient, and perceptions of appropriateness are associated with desirable outcomes such as trust and liking.

Due to the relative novelty of social media, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) suggest that the rules of communication are mostly implicit in nature. The authors indicate that the social norms of appropriateness found in SNSs could mirror larger societal norms. SNSs are subject to social context collapse due to blurry boundaries between private and public communication (Archer-Brown et al., 2018; Utz, 2015). Thus, public self-disclosure may create a greater risk of being perceived as inappropriate (Muscanell et al., 2016). However, Utz (2015) explains that SNS environments are characterized by quick changes especially in usage norms. In addition, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) suggest that the appropriateness of intimate public self-disclosure can have different results depending on the platform used. Hence, it is not known if public self-disclosure by SMIs will be deemed appropriate by their followers or not, and this requires further investigation. In summary, regardless of the direction of the relationship, I predict that there is a significant relationship between disclosures' depth and breadth and perceived appropriateness. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed.

H1: (a) High Depth and (b) breadth of social self-disclosure by SMIs predicts differences in perceived appropriateness. are associated with appropriateness.

Gender and Appropriateness

Gender of the discloser has also been shown to affect observers' ratings of appropriateness. Berg & Derlega (1987) suggested that there might be differences in

self-disclosure perceptions of males versus females. Differences in the social norms of self-disclosure for men and women raised the question of whether there exist gendered differences in disclosure-appropriateness (Collins & Miller, 1994). Given the importance of social norms in judgments of disclosure appropriateness has led Collins & Miller (1994) to argue that disclosures by females may be more strongly associated with positive perceptions than disclosures by males.

Hill & Stull (1987) assert that gender role norms affect our expectations of appropriate self-disclosure for men and women. Because of traditional gender-role stereotypes, an intimate disclosure from a woman might be socially acceptable while a similar disclosure from a man might violate social norms and be viewed as less appropriate (Collins & Miller, 1994). It may be expected that women disclose more than men, on the grounds that it is perceived to be more appropriate for women to disclose more than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992). As a result, men may be viewed as maladjusted if they do disclose whereas women may be viewed as maladjusted if they don't (Derlega & Chaikin, 1976). Chelune (1976) found that the male disclosers were liked the most when their disclosure was low, whereas female disclosers were least liked when their disclosure was low. In addition, he found that low disclosure by a male to a stranger was perceived more appropriate than low disclosure by a female to a stranger. Chaikin and Derlega (1974) also found that gender of the discloser interacts with disclosure intimacy in affecting perceptions of disclosure appropriateness. This indicates a potential interaction between gender and disclosure (depth and breadth). Although no hypothesis is formulated about this interaction, I intend to explore both the 2-way and 3-way interactions that may exist.

Collins & Miller (1994) suggested that future theoretical frameworks studying the impact of disclosure on recipients should consider the gender of the disclosure as a variable impacting that relationship. Moreover, marketing studies on self-disclosure have called for more attention to the effects of gender. Hence, in response to calls in the marketing literature (Andersson et al., 2016; Huang, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2001), the gender of the influencer is considered in this study as an independent variable. Therefore, I hypothesise the following:

H2: The gender of the influencer predicts differences in perceived appropriateness of self-disclosure.

We now have the key variables for experimental manipulation in the current work; depth and breadth of disclosure, and the gender of the discloser, and have hypothesised regarding the effects of these variables on perception of appropriateness. In the remaining sections, downstream effects of appropriateness relevant to SMI marketing are considered; trust, product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM intention.

Trust

Trust in a salesperson is *"the belief that the salesperson's word or promise is reliable and that he/she will fulfil his/her obligations in an exchange relationship"* (Andersson et al., 2016). Indeed, trust is the universal basis for any human interaction. Magno & Cassia (2018) found that an individual's intention to follow a blogger's travel suggestion depends on the trust in the blogger and the information provided by them.

Trust in a SMI is an interpersonal trust which can be, measured as a one dimension or two dimensions which are cognitive and affective trust (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; McAllister, 1995). Cognition-based trust is grounded on individual beliefs about peer reliability and dependability, labelled ‘reliableness’ (McAllister, 1995). This form of trust is based on 'good reason’ that gives evidence of trust worthiness (Ibid). In the context of a service business relationship cognitive trust refers to a customer’s confidence in or willingness to depend on a service provider’s reliability and competence (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). On the other hand, affective trust, also labelled ‘emotional trust’, is emotionally based on the confidence one places in the other person generated by the level of care and concern demonstrated by that person (McAllister, 1995). This form of trust is characterized by feelings of security (Johnson & Grayson, 2005).

In this research we are examining the follower trust in an influencer and the information provided by them after being exposed to different levels of self-disclosure. A meta-analysis by Collins & Miller (1994) affirmed the critical link between self-disclosure and trust in research, as it has been found to correlate with trust (Cozby, 1973). Research proposes various factors influencing trust in social networks. For example, Chu & Kamal, (2008) associated trust with the message itself and Nekmat & Gower (2012) linked it to message valence, which is indicative of an implicit role for the perceived appropriateness of the message. Moreover, Huang (2015) found that higher social self-disclosure increases readers affective trust, especially when a blogger shares values and personal information, indicating that there is an implicit perceived appropriateness. Indeed, Lin & Utz (2017) suggest that the effects of disclosure intimacy on the feeling of closeness and social attraction are influenced by perceived

appropriateness. Cheshin, Amit, & Van Kleef (2017) found that trust in a service provider was impacted by the perceived appropriateness of the level of emotional intensity displayed by frontline workers in customer interactions, and that trust mediated the relationship between emotional intensity and customer satisfaction. When someone self-discloses to us in an appropriate manner, this builds trust towards the discloser and our positive feelings about this person are enhanced (Altman & Taylor, 1968; Degges-White, 2018). Receivers of self-disclosure on SNSs are likely to form trust in the individual when they perceive it as appropriate. When social disclosures on SNSs are perceived as appropriate, they will be positively associated with trust, and vice versa; and if perceived as inappropriate it is likely to negatively affect trust towards SMIs, and vice versa. Hence, the following hypotheses are developed:

H3: Perceived appropriateness is positively associated with trust (i.e. when disclosure is considered more appropriate it leads to higher trust, and vice versa).

Several researchers in the field of self-disclosure have suggested that the appropriateness of disclosure is an important mediating variable in interpersonal exchanges and relationships (Caltabiano & Smithson, 1983). Chaikin and Derlega (1974) for example, suggest that compliance with disclosure norms leads to approval and acceptance, while violation of such norms may result in rejection or even punishment. Moreover, Ziegele & Reinecke (2017) found that the perceived appropriateness of the message mediated the relationship between negative status updates on SNSs and receiving social support. In addition, Lin & Utz (2017) found that perceived appropriateness played an important mediating role in predicting closeness and social attraction. The effects of disclosure intimacy on feelings of closeness and

social attraction were found to be influenced by perceived appropriateness. They advise caution when disclosing intimate personal information that might be perceived as inappropriate by others, which can decrease one's perceived social attraction. This indicate that appropriateness might be a mediator in the relationship between self-disclosure and consumer outcomes. Consequently, the following is hypothesised:

H4: Perceived appropriateness mediates the relationship between self-disclosure (depth and breadth) and trust.

Trust and Product Attitude

Trust in online information positively affects consumers' attitudes towards mentioned products (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Pan & Chiou, 2011). Huang (2015) found that blog readers with higher trust also have more positive attitudes towards the products described in the blogs, and that trust mediates the relationship between self-disclosure and product attitude. Magno & Cassia (2018) studied the impact of SMI on tourism and found that a follower's intention to adopt the travel suggestions provided by the blogger depends significantly on the perceptions of both the blogger's trustworthiness and quality of the information the blogger provides. Therefore, the next hypotheses are:

H5: Trust is positively associated with product attitude (i.e., when trust is increased product attitude increases).

H6: Trust is a mediator in the relationship between perceived appropriateness and product attitude.

Product Attitude, Purchase Intention, and WOM Intention

In linking attitude to behavioural intentions, researchers follow (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975) a model of behaviour that states: attitude leads to intentions leads to behaviour. They indicate that the most immediate precursor of behavioural intention is attitude. Furthermore, marketing literature has found a clear strong link between product attitude and purchase intention, whether online or offline, confirming that higher product attitude led to higher purchase intention (Kamins & Marks, 1987; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). In addition, Gilliam & Zablah (2013) found that in one-time sales encounters, attitude towards the product more strongly determine consumers' purchase intentions than attitude towards the salesperson. Pradhan, Duraipandian, & Sethi, (2016) assert that product attitude substantially impacts purchase intentions, as it increases consumers' motivation towards the product. In addition, Vidyanata, Sunaryo, & Hadiwidjojo (2018) found that celebrity endorsement would not directly affect purchase intention, though celebrity endorsement can enhance product attitude which in turn increase purchase intention. Similarly, Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah, Wong, & Wong (2017) found that favourable attitudes towards products endorsed by SMIs will produce a higher chance of purchase intention. Also, they found that consumer attitude is a significant mediator in the relationship between advertisment by a celebrity on social media and purchase intention. Thus, the following hypotheses are developed:

H7: Product attitude is positively associated with purchase intention.

It is naturally to be expected that attitude and behaviour are intimately related; a person holding a favourable attitude towards a thing is likely to perform favourable behaviours

towards it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Scholars have established a strong link between product attitude and WOM (Leung, Bai, & Stahura, 2015). Zhao, Liu, Lai, Zhang, & Zhang (2016) found that positive product attitude positively influenced WOM behaviour. Attitudes are a major determinant of behavioural intention and positive attitudes have a positive effect on the intention to engage in WOM (Lien & Cao, 2014). Thus, the following hypotheses are developed:

H8: Product attitude is positively associated with WOM intention.

H9: Product attitude is a mediator in the relationship between trust and (a)purchase intention and (b) WOM intention.

And, finally closing the loop, H10: Self-disclosure depth and breadth of disclosure are predictors of purchase intention and WOM and this predictive relationship is mediated by appropriateness, trust, and product attitude.

The next chapter will present study one that experimentally test the conceptual model.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The current research presents an in-depth study to examine self-disclosure by SMIs during advertising campaign and the impact of these disclosures on influencer-consumer relationships. The blurry nature of the relationship between influencers and followers (i.e., are they seen as marketers or as friends), leads to ambiguity regarding influencers' self-disclosure on consumer outcomes. To this end, a mixed methods research is adopted, aiming to gather and analyse data from different perspectives. This chapter will provide a full road map of the methodology adopted in this thesis, and specifically, give an account of the philosophical stance, research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, quality assurance, and ethical considerations that informed the present work.

Paradigm

Before discussing the paradigm choice, this section discusses what a paradigm *is*, followed by a discussion of its main dimensions. A researcher's paradigm is the philosophical assumptions that inform their work, reflecting their values, world view, and understanding of how knowledge is produced in their field (Schwandt, 2001). Braun & Clarke (2006) defines it as a set of generalizations, common beliefs, and values of a community of specialists that helps to build the knowledge of their field. A research's paradigm critically affects the choice of methodology and research design.

Kuhn (1970) emphasizes the critical role of paradigms as normal science is defined by the existence of a paradigm. According to Kuhn *"no natural history can be interpreted in the absence of at least some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism"* (Ibid). In addition, Kuhn proposed the idea that scientific paradigms are incommensurable suggesting that science guided by one paradigm would be 'incommensurable' with science developed under a different paradigm, by which is meant that there is no common measure for assessing the different scientific theories (Anand, Larson, & Mahoney, 2020).

Moreover, Kuhn's developed The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (SSR), which illustrates that science go through phases (Anand et al., 2020). Specifically, during the normal science phase scientist trust the paradigm and are not critical of it as they take it for granted and solve puzzles within the rules of the paradigm (McLeod, 2020). The Structure of Scientific Revolutions developed by Kuhn (1970) showed that science primarily advances through shifts in theory and not by the accumulation of knowledge. SSR instead ideas from a competing paradigm should take place of ideas from the old paradigm. Kuhn indicates that a paradigm shift occurs when current theories cannot explain some phenomenon, and when a new paradigm better explains it; and the new paradigm is incommensurate with the former.

In articulating the paradigm of this research, it is important to explore the paradigmatic common assumptions of contemporary social sciences and define each of them. For any paradigm there are four main dimensions, which are ontology, epistemology,

methodology, and axiology (Wahyuni, 2012). The definition of each of these dimensions is discussed below.

Ontology

Ontology concerns the nature of reality (Aliyu, Singhry, Adamu, & Abubakar, 2015). Basically, it is one's own beliefs about reality and truth (Richards, 2003). Ontology, in the social sciences, can be defined as the theory of the fundamental entities, relations, and concepts of the social and political world, aiming to deeply investigate the nature of social reality (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Ontology is a very important part of a paradigm, as the researcher's ontology impacts the way they acquire knowledge and represent reality (Cooksey & McDonald, 2011).

Ontological perspectives may broadly be categorised into two families: objectivism and constructivism. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe objectivism as an ontological position that affirms reality is external and independent of social actors and their interpretations of it. On the other hand, constructivism affirms the dependence and coexistence of social actors and social phenomena (Bryman, 2015). It posits that social phenomena and categories, being the product of social interactions, are a constantly moving target, always subject to revision. (Grix, 2002)

According to Bryman (2008), social phenomena, from an objectivist point of view, are encountered as external facts that do not depend on us and are out with our control. Constructivists deny this, arguing that realities are constructions of a particular time

and context, and as such many realities have equal claim to existence. The researcher acts in concert with the social phenomena they study in the co-construction of social reality, and as a consequence the research's findings cannot be understood without insight into the subjective perspective of its participants (Guba 1990; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). That is to say, the researcher's view is not to be privileged as a 'Reality with a capital R', or as a definitive and final truth but rather is to be understood as a specific interpretation of social reality, (Bryman and Bell 2003). As such, ontology (what it means to be real, what *can* be real) cannot be separated easily from epistemology (how reality is known). This will now be discussed.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how knowledge of reality is produced, criticised and justified (Abdul Rehman & Alharthi, 2016), and with the relationship between the researcher and their object of study (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Kivunja and Kuyini, (2017) refer to epistemology as describing how we can come to know reality, and what counts as knowledge.

Epistemological perspectives may also broadly be categorised into two families; interpretivism and positivism (Grix, 2002). Bryman (2003) characterises interpretivism as putting the subjective perspective of the researcher at the centre of the research process, which has a major influence on the interpretation of the data. As such, this interpretivism looks at the social world from the subjective perspective of an individual *within* the social world. On the contrary, positivism looks at social reality as a set of objective facts, just like natural science, and as such advocates the use of the methods

of natural science (Grix, 2002). Hence, the process of data gathering should be held to the standard of a non-biased scientific approach (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). Positivism is the view that social reality exists independently of the observer, and is better measured objectively rather than inferred subjectively (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

After defining the two main elements of a research paradigm, Ontology and Epistemology, there are other two basic constitutive elements to consider; Methodology and Axiology. The definition of each belief is discussed briefly in the coming subsections.

Methodology

Methodology is the study and application of methods and processes in research (Creswell & Clark, 2018; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). Wahyuni (2012) defines methodology as a model for the conduct of research within a particular paradigm, governing the researcher's choice of methods. We distinguish here between *methods* and *methodology*; the former is the set of specific procedures, tools and techniques available to researchers, while the latter is a body of meta-theory that guides the choice of effective methods and their use.

By analogy, the 'methods' for walking from one place in a city to another are things like 'go forward', 'turn left', 'turn right', etc, which you may combine as needed to get from your origin to your destination; but the 'methodology' is the map of the city (ibid.).

It should be noted that a research method, e.g., an interview, is applicable under diverse research methodologies (Wahyuni, 2012). A research design, therefore, is the crucial step of applying a research *methodology* to a research *problem* to propose an appropriate set of research *methods* (Ibid).

Axiology

Axiology is an element of the paradigm which focuses on the role of values in research (Creswell & Clark, 2018). It concerns the values that inform and motivate the research, and how those values affect the research process and research outcomes (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). Its purpose is to ensure a high level of consistency and reliability of the research and its outcomes (Aliyu et al., 2015).

The Current Research

In the current research a mixed method methodology is implemented. Mixed method research typically adopts a pragmatist stance (Brierley, 2017; Hall, 2013), as does this thesis. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) explicitly linked pragmatism and mixed methods research. From a historical perspective, John Dewey is regarded the father of pragmatism, a view that rejected the dualistic epistemology and metaphysics of modern philosophy in favour of a naturalistic approach (Sorrell, 2013). Dewy viewed knowledge a result of active adaptation of the human organism to its environment (Ibid). Specifically, pragmatism is the view that even high level choices methodology and philosophical stance should be subservient to the practical considerations of the

particular research question, rather *a priori* theoretical commitments (Tashakkori, 1998). Fundamentally, with a pragmatist approach, the research question determines the method, rather an *a priori* research philosophy (Murphy, 1990). Hence, pragmatism abandon the forced dichotomous choice between positivism and constructivism (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Understood as a research paradigm, pragmatism proposes that the researcher should adopt the stance of believing in single or multiple realities according to what makes the research question at hand easiest to reason clearly and fruitfully about (Morgan, 2007). Dewey views the guiding principle of pragmatism is to fulfil the ends of practical life. In his view, what works in a practical situation is true; what does not work is false (Sorrell, 2013). Thus, truth is thus not fixed or unchangeable, rather it changeable and practical because the world is subject to constant change and uncertainty (Ibid). Pragmatism is inherently pluralistic, drawing on diverse approaches for "what works" and valuing both objective and subjective knowledge (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Pragmatism is not committed to any single system of ontology or epistemology (Frey, 2018), abandoning any metaphysical construction of reality or truth (Creswell, 2018a) in favour of a view of reality as an ever-changing, active creation of individuals in the world, based on human experience and the practical exigences of solving actual problems (Allmark & Machaczek, 2018). Fery (2018) explains that 'truth' in pragmatism is simply what works at the time, and should not be understood in terms of a dichotomy between mind-independent reality (as with postpositivism and critical paradigms hold) and or a purely subjective construction within the mind (as with constructivist paradigm). He elaborates that pragmatist approaches are generally also *naturalistic*;

they treat philosophy as continuous with science, not prior to it. Therefore, a pragmatist approaches is open to using different methodologies drawn from different branches of science, and has gained considerable support as a stance for mixed-methods research. Dewey has emphasised that action is higher than knowledge and practice is superior to thought and that knowledge and thinking are complementary with action (Sorrell, 2013).

For dewy, only ideas that can change the world are true, because truth and usefulness are identical. However, Rosenbaum (2013) clarifies that pragmatism is different from relativism as relativism means that the truth is relative to the individual. According to this view if there is absolute truth we can't know it; for they do not make any absolute truth claims. However, pragmatism considers what is useful — what works in a practical situation — is true; what does not work is false. In Dewy's view, truth is not fixed and unchangeable, it is changeable and practical; *"what is true today may be false tomorrow"* (Morgan, 2014). Yet, Dewey's conclusion about relativism is that it is misleading and is unable to replace pragmatism's progress. Dewy affirms that relativism is not a commitment of pragmatism and is not embedded in pragmatism, and pragmatists may safely ignore misguided charges of relativism against their views (Rosenbaum, 2013).

Pragmatism is the most suitable paradigm for this research, because it offers a practical, outcome-orientated method of inquiry. It is centred on the research question, focused on consequences of actions, and oriented towards real-world practice (Murphy, 1990). Pragmatic inquiry theorises, evaluates and transforms features of real-world psychological, social, and educational phenomena, and due to its inherently

pluralistic character is especially suited to offer a rich understanding of experience. This is particularly applicable in the current research as it aims to provide to the marketing community an understanding of self-disclosure by a SMI and its impact on consumer outcomes, both on the level of broad, reproducible patterns ('consumers exposed to *this* sort of content usually have *this* response'), and on the level of the particular, individual attitudes that motivate those responses. Jick (1979) argues that in mixed-methods research, divergent results drawn from each method allow the researcher to develop more complex, and potentially novel, explanations of the phenomenon under study. Pragmatism and mixed methods are therefore employed in this research to inform the examination of SMIs self-disclosures from multiple perspectives, while providing robust scrutiny.

The table below provides a reflection of the pragmatic approach on the paradigm elements mentioned previously.

Paradigm Element	**Effects of the application of a Pragmatist Paradigm**	**Ref**
Ontology	A pragmatist adopts the stance of believing in **singular** and **multiple realities**; for example, in relation to a single phenomenon under study, a pragmatic researcher might test hypotheses, and also presents multiple perspectives when explaining and theorising the phenomenon.	(Wahyuni, 2012)

Epistemology	A pragmatist approach is one which treats practical efficacy in knowledge-production as superseding all *a priori* or philosophical considerations. In practice, this means that a diversity of methods may be used in collecting and interpreting the collected data, in order to more effectively illuminate the problem from multiple perspectives.	(Kaushik & Walsh, 2019)
Axiology	**Multiple stances:** a pragmatist axiology requires the researcher to consider subjective and objective perspectives in the research.	(Wahyuni, 2012)
Methodology	A pragmatist researcher may collect and combine both quantitative and qualitative data.	(Creswell & Clark, 2018)

Table 3.1: the effect of the application of a pragmatism approach on research paradigm components.

After exploring elements of a pragmatic paradigm, the mixed methods research design is discussed in detail in the following section in relation to the research aim, objectives, and questions.

Research Design

As mentioned before, the aim of this research is to provide an initial understanding of self-disclosure by a SMI and its impact on consumer outcomes, which will help the marketing community to understand the nature of relationship between followers' and influencers—an important but relatively new, and hence under-investigated type of

marketing relationship. Although the overall research aim and initial research questions were determined from the beginning, the research objective and questions for study two and three emerged from the results of the prior study. The following table illustrates the research decisions regarding objective, questions, sample, data collection and analysis of each of the three studies.

No.	Research Objectives	Research Questions	Sample	Sample Size	Data Instrument	Data Collection	Data Analysis
1	To establish a cause and effect relationship between self-disclosure and consumer outcomes.	How does the different levels of depth and breadth of social self-disclosure by a SMI impact consumer's purchase and WOM intent? Does the gender of the influencer play a role in the relationship between self-disclosure and consumer outcomes? Are perceived appropriateness, trust, product attitude mediators in this relationship?	Purposive (Adult Instagram users that follow Instagram travel influencers) Mturk participants	459	Online experiment	Quantitative	Deductive MANCOVA and SEM
2	To validate the critical mediating role appropriateness play in the relationship between self-disclosure and consumer outcomes	How does the different appropriateness perception levels impact consumer outcomes?	Purposive (Adult Instagram users that follow Instagram travel influencers)Mturk participants	266	Online experiment	Quantitative	Deductive ANCOVA and SEM
3	To explain and validate the results acquired in study one and two.	Why is there a negative association between personal self-disclosure by an Instagram travel influencer and consumer outcomes? What do followers consider appropriate self-disclosure by an Instagram travel influencer?	Purposive (University students sample-UK based that follow Instagram travel influencers)	20	Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative	Inductive Thematic Analysis-Template Analysis Style

Table 3.2 Research Design Table

This research employs a mixed method approach, typical of the pragmatist paradigm, combining both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to gain breadth and depth of understanding (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). In pragmatist research, the research design may combine deductive and inductive reasoning as the researcher mixes qualitative and quantitative data (Bryman, 2015).

Specifically, research questions suited for mixed methods are those which one data source may be insufficient to answer, as is the case here (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Qualitative data provides a detailed understanding of a problem while quantitative data provides a more general understanding (Tracy, 2012). Brierley (2017) explains that quantitative research is best when the researcher seeks to understand the relationships between variables. Specifically, quantitative experiments are best suited to cases where the problem at hand is determining whether an intervention produces better outcomes than a control condition. On the other hand, qualitative research is best suited to cases where the goal is to explore and map out the phenomenon in its full complexity, honouring the voices of participants and their diverse perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative understanding arises from studying a few individuals and exploring their perspective in depth, whereas quantitative understanding arises from examining a large number of people and assessing responses to a few variables (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Qualitative and quantitative research provides different pictures and perspectives, and each has limitations. Qualitative research lacks the ability to generalize results, while in quantitative research the understanding of any one individual is diminished

(Creswell, 2018). Hence, in the present work the strengths of each method offset the weaknesses of the other, and quantitative and qualitative data in combination provide a more comprehensive understanding either could method alone. Engaging multiple forms of inquiry allows information to be explored in a way that would be inaccessible through a single approach alone (Hall, 2013).

Specifically, this research adopts a *mixed methods experimental design.* The primary design of the study is a quantitative experiment (Creswell & Clark, 2018); after developing a good understanding of the phenomenon in a controlled setting through two experiments, a qualitative interview study followed. The qualitative data is a secondary component of this design, intended to enrich understanding of the experimental results. This is an *explanatory sequential* approach (Creswell, 2018), in which quantitative studies occur first in order to address the study's main question, and qualitative methods followed to provide deeper understanding and give nuance to the quantitative results. This kind of design has been successful in previous research (Sun & May, 2013; van 't Riet et al., 2016).

The rationale here is that the statistical analysis of the quantitative data provides validity in determining causation between the two main sides of the model i.e., self-disclosure and consumer outcomes, while the qualitative data and their analysis explain those empirical results by exploring participants' perspectives in more depth. An experiment (as opposed to a survey study) is able to diagnose causality, rather than mere correlation, because the predictor variables are controlled by the investigators, who administer an intervention then test whether the it affects the

outcome (Shadish, 2002). Adding qualitative inquiry to an experimental design then provides personal, contextual, qualitative experiences along with the qualitative outcome measures (Creswell, 2018), and helps us to understand and explain the variation in outcome responses (Johnson et al., 2007). Moreover, the qualitative study aids in assessing how the specific context of travel influencers may have influenced the outcomes.

Philosophically, the experimental part of the research is more aligned with objectivism and positivism, while the interview phase is more aligned with constructivism and interpretivism. By using a conceptual model to guide the experiment and deduce conclusions, the first stage informs the qualitative stage. This model was constructed deductively, drawing on what is already known in the influencer marketing and the self-disclosure literature; and was then subject to empirical scrutiny through experiments and statistical hypothesis testing. An experimental mixed methods design was chosen because it is causal research trying to identify a relationship between universal concepts (self-disclosure and consumer's purchase intent and WOM intent), which then inductively aims to explain the results with a thorough qualitative study. Different assumptions are used with each stage of the study; beginning with quantitative work aligned to a positivist orientation int the selection of instruments, measurement of variables, and assessment of statistical results. However, in the qualitative phase, multiple perspectives and in-depth descriptions are valued, showing a shift to the assumptions of constructivism. The final interpretation of the results is then based on one set of assumptions aligned with the pragmatism stance.

Experiments

Since the purpose of an experiment is to prove that one phenomenon causes another (Maxwell & Delaney, 2003), experiments are well suited to my initial research question. The rationale for conducting experiments is that the influence of particular factors on outcomes can be isolated, and law-like patterns identified (Maxwell & Delaney, 2003). Part of the appeal of experiments is that findings are independent of the researcher, so the same experiment conducted by different researchers should produce the same results (Bryman, 1988/1992). In experiments, the production of knowledge can be controlled and is more systematic than other methods (Shadish, 2002). The underlying assumption is that causal relationships can be identified by running experiments in which key variables are manipulated independently (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000).

However, experiments have limitations. For example, Blaikie (2010) explains that experiments are abstracted away from 'real world' conditions; people behave differently as 'subjects' in an experiment to how they would in 'real life', because they are taken out of their natural environments, away from contexts where 'local knowledge' applies. However, the method enables manipulating the independent variables and controls for issues involving unmanageable factors and individual differences (Maxwell & Delaney, 2003). While experiments are high in internal validity, they generally lack external and ecological validity (Bryman, 2015).

Regarding the choice of lab versus online experiments, Clifford & Jerit (2014) found few differences in terms of the quality of responses, like the levels of attention and socially desirable responding, between online and lab data. Furthermore, online

experiments are less work for researchers to administer, and for participants to take, while laboratory experiments involve greater cost (setup, proctoring, etc.) and require subjects to turn up at a specified time and place. Internet-administered randomized experiments, they conclude, are an appealing alternative to laboratory experiments. Therefore, the two experiments in the current research are conducted online for cost and convenience reasons.

Interviews

Qualitative research approaches are often used to understand and examine complex phenomena (Bryman, 2003). Qualitative interviews are included in this research because the quantitative findings need to be clarified from the point of view of someone who is part of the social phenomenon under study, such as the followers of travel influencers, who are prospective consumers of the goods and services that influencers advertise. Such method is thought to be the best way to learn this insight and experience. Interviews have been defined as conversations with a purpose (Burgess, 2002). Interviews provide the chance to ask someone who knows what the interviewer wants to know (Miles, 2020). An interview provides more depth compared to quantitative data collection methods (Haddow, 2017). In addition, according to Rubin (1995) qualitative interviews provides the ability to find out what others feel and think about their worlds.

Adopting an open-ended view of the research process through in-depth semi-structured interviews allows fewer restrictions to be placed on what the kind of things can be found out (Braun, 2013). This enables the researcher to have an open mind

about the phenomenon being studied (Bryman, 2015), by allowing the researcher to depart from the interview guide and ask new questions that follow up on the interviewee' replies, allowing richer, more detailed answers (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013) (see appendix 1.1 for the interview questions). Thus, the interview process adopted is flexible.

The interview consists of two parts: the first involves questions about travel influencers that the participants follow, and disclosures made by these influencers using a 'show-and-tell' interviewing technique (Gelineck & Serafin, 2012; Lambert, 2017; Zaman, Vanden Abeele, Markopoulos, & Marshall, 2012). In the second part of the interview, interviewees are shown four fictional Instagram posts by travel influencers, demonstrating different levels of self-disclosure (high to low depth: see Appendix 1.1 for all posts displayed), and are invited to comment on any interesting aspects of it. The aim of this part is to stimulate more discussion around influencers' disclosures; similar techniques have been used by Bates, Mccann, Kaye, & Taylor (2017).

Through this mixed methods design, experiments and semi-structured interviews complement each other with regard to validity (Erzberger & Prein, 1997). Results from quantitative and qualitative research build upon and supplement each other (Tashakkori, 2003). After developing a good understanding of the phenomenon in a controlled setting, the interview results enrich the experimental results and provide validity in determining causation. Also, the qualitative data and their analysis explain the experimental results by exploring participants' perspectives in more depth and providing personal, contextual experiences (Creswell, 2018).

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique is used in all three studies. Instagram adult users that follow travel influencers are the target sample of this research. The research did not focus on respondents of any particular age group, to allow greater generalizability. Instagram users were chosen because Instagram is the most important platform for influencer marketing (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). According to the Digital Marketing Institute (2020), 78% of influencer brand promotions use Instagram as their primary social platform. Instagram has in excess of 558,000 influencers active on the platform, and in 2020 65% of marketers plan to increase their influencer marketing budget, especially on Instagram, where engagement rates are highest. It's predicted that advertisers will spend $2.3 billion on Instagram influencer marketing in 2020 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

The participants of both Study 1 and 2 consist of Instagram users that follow travel influencers, recruited and paid via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Research supports the validity of Amazon Mechanical Turk data for quantitative studies (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka, & Reinikainen, 2019), and has been used by prior studies concerned with SMIs (Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Buhrmester et al., (2011) have found that MTurk benefits from obtaining high-quality data inexpensively and rapidly. Specifically, they found that compensation rates do not impact data quality; and that the data obtained are as reliable as the data obtained via traditional methods. The sample is predominantly US based. For the third study, the participants were also all Instagram users that follow travel influencers. However, it was a UK-based student sample, recruited with the help and approval of the University of Edinburgh and encouraged to

share contact details with other followers of travel influencers, thereby creating a snowball sample. Although the samples are different, consistent results were acquired in all three studies.

Provided the sampling criteria are objectively derived from the segment of the population specified by the research question *(e.g., followers of travel influencers on Instagram*) and the results are not generalized beyond the group from which the sample was derived, this type of purposive sampling is acceptable (Black, 1999). While limitations of this approach must be acknowledged, it is impossible to acquire population lists of all social media followers of travel influencers (Tow, Dell, and Venable, 2010). Furthermore, this approach is well-established in studies of adult Internet users (Archer-Brown, Kampani, Marder, Bal, & Kietzmann, 2017; Matook, Brown, and Rolf, 2015; McMillan, Hwang, and Lee, 2003). Also, the anti-ballot stuffing setting on MTurk was used to prevent multiple submissions from the same participant, thereby increasing the overall validity of the study. More measures to control for the quality of the responses acquired from Mturk are provided in study one and two.

Management of Ethical Issues

Ethical approval has been acquired prior to any data collection procedures (see all ethical form in appendix 1.2). This research's data collection has been under the umbrella of the University of Edinburgh's ethical conduct and committee approval. In addition, the procedures adopted in this research are in accordance with the British Education Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines. Consent forms were taken from all participants for all studies. In interviews information was given through

the consent form (see appendix 1.3) which also served as a protection for both interviewees and interviewer. Through the consent form interviewees were informed that the interview transcripts would be used for research purposes after anonymising participants and any information that might lead to their identity, and they signed confirming agreement to this before proceeding. It was made clear that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any time for any reason. They were also informed that the original interview recording would only be available to the main researcher only. Information was given regarding the use of results from these interviews in publications. Participants knew and agreed to being recorded through written consent, and were also asked at the start of the interview to confirm their agreement. This was a choice that they made, and not a condition they had to agree upon. After that, the recordings are to be kept until the completion of this PhD, then deleted and destroyed with the help of the University of Edinburgh's specialized team. Until then the data is kept securely in encrypted files on the laptop of the main researcher. All participants' names mentioned in chapter 6 are pseudonyms.

Quality Assurance

For each of the quantitative studies, quality assurance measures of the validity and reliability of the data are provided as part of their respective analyses. Reliability refers to the consistency over time of findings from participants (Creswell and Clark, 2007). Reliability of constructs is typically measured by using Kronbach's alpha. The reliability of measures must be ensured before validity can be evaluated (Ibid.). All reliability measures in Study 1 and 2 were found satisfactory (see chapter 4 and 5).

The validity of an experiment, broadly speaking, is whether it in fact measures what it purports to measure. This is typically decomposed into internal and external validity. Internal Validity concerns the extent to which a researcher can infer a cause and effect relationship between variables (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Experiments are high in internal validity than merely survey studies, as the independent variables (IVs) are typically directly manipulated by the investigator, and can conclude that there is a cause and effect relationship between variables (Bryman and Bell 2003; Bryman 2008; Field 2009). On the other hand, External Validity refers to the extent to which the results may be generalised beyond the experiment and the particular group of participants it was conducted on (Bryman and Bell 2006). Generally speaking, experiments are low in external validity because experiments use quite artificial set-ups in order to elicit causal relationships. As such, internal and external validity are typically in tension (Ibid). Ecological validity is a subtype of external validity, referring specifically to the generalisability of findings in an artificial, experimental set-up to the phenomena in natural settings. Experimental methods often have lower ecological validity than other techniques, as phenomena are typically abstracted away from their natural environment (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

On the other hand, in qualitative studies, validity is more typically understood as the question of whether the researcher's interpretations match what the participants actually meant, in an accurate, trustworthy and credible manner (Guba and Lincoln 1985). The qualitative component of the current research used a number of common strategies to ensure qualitative validity. First, the key findings from each participant's interview were summarised and shown to the participant (Bryman, 2008); once the data was all transcribed and the preliminarily analysis was complete, each participant

was emailed a copy of their transcript, and they provided feedback confirming the transcriptions were accurate (Punch, 2013). Secondly, the researcher was debriefed by peers (other doctoral students) and supervisors, continuously providing feedback on the data analysis. Third, the iterative reanalysis required by the Template Analysis (TA) framework required that all versions of the template, all changes, and the reasons for changes has been documented in detail, ensuring high degree of transparency (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015) and facilitating methodological reflexivity (King & Brooks, 2017). Methodological reflexivity refers to critical self-awareness and examination of beliefs and knowledge-claims through conscious, reflexive thinking about one's own thinking, and critiquing pre-understandings, and their effect on the research (D O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2014). Reflexivity was also maintained by returning to the data repeatedly over many weeks, ensuring that the researcher found the same themes repeatedly, even after time away from the data. Finally, the mixed methods approach of this research ensures the reliability of the results, as it requires triangulation and consilience between different sources of information (Creswell and Miller 2000; Creswell and Clark 2007).

Analysis

Analysis of Quantitative studies

The results of the two experiments has been analysed statistically through SPSS and SMART PLS for mediation analysis, for several reasons. PLS-SEM estimation, unlike to co-variance-based structural equation methods (CB-SEM), is non-parametric and therefore makes no assumptions about the distributions of the data (Hair, Hult, and Ringle, 2014). Secondly, PLS-SEM is more suitable for prediction-oriented studies,

and here the main objective was to explain and predict variance in the dependent variable, as opposed to co-variance-based SEM, which is better suited to testing which models best fit the data (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Chin et al., 2003). Also, it allows for testing more than one dependent variable in the same mediation model, unlike PROCESS on SPSS(Hayes, 2017).

Analytical Framework for Interviews

To analyse the data, thematic analysis was adopted, specifically with a template analysis (TA) style. Braun & Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a qualitative analysis technique for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data in rich detail and organising those themes into a structure. It reports experiences, meanings, and realities of participants (Brooks et al., 2015). It is a flexible and useful research tool, which provides a rich and detailed, account of data that is capable of accounting for complexities (Bryman, 2015).

The first step was simply to transcribe the data; although time-consuming—each interview required around 6 hours of transcribing—this proved to be an excellent way to get familiar with the data—a prerequisite of any effective analysis (Bryman, 2003). Braun & Clarke (2006) describes this familiarisation as the bedrock for the rest of the analysis. Further re-reading the transcripts and noting down initial ideas facilitated immersion in the data and helped with identifying possible patterns (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

The second step was coding the data (Bryman, 2003). By identifying salient features of the data, codes segment the raw data into its smallest meaningfully evaluable components (Service, Brooks, & King, 2014). As suggested by Tracy (2012) open coding was used, and coding was done on the go; meaning that an interview was coded as soon as it was transcribed, even if other interviews were yet to be collected. This facilitated gaining in-depth understanding of the data, which then helped orient and focus upcoming interviews. Initial codes were generated by systematically highlighting anything in the dataset that seemed relevant to the research questions, while also collecting data relevant to each code (Service et al., 2014). The coding process has been facilitated by NVivo, a qualitative research application which enables tagging and naming selections of text within data (Welsh, 2002). Following the advice of Braun & Clarke (2006), coding was done for as many potential themes/patterns as possible.

Template Analysis (TA) is a set of techniques used to thematically organize and analyse textual data into a meaningful structure (King, 2004). An initial subset of the data is used to develop a coding template, which is then revised and refined as it is applied to further data, (Service et al., 2014). Although TA is considered a relatively new technique, it has been found beneficial in marketing research (Burton & Khammash, 2010; King & Brooks, 2017; Liu, Perry, Moore, & Warnaby, 2016; Truong & Simmons, 2010).

In the preliminary data coding stage of TA it is common to use some *a priori* themes; themes that have been identified in advance of coding to help guide the analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). King & Brooks (2017) explain that these *a priori* themes are usually identified because the researcher intends to focus on certain aspects of the research question, or when the importance of a particular theme in relation to the quesiton is well established in the literature. Thus, the template can be informed by both the data and the literature, depending on the extent to which the researcher uses *a priori* themes. After careful consideration, two broadly defined *a priori* themes were used; social self-disclosure and appropriateness; which were drawn from the literature and the researcher's own previous empirical studies (Study 1 and 2).

Template analysis was used for several reasons; First, because the discipline of producing a template forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handling the data, which provides clarity and organization in representing the findings (King, 2004). Second, this approach is flexible regarding the style and the format of the template produced, without suggesting a set sequence of coding hierarchy in advance, but rather allows the analyst to develop themes by exploring the data in real depth, encouraging an open-minded approach to the analysis (Service et al. 2014). Third, a major strength of TA is that it can be adapted to the needs of any project in any area (King & Brooks, 2017). Fourth, at the heart of TA is the process of iteratively developing, applying, modifying, and then reapplying versions of the template on further data, which ensures a thorough analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, there is a high degree of transparency to the analytical process, as all versions of the template are documented along with records of changes and why they were made (Brooks et al., 2015; see appendix 1.4 for all iterations of template). This can be a significant aspect of quality assurance as well as facilitating methodological reflexivity (King & Brooks, 2017).

As with any method, TA has limitations. First, the flexibility of the method, in relation to the freedom allowed in coding structure, can be challenging for inexperienced data analysts, finding themselves facing an unmanageably complex coding template (Brooks et al., 2015). Second, there is limited guidance on interpretation, with the result that researchers may simply end up summarizing what they have coded under each main theme, with little attempt to engage in more sophisticated interpretative thinking (King, 2004). Third, although the use of a prior themes is not compulsory, Service et al. (2014) warns of the risks of starting with too many pre-defined codes, as the initial template may blinker the analysis, preventing the researcher from considering data that conflict with their assumptions. Nonetheless, they argue that *a priori* themes are always tentative, and can be redefined or removed if they do not prove relevant or suitable.

After reading all interviews a subset of the data was chosen to create the initial template (Brooks et al., 2015), taking care to ensure as varied a selection as possible, to capture a good cross-section of the issues and experiences in the data (Service et al., 2014). To ensure that the chosen subset represented the entire dataset, they were picked for diversity of gender, age, and education of the interviewees, as well as the differences in the issues and experiences covered in the interviews. A very detailed and in-depth coding of five interviews was then conducted.

Once the preliminary coding was no longer producing distinctly different new themes and/or codes, it was deemed an appropriate to formulate the intial template (Liu et al., 2016). This phase re-focuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than

codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial template identified the key themes emerging from participants' interviews by considering how the different codes combined to form overarching themes (Brooks et al., 2015). The template is then organized into a hierarchical structure representing the relationships between the themes (King, 2004). Some initial codes formed main themes, while others formed sub-themes, and others were discarded (King & Brooks, 2017). The importance of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question, or represents some level of pattern or meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

At the end of this stage the initial template was formulated, covering the data considered thus far. It represented a thematic ‘map’- an overall conceptualization of the patterns in the data, and the relationships between them (Brooks & King, 2014). Unlike some other thematic approaches, the beauty of template analysis at this stage is that it accommodates a high number of hierarchies (King, 2004). Hence, the initial template was very detailed, lengthy, and meaningfully represented the relationships between the different themes (see appendix 1.4). The emerging themes were organised into clusters that illustrated how they relate to each other within and between these groupings (Brooks et al., 2015), including lateral relationships across clusters. Themes which permeate several clusters are referred to as “integrative themes” (Service et al., 2014). For example, the theme “trust in influencers” is an important integrative theme because it infused much of the discussion, whatever the foreground issue was.

Afterwards, the template was adapted to the rest of the interviews, to see if the themes of the initial template accurately represent them (King, 2004). This was an iterative process of trying the template, modifying it, and trying again, to allow a rich and comprehensive interpretation of the data (Service et al., 2014). Great care was taken throughout this process to guarantee that ongoing analysis was not unduly constrained by the initial template design (King & Brooks, 2017). Rather than reorganising the template after each new interview examined, the analyst worked through several interviews noting possible revisions, and periodically constructing new versions of the template, following common practice (Brooks et al., 2015). Modifications to the template included adding new emerging codes that were not in the initial format, while others were moved, merged, or their place in the hierarchy was changed (Service et al., 2014).

As writing is an integral part of analysis, rather than taking place at the end, all changes were recorded, along with the reasons the changes were made (Liu et al., 2016). Writing started in phase one, with jotting down ideas and potential coding schemes, and continued throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, notes were taken to document decisions and modifications, and to provide clarity on the process of coding (Burton & Khammash, 2010).

After developing the second version of the template, the two versions were compared (Service et al., 2014), through several stages:

- Themes were reviewed to ensure that they work with the coded extracts, and the entire dataset (Burton & Khammash, 2010). This phase requires two levels of reviewing and refining themes:
    - Level one involves reviewing the coded data extracts, by reading all the collated extracts for each theme and checking whether they form a coherent pattern (King, 2004). In the case where a candidate theme or some of the data extracts within it didn't fit, the theme is reworked, either by creating a new theme, or finding a home in the pre-existing theme for those extracts, or discarding them from the analysis (Brooks et al., 2015).
    - Level two, focuses on considering whether the candidate template accurately reflects the meaning of the dataset as a whole, which is done by re-reading the entire dataset (King & Brooks, 2017). If the map doesn't fit the dataset, further reviewing and refining of the coding is done, until a satisfactory thematic map is reached (King, 2004).
- The outcome of this stage is the identification of main themes and sub-themes, how the different themes fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data (Truong & Simmons, 2010).

Overall, this template has undergone four iterations to arrive at the final template. Thus, the final template includes the most salient themes and sub-themes of this data. Lastly, the final template has been applied to the full dataset (Brooks et al., 2015). The final template serves as the basis for the interpretation of the dataset, as well as a useful guide and structure to the writing-up of the research findings.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this mixed methods research adopts a pragmatic stance with an experimental-explanatory sequential design. Two experiments were conducted, followed by a qualitative phase for validation and explanatory purposes. This chapter covers the philosophical assumptions adapted in this research along with the research design, data collection, sampling, analysis, quality assurance, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Study One

Introduction

This chapter presents the first study of the present work into the effects of social self-disclosure by a travel Instagram influencer on followers' purchase intent and Word of Mouth (WOM) intent. Also, this study aims to support the conceptual model developed in the literature review in chapter 2. A between-subjects experiment (n= 454, 2 x 2 x 2) examined disclosure depth (High vs. Low), disclosure breadth (High vs. Low), and gender of Instagram travel influencers (Male vs. female), on perceived Appropriateness, Trust, Product Attitude, Purchase Intention, and WOM Intention. Primarily, this study expands on the existing literature on self-disclosure by marketing agents to a new domain—that of SMIs— and highlights the important role that perceived appropriateness play in this relationship.

Social media influencers (SMI) are key marketing agents and core to many brands' digital marketing strategies (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Although self-disclosure has been known for its positive impact on relationships whether online or offline (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2018; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016; Lin & Utz, 2017; Mazer et al., 2007; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002), current knowledge on social self-disclosure by salespeople indicates that such disclosures are detrimental to brands and should be avoided (Andersson et al., 2016; Jacobs, Hyman, et al., 2001). Influencers challenge this orthodoxy, as self-disclosure has been shown to be central to their success (Marshall & Redmond, 2016). Thus, this study was conducted to explore this phenomenon.

This chapter is organized in as follows: first an explanation of the experiment and sampling procedures are provided; followed by a presentation of the results; followed by a discussion of these results, and lastly the conclusion, along with a consideration of the limits of this study.

Design

An experimental approach is adopted, as such approaches as opposed to real-world studies, provide researchers a high level of control over otherwise unmanageable factors (Dyussembayeva, Viglia, Nieto-Garcia, & Invernizzi, 2020). Previous research (Huang, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2001) asked for future studies to utilize experimental designs to manipulate self-disclosure. Thus, an online experiment was conducted through Qualtrics, a survey tool commonly used for conducting online experiments in marketing research (e.g., Carr & Hayes, 2014; Kim & Song, 2016; Yuan & Lou, 2020). An online setting was chosen because it more closely resembles real-life SNS browsing than a lab setting would (Lin & Utz, 2017), and because it enables us to collect a larger and more heterogeneous sample of participants.

We adopted this practice, using a vignette and fictitious influencers and their Instagram posts for the following reasons. Firstly, real-life influencers and companies might not be willing to allow investigations with their real followers and consumers, as such manipulations might affect them negatively. Therefore, secondly, using fictional influencers' posts provides the opportunity to finely manipulate variables and contexts that are not always easily studied in a real-life setting (Andersson et al., 2016; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008). Also, the use of real-life influencers prohibits

controlling for unmanageable factors (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Further, the use of fictional posts is already a well-established practice in social media and influencer research (Bazarova 2012, Carr & Hayes, 2014). Furthermore, this work answers Magno & Cassia's (2018) call for future research to explore whether travel influencers only affect their loyal followers or whether they also affect the larger public. Thus, in this experiment the impact of manipulating fictitious influencers' self-disclosure on Instagram users (who are not followers of the featured influencer) is explored.

The study features a 2 (Breadth: high vs. low) X 2 (Depth: high vs. low) X 2 (Gender: male vs. female) between –subjects MANCOVA experiment, resulting in eight conditions. The stimuli were manipulated Instagram posts (picture and a caption) by a travel influencer. The picture is of the influencer with his/her spouse on a trip to Bali, Indonesia. All conditions saw the same picture. Except for the caption under the picture, everything on the webpage remained the same across conditions. The caption featured different levels of influencer gender (male vs. female), depth (superficial vs. personal topics), and breadth (number of items disclosed). The levels of depth and breadth were determined through the literature and pretested to ensure validity. In addition, a brief review about their experience with the resort mentioned in the post is included in all conditions. In the first condition the caption includes social self-disclosure that is high in breadth and depth. The second condition's caption includes a high breadth and low depth social self-disclosure. The third condition's caption includes a low breadth and high depth social self-disclosure. The fourth condition's caption includes a low breadth and low depth social self-disclosure. All four conditions were repeated with a change of the influencer's gender (see figure 4.1 for a

representation of the conditions). Stimuli were randomised via Qualtrics' randomisation function.

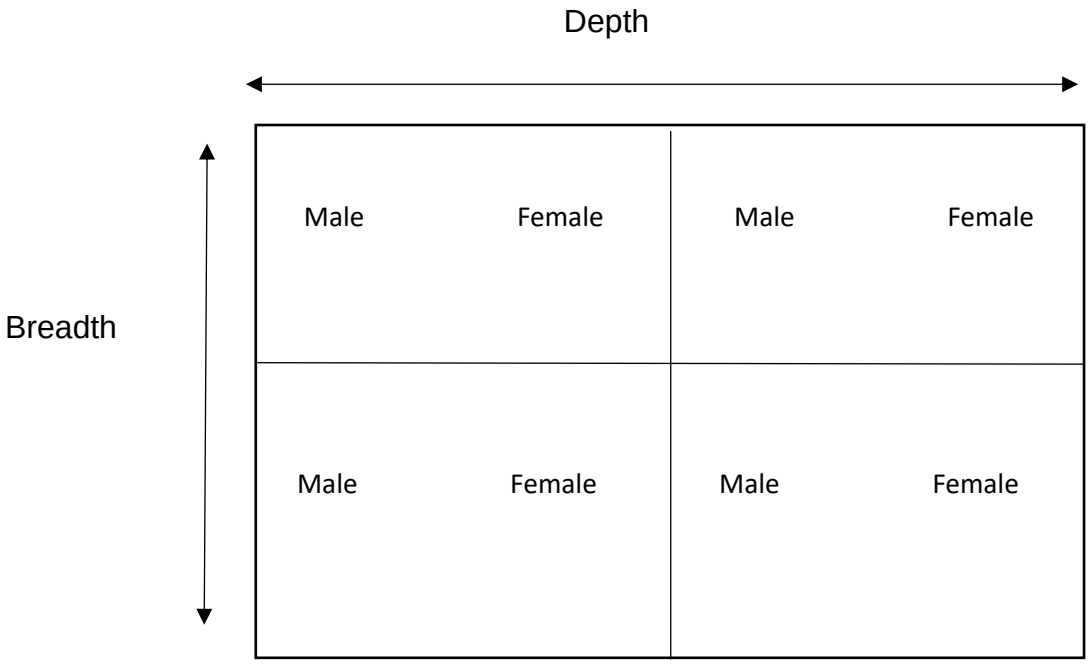

Figure 4.1: conditions representation

The Instagram post did not include likes or comments. The rational for the exclusion of these elements is to reduce social desirability, where the respondents might tend to respond to the post in a way that matches the likes and comments. In addition, the resort name was mentioned at the end of the caption to keep the attention on the self-disclosure as it is the main variable to be investigated. An example of the conditions is provided below in figure 4.2 (for full stimuli see appendix 2.1).

Figure 4.2 Illustration of stimuli -condition 3: Male influencer, low breadth, and high depth of self-disclosure.

Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to read and acknowledge an informed consent form. Then, participants were shown the stimulus, accompanied by the following instruction: "Please imagine you see the following post in your Instagram feed, posted by a travel influencer. Please look carefully at the post." After viewing the stimulus, questions were presented in a randomized order, probing dependent variables and asking for their demographic information.

A common method used in self-disclosure experiments is the manipulation of the depth and breadth of disclosures. Operationally, breadth level can be categorized into high or low in terms of the total number of topical items an individual discloses about themself; thus, a greater number of items in the disclosure corresponds to greater breadth of self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994). The breadth items implemented in this study's conditions were drawn from the Jourard Self-Disclosure Inventory (AKA. SD-60) of topical categories including religion, own marriage and family, love, personal physical condition and appearance, emotions and feelings, relationships with others and so on (Jourard & Lasakow, 1957). The level of depth is manipulated through the intimacy of the information disclosed (high vs. low intimacy). For example, one's feelings about own marriage is considered a high depth disclosure, while how long one has been married is a relatively low depth disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994).

In order to check and validate the depth and breadth dimensions of the stimuli two pre-tests were conducted, consistent with previous literature (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Moon, 2000). Before asking participants about their perceptions on the level of disclosure, they were given definitions of self-disclosure and the two dimensions depth and breadth, with examples that were consistent with the theoretical conceptualization of this study. Depth was measured through a seven-point semantic differential scale with three items, which are: *The post message is: intimate-nonintimate, personal-impersonal, deep-superficial* (Bazarova, 2012). Breadth was measured by asking the participants to count the actual number of topics/areas of the influencer's personal life that the post covers (Moon, 2000).

A sample of (n=56) participants recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk completed the survey. The sample was comprised of (60%) Males, the majority of participants (82.2%) where aged between 25-44, (37.5%) of them where from the USA and (46.4%) where from India. An independent-sample t-test for depth and breadth confirmed that the high and low depth and breadth conditions were perceived as intended by participants. The sample perceived the self-disclosure conditions consistent with the levels it was intended to represent, (Breadth P= .04 and Depth P=.05). Depth has been further strengthened in the conditions for the main experiment through adding deeper personal statement about the influencer's emotions, inner thoughts and beliefs similar to Lin & Utz's (2017) approach. Additionally, a depth manipulation check was also inserted in the main experiment.

Furthermore, two other pre-tests were conducted, testing the realism of the post and the attractiveness of the influencer. Previous studies suggested that physical attractiveness of a person can affect persuasiveness of messages (Shin, Van Der Heide, Beyea, Dai, & Prchal, 2017). Hence a pre-test was conducted, presenting participants with three different pictures of couples to ensure the picture eventually chosen showed with no significant difference in the level of attractiveness within the couple pictured (see appendix 2.3 for all pictures included in the pre-test). Attractiveness measure was adapted from Shin et al. (2017); *"I think s/he is quite pretty/handsome, I find her/him very attractive physically, S/he is somewhat ugly (reverse-coded)"* (1 Strongly Disagree; 7 Strongly Agree). A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the attractiveness of the male in the picture to the attractiveness of the female in the same picture. There was no significant difference in the "Surf Couple" scores for male attractiveness (M=3.33, SD=.76) and female attractiveness

(M=3.35, SD=.76); t (158)= .29, p= .78. The results for this picture suggest that the attractiveness of the couple in the picture will not impact the persuasiveness of the message differently in the male-influencer and female-influencer conditions, making it suitable to be used in this experiment. Furthermore, the realism of the post was pre-tested, using the following question: *Do you think the post is a realistic representation of a post by an Instagram influencer* (1 very realistic; 7 very unrealistic). A one-sample t-test against middle point (4) confirmed that the post is considered a realistic presentation of an Instagram post (t=-6.470, M= 2.82. p<.001).

In addition, platform familiarity was controlled for by only including participants that already have an Instagram account. Also, third party affiliation was controlled for in compliance with the endorsement guidelines of the US Federal Trade Commission (Federal Trade Commission, 2020). The guidelines require disclosure of affiliation on any Instagram post for which the influencer has any connection or relationship with a company for promotional purposes. At first glance, such regulations might not seem desirable from the marketer's perspective. However, research has proven that disclosure of affiliation reflects positively on consumer behavior and the perceived credibility of the opinion leader (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Thus, third party sponsorship was controlled for, by declaring to participants that the influencer receives sponsorship from brands regularly before viewing the stimuli.

Measures

The study features three exogenous constructs (independent variables) Depth, Breadth, Influencer gender; and five endogenous constructs (dependent variables)

appropriateness, trust, product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM. All dependent variables were measured using existing multiitem scales on a 7-point Likert scales (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree), except for *Appropriateness*, which was measured with a semantic differential scale adapted from Bazarova (2012) and Lin & Utz (2017), (α= .93). An item example is "*All things considered; I think the information provided by the influencer in the post is: Appropriate-Inappropriate*". Higher scores represent greater perceived appropriateness. *Product attitude* was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Huang (2015) (α= .93) and *purchase intention* was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Lu, Fan, & Zhou (2016) (α= .93), with both variables slightly modified to align with the tourism context. An item example for product attitude is *"Please rate your attitude toward the resort mentioned in the post: I have positive thoughts about the resort mentioned in this Instagram post"*. An item example of purchase intention is: *"Given the opportunity to go to Bali.. I am very likely to consider staying at the resort mentioned in the post". WOM intention* was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from (Maxham, 2001) (α= .91), slightly modified to align with the tourism context. An item example is *"If you had a friend who was going to Bali, please rate how likely you are to.. Recommend the resort mentioned in the post to them".*

Trust was originally measured through two independent measures *Affective Trust* and *cognitive Trust* using a 10-item scale reported along a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) adapted from (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; McAllister, 1995; Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012) with some modification to align with the context of SMI. An item example is *"Given the chance, rate to what extent you would think or do the following with regards to the person who shared the post you just saw:*

Freely share your ideas, hopes, and feelings with this person.". An item example of Cognitive trust is: *"Please rate to which extent you trust this influencer: I think this influencer provides unbiased opinions"* Four items measured affective trust and six measured cognitive trust (α= .93, .91 respectively) (A full table of the measures will be presented later along with the model fit discussion for the mediation analysis- check Table 4.7). However, through looking at reliability all items across the two trust measures strongly loaded with one factor than another (see Table 1 in Appendix 2.4). Moreover, it is difficult to determine the relationship between the two constructs in the model—that is to say, which form of trust is formed first, especially in the context of SMIs as they blur the line between social and commercial personas. Thus, it was decided that the two forms of trust should be collapsed into a single higher order trust construct. Furthermore, exploratory analysis on SMART PLS to check the model fit and discriminant validity was conducted, and trust was found to have high collinearity with WOM. In order to ensure discriminant validity and avoid merging the two variables, some cognitive trust items that had high collinearity with WOM were omitted; since the trust measure was composed of a higher number of items (i.e., ten), trust items were reduced, which improved discriminant validity. The alpha score for the trust variable is equal to .905.

Sample

A purposive sampling technique was used, with the respondents being adult (above 18) Instagram users that follow travel influencers (n= 583). We recruited and compensated a sample through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Following the advice of (Stubb et al., 2019), to improve the quality of the answers, some control measures/procedures were implemented. First, Amazon Mechanical Turk

respondents were restricted to those who had a validated approval record of above 90%. Second, the Qualtrics anti-ballot stuffing setting was enabled to avoid multiple submissions from the same participant. Third, a hidden timer was inserted in the online survey when displaying the stimulus, to ensure that participants spent adequate time carefully reading the post. Participants could not move forward to the survey questions before spending at least 6 seconds looking at the stimulus, confirmed by an eye-tracking study to be the average amount of time attended to picture posts on social media (Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016).

Furthermore, at the end of the survey, participants were asked quality check questions related to their attention to the stimulus. Participants were asked to state the gender of the influencer in each specific condition, and the resort name mentioned in the post; any who failed to answer correctly were excluded. Through pre-testing the length of the survey, it was found that the minimum time required to complete the survey is three minutes. Thus, participants who spent less than three minutes answering the questions were removed. Through data cleaning it is ensured that any bias that might come from this method or sample has been controlled for, leaving a sample of (*n= 459)*. The sample consisted of (53.2%) Males and (46.8%) Females. The majority of the sample were aged between 25 to 44 years (71.2%, see Table 2). The participants were predominantly from the US (71.5%), India (19.4%), UK (1.5%) and Italy (1.1%), and (6.5%) where from other countries (Table 2 in appendix 2.5).

Pre-Analysis

A MANCOVA was conducted to explore whether the independent variables (influencer gender, breadth, depth) had an effect on the dependent variables (appropriateness,

trust, product attitude, purchase intention, WOM) while controlling for (participant gender, age). Descriptive statistics are presented in the tables below (tables 4.1 and 4.2).

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Depth	Breadth	Influencer Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Appropriate	Low	Low	Male	6.02	1.12	63
			Female	6.02	.92	55
		High	Male	5.87	1.23	61
			Female	5.85	1.25	54
	High	Low	Male	5.42	1.43	65
			Female	5.28	1.29	50
		High	Male	4.99	1.67	64
			Female	4.85	1.66	47
Trust	Low	Low	Male	4.57	1.29	63
			Female	4.85	1.21	55
		High	Male	4.56	1.35	61
			Female	4.54	1.42	54
	High	Low	Male	4.81	1.38	65
			Female	4.79	1.35	50
		High	Male	4.50	1.19	64
			Female	4.31	1.43	47
Product Attitude	Low	Low	Male	5.57	1.00	63
			Female	5.73	.96	55
		High	Male	5.54	1.18	61
			Female	5.63	1.18	54
	High	Low	Male	5.77	.93	65
			Female	5.56	1.11	50
		High	Male	5.35	1.21	64
			Female	5.37	1.24	47
Purchase Intention	Low	Low	Male	5.32	.97	63
			Female	5.43	1.10	55
		High	Male	5.28	1.34	61
			Female	5.10	1.52	54
	High	Low	Male	5.27	1.40	65
			Female	5.28	1.28	50
		High	Male	5.01	1.38	64
			Female	4.98	1.42	47
WOM	Low	Low	Male	5.29	1.08	63
			Female	5.33	1.15	55
		High	Male	5.08	1.33	61
			Female	5.03	1.36	54
	High	Low	Male	5.24	1.43	65

			Female	5.16	1.37	50
		High	Male	4.72	1.68	64
			Female	4.81	1.53	47

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables under each condition.

Condition			N
Depth	Breadth	Influencer Gender	
Low	Low	Male	63
		Female	55
	High	Male	61
		Female	54
High	Low	Male	65
		Female	50
	High	Male	64
		Female	47

Table 4.2: Total number of participants in each condition.

Assumptions

Before proceeding to further analysis, the normality of the dependent variables was assessed. Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests both produced significant results for all dependent variables ($p<.001$), indicating that the data is not normally distributed and violates the normality assumption for MANCOVA, possibly due to the polarizing effect of self-disclosure. However, visual inspection of histograms, stem and leaf plots, box plots, and QQ plots show that data were approaching normal with a mild negative skew. Also, no outliers were found in the data. In addition, a scatter plot matrix of the dependent variables was produced, and a visual inspection was performed to check for the linearity of the dependent variables and covariates and it appears to be approaching linearity. Furthermore, the highest correlation coefficient between dependent variables is .77 (between product attitude and purchase intention), meeting the assumption of no multi-collinearity between dependent

variables, based on a cut off .80 (Berry & Feldman, 1985). The correlation table is provided below (see table 4.3).

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(11)
(1) Participant Gender										
(2) Participant Age	R=.028									
(3) Influencer gender	R= .040	R=-.017								
(4) Breadth	R=.010	R=.068	R=-.004							
(5) trust	R=-.080	R=.160**	R=-.007	R= .097*						
(6) Product attitude	R=-.019	R=.018	R= -.009	R=-.087	R = .601**					
(7) Purchase intention	R=.007	R=.077	R=.005	R=.087	R= .608**	R= .732**				
(8) WOM	R=-.023	R=.047	R= -.002	R=.125**	R= .687**	R= .710**	R= .696**			
(9) Depth	R=-.060	R=-.051	R=-.039	R=-.002	R= .006	R=.041	R=.056	R=.072		
(10) Appropriateness	R=-.064	R=.023	R=.015	R=.103*	R= .427**	R= .567**	R= .450**	R= .459**	R= .282**	

Table 4.3: correlations table, showing the r values for all variables (* denotes p<.05, ** denotes p<.001)

A preliminary MANCOVA was performed to check additional assumptions. To assess for homogeneity of covariance, Box's M was insignificant at the ($p<.001$), thus the assumption has been met. Because not all normality assumptions have been met, Pillai's Trace is reported for multivariate test results, which has been found to be significant. This shows that there is a statistically significant difference across the levels of the independent variables on a linear combination of the dependent variables.

Although there is some uncertainty regarding normality, the relatively large sample size here ($n= 459$) allows us to proceed with a MANCOVA, as the data meets the assumption of sufficient sample size for a MANCOVA to overcome issues with multicollinearity and normality (Wilson Vanvoorhis & Morgan, 2007). For larger sample sizes, there exist an ongoing debate as to whether you need to test normality of residuals, since normality of residuals tests are highly sensitive and data rarely passes them (Field, 2013). Moreover, the sample has relatively similar sample sizes for the groups as shown in table 4.2. According to Field (2013), If the n per cell is fairly large, then deviations from normality do not matter much because, according to the central limit theorem, the sampling distribution of the mean approximates the normal distribution, regardless of the distribution of the variable in the population. Overall, the F test is remarkably robust to deviations from normality and the skewness of the distribution usually does not have a sizable effect on the F statistic (Schmider, Ziegler, Danay, Beyer, & Bühner, 2010). Therefore, given the generally accepted robustness of MANOVA testing (O'Brien & Kaiser, 1985) and the need for covariant control, a MANCOVA is suitable for analysing this data. Thus, the analysis will proceed with caution. Mediation testing with PLS-SEM will be used (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt

2014); an assumption-free, non-parametric method, was the main analysis for this study, while a MANCOVA will be conducted for exploratory purposes.

Manipulation Check

Within the main experiment a manipulation check for Depth was implemented. *Depth* was measured through a seven-point semantic differential scale with three items that are: *The post message is: intimate-nonintimate, personal-impersonal, deep-superficial* (Bazarova, 2012); higher scores represent greater depth. An independent samples t-test comparing perceived depth in the high and low depth conditions, showed a significant difference between the high depth condition (M= 5.70, SD= 1.195) and low depth condition (M= 4.95, SD=1.25); t (457)= -6.537, p<0.001. This confirms that the participants perceived the high depth condition as more intimate than the low depth condition, thereby verifying the effectiveness of the disclosure manipulation. After three pre-tests conducted on breadth manipulation, which confirmed the robustness of the manipulation, no manipulation check for breadth was required in the main experiment.

MANCOVA

A MANCOVA was conducted to explore whether the independent variables (influencer gender, breadth, depth) had an effect on the dependent variables (appropriateness, trust, product attitude, purchase intention, WOM) when controlling for (participant gender, age). Multivariate tests showed a significant interaction effect of depth and age on trust F(5,455)= 10.65, P<.001, Pillai's Trace=.11, partial η^2= .11, F(5,455)= 3.39, P= .005, Pillai's Trace= .04, partial η^2= .04 respectively, meaning that there is a

significant difference between groups. The analysis of MANCOVA and interactions between IVs are presented below in table 4.4.

Independent Variable (ID)	Dependent variable (DV)	F (1,449)	P	np^2
Depth	Appropriate	39.795**	.000	.081
	Trust	.260	.610	.001
	Product Attitude	.971	.325	.002
	Purchase Intention	1.654	.199	.004
	WOM	2.595	.108	.006
Breadth	Appropriate	5.243*	.023	.012
	Trust	3.715*	.055	.008
	Product Attitude	3.164	.076	.007
	Purchase Intention	3.185	.075	.007
	WOM	6.588*	.011	.014
Influencer Gender	Appropriate	.427	.514	.001
	Trust	.042	.838	.000
	Product Attitude	.015	.903	.000
	Purchase Intention	.021	.886	.000
	WOM	.000	.990	.000
Depth * Breadth	Appropriate	1.156	.283	.003
	Trust	.773	.380	.002
	Product Attitude	1.349	.246	.003
	Purchase Intention	.134	.714	.000
	WOM	.453	.501	.001
Depth * Influencer Gender	Appropriate	.383	.536	.001
	Trust	1.022	.313	.002
	Product Attitude	1.220	.270	.003
	Purchase Intention	.002	.964	.000
	WOM	.001	.982	.000
Breadth * Influencer Gender	Appropriate	.002	.967	.000
	Trust	.557	.456	.001
	Product Attitude	.184	.668	.000
	Purchase Intention	.332	.565	.001
	WOM	.044	.833	.000
Depth * Breadth * Influencer Gender	Appropriate	.010	.920	.000
	Trust	.120	.729	.000
	Product Attitude	.554	.457	.001
	Purchase Intention	.350	.554	.001
	WOM	.263	.608	.001
Age (covariate CV)	Appropriate	.497	.481	.001
	Trust	10.917**	.001	.024
	Product Attitude	.153	.696	.000
	Purchase Intention	2.433	.120	.005
	WOM	.853	.356	.002
Gender (covariate CV)	Appropriate	1.365	.243	.003
	Trust	2.464	.117	.005
	Product Attitude	.218	.641	.000
	Purchase Intention	.016	.899	.000
	WOM	.272	.602	.001

Table 4.4 *Denotes significant results.

Abbreviations	Hypothesis
H1	(a) High Depth and (b) breadth of social self-disclosure by SMIs predicts differences in perceived appropriateness. are associated with appropriateness.
H2	The gender of the influencer predicts differences in perceived appropriateness of self-disclosure.
H3	Perceived appropriateness is positively associated with trust, when disclosure is considered appropriate it leads to higher trust, and vice versa.
H4	Perceived appropriateness mediates the relationship between self-disclosure (depth and breadth) and trust.
H5	Trust is positively associated with product attitude (i.e., when trust is increased product attitude increases).
H6	Trust is a mediator in the relationship between perceived appropriateness and product attitude.
H7	Product attitude is positively associated with purchase intention.
H8	Product attitude is positively associated with WOM intention.
H9	Product attitude is a mediator in the relationship between trust and (a)purchase intention and (b) WOM intention.
H10	Self-disclosure depth and breadth of disclosure are predictors of purchase intention and WOM and this predictive relationship is mediated by appropriateness, trust, and product attitude.

Table 4.5: List of Hypotheses

The results of MANCOVA revealed significant main effects of breadth on appropriateness $F(1,449)= 5.24$, $p=.02$, partial $\eta^2=.01$, trust $F(1,449)= 3.715$, $p=.05$, partial $\eta^2=.008$, and WOM $F(1,449)= 6.588$, $p=.01$, partial $\eta^2=.14$. Additionally, depth have significant effect on Appropriateness $F(1,449)= 39.795$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.08$. However, influencer gender had no significant effects on any of the DVs, which lead to the rejection of H2. Similar to Andersson et al. (2016) Huang (2015), and Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2011) no main effects or interaction effects associated with participants' gender were found. Male and female participants didn't show different patterns in the rating of the dependent measures. In addition, there were no significant interaction effects between IVs. However, interestingly participants' age had significant results on trust $F(1,449)= 10.917$, $P=.001$, partial $\eta^2=.02$. Hence, participants' age and gender were used as covariates and will be controlled for in the mediation model.

To examine the main effect of depth and breadth a pairwise comparison was conducted. Supporting H1(B), the results reveal that when breadth is high, it negatively impacts appropriateness and WOM (M=-.290, p=.023) (M=-.334, p=.011), respectively. Means for high breadth on appropriateness, trust, and WOM in order are (M=5.392), (M=4.498) (M=4.916). In addition, High Depth was found to have a significantly negative effect on appropriateness (M=-.798, p<.001); the mean for high depth condition on appropriateness is (M=5.936), while the mean of the low depth condition is (M=5.137), supporting H1(a).

Based on the literature and supported by the results of the MANCOVA above, a serial mediation model has been tested below (see figure 4.3). Appropriateness is predicted to be a major mediator in the relationship between self-disclosure and consumer outcomes, based on theoretical evidence linking self-disclosure and perceptions of appropriateness (as discussed in the literature review chapter) self-disclosure directly impacts perceptions of appropriateness. In addition, empirical evidence obtained by MANCOVA shows an association between appropriateness and all DVs in this study. Appropriateness has been predicted to mediate the effects of self-disclosure on variables of interest by Andersson et al. (2016). Because influencer gender did not have any significant effects on any of the dependent variables, it was not included as an Independent variable in the model. Yet, its effect was controlled for, and thus has been used as a control variable.

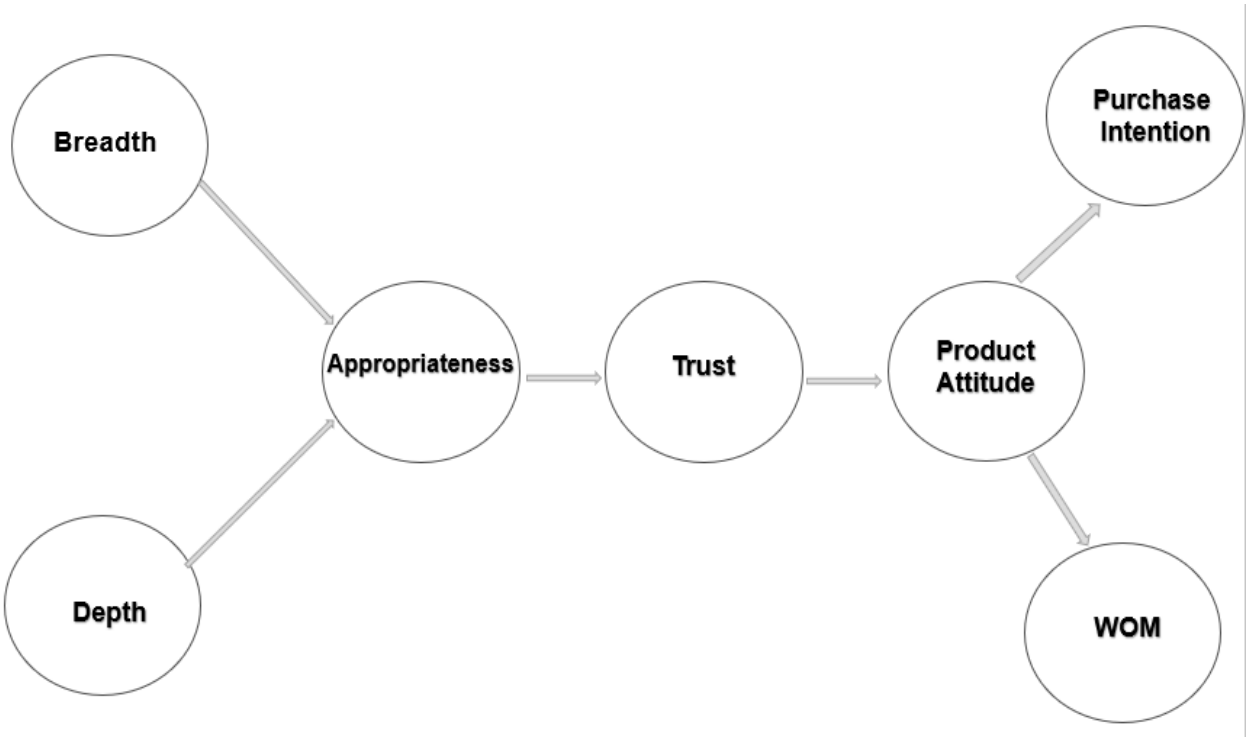

Figure 4.3: Influencer Self-disclosure Model – Influencer gender, Participant's age and gender were control variables in the model.

Mediation Analysis

To test and evaluate the specified model (Figure 4.3), a partial least squares approach to structural equation modelling (PLSSEM) was employed, with the use of SmartPLS version V3.2. PROCESS was not suitable in this case because the current model has multiple IV's and DVs (Hayes, 2017). SMARTPLS has previously been well applied in travel research (Lin, Zhang, Gursoy, & Fu, 2019; Llodra-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015; Ribeiro, Fonseca Amaro, Seabra, & Luís Abrantes, 2014) and marketing (Andersson et al., 2016; Archer-Brown et al., 2017). According to Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2014), SEM-PLS models provide causal relationships with the aim of maximizing the explained variance in latent dependent variables. It provides a number of advantages over previously established covariance-

based SEM techniques, including that is makes fewer assumptions of the data and is robust to small samples sizes.

Model Fit

Harmann's common factor test was run to assess for potential common method bias, and indicated that 44.72% of the variance was explained by one factor, which is below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), and therefore satisfactory. The SEM fit indexes are as follows: Assessments of discriminant validity, composite reliability (CR) scores, and Cronbach's α values all exceeded the recommended value of 0.8, indicating good reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally & Bernstein., 1994) (see table 4.6). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores were all above 0.6, exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.5 to support the convergent validity of the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). All the square roots of the AVE values exceeded the correlations among latent variables, in accordance with the Fornell & Larcker (1981) criterion, which stipulates that all of the square roots of the AVEs should be greater than any other correlations between the corresponding construct and another construct. The cross-loadings shown in Table 4.7 indicate that all items fit in the assigned factor and no other. Further, the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations are acceptable (<0.9) (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). Multicollinearity was examined by assessing the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all constructs and items. VIFs for the models were acceptable at the Hair et al. (2016) recommended threshold of 0.2 to 5.0. Together, these figures support the validity and reliability assumptions of the constructs.

	CR	CA	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Appropriateness	0.895	0.894	0.74	**0.861**				
2. Product Attitude	0.925	0.925	0.80	0.616	**0.896**			
3. Purchase Intention	0.932	0.932	0.82	0.485	0.789	**0.906**		
4. Trust	0.901	0.906	0.61	0.484	0.683	0.676	**0.779**	
5. WOM	0.913	0.913	0.78	0.499	0.772	0.754	0.764	**0.882**

Table 4.6 Data Validity. Note: CR = Composite reliability; CA = Cornbach's Alpha. Figures in diagonal (bold) are the average variance extracted. Figures show the diagonal are the bivariate correlations between constructs.

Before proceeding with the path analysis, the overall plausibility of the specified model should be considered. R-squared fit measures are less suitable for the specified model, given the use of multiple DVs. Thus, a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of 0.042 may be reported, which is below the most stringent threshold of 0.06 asserted by Hu & Bentler (1999). Therefore, the specified model provides a plausible explanation of variance in consumer outcomes and indicates a good fit of the model to the data.

Measure	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust	Talk freely to this person about difficulties you are having in life knowing that he/she would want to listen.	3.475	1.703	0.793	0.377	0.631	0.524	0.53
	Freely share your ideas, hopes, and feelings with this person.	3.732	1.847	0.628	0.28	0.559	0.407	0.465
	This person displays warmth and caring attitude towards the followers.	3.503	1.648	0.682	0.292	0.579	0.469	0.493
	If I shared my problems with this person, I know he/she would respond constructively and caringly.	3.109	1.412	0.884	0.464	0.62	0.594	0.557
	I would rely on this influencer's tourism reviews.	3.669	1.693	0.919	0.485	0.606	0.634	0.58
	I think this influencer provides unbiased opinions.	2.791	1.285	0.724	0.319	0.591	0.534	0.53
2. Appropriateness	Appropriate- not appropriate	2.49	1.54	0.483	0.968	0.472	0.581	0.462
	normal to share on social media – out of place in the context of social media	2.277	1.531	0.395	0.797	0.399	0.545	0.402
	Proper- Improper	2.501	1.578	0.363	0.806	0.415	0.462	0.384
	suitable for Instagram- not suitable	2.529	1.518	0.687	0.39	0.866	0.668	0.667
3. WOM	Discuss with your friend the recommendation of the influencer.	2.948	1.491	0.671	0.442	0.904	0.698	0.669
	Recommend the resort mentioned in the post to them.	2.895	1.499	0.665	0.489	0.877	0.678	0.661
	Suggest the resort the influencer mentioned.	2.895	1.503	0.624	0.576	0.711	0.92	0.729
4.Product Attitude	I have positive thoughts about the resort mentioned in this Instagram post.	2.438	1.182	0.601	0.536	0.66	0.87	0.69
	I think the resort mentioned in this post is good.	2.431	1.189	0.613	0.544	0.706	0.898	0.703
	It would be worthwhile to try the resort described in this Instagram post.	2.427	1.174	0.63	0.413	0.68	0.685	0.87
5. Purchase Intention	I would consider booking a room in the resort mentioned in the post.	2.828	1.397	0.622	0.47	0.69	0.742	0.936
	I would intend to explore the possibility of reserving a room in the resort mentioned in the post.	2.8	1.391	0.585	0.432	0.679	0.717	0.909
	I am very likely to consider staying at the resort mentioned in the post.	2.739	1.388	0.793	0.377	0.631	0.524	0.53

Table 4.7 Psychometric properties (key: 1 = Trust, 2 = Appropriateness, 3 = WOM Intention, 4 = Product Attitude, 5 = Purchase Intention)

Path Analysis

Path coefficients were tested through the bootstrap procedure, with 5000 subsamples (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). The results are summarized in Table 4.8. Differences in depth and breadth didn't have a significant direct effect on the IVs purchase intention and WOM after being exposed to the stimuli ($p > 0.05$ in all cases). Moreover, significant direct effects were acquired from IVs to mediators and from mediators to DV's, which resulted in indirect mediation. Specifically, high depth and breadth of disclosure negatively affected perception of influencer disclosure appropriateness ($\beta = -.29$, $t = 6.61$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = -.11$, $t = 2.4$, $p = .02$), in line with H1(a) and (b). Also, high perceived appropriateness was highly associated to trust ($\beta = 5.3$, $t = 10.78$, $p < .001$), in support of H3. High trust led to positive product attitude ($\beta = .50$, $t = 9.92$, $p < .001$), in line with H5 and product attitude was highly associated with purchase intention and WOM ($\beta = .64$, $t = 9.43$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .48$, $t = 7.295$, $p < .001$), supporting H7 and H8. Additionally, interesting relationships were observed between participant age and gender on trust ($\beta = -.135$, $t = 3.448$, $p = .001$ and $\beta = -.098$, $t = 2.269$, $p = .023$). Also, participant's age had significant paths to product attitude ($\beta = .075$, $t = 2.025$, $p = .043$).

Path	B	T	P
Breadth -> Appropriateness	-0.11	2.4	0.02
Breadth -> Purchase Intention	-0.01	0.27	0.79
Breadth -> WOM	-0.05	1.45	0.15
Depth -> Appropriateness	-0.29	6.61	<.001
Depth -> Purchase Intention	-0.04	1.36	0.18
Depth -> WOM	-0.06	1.90	0.057
Appropriateness -> Trust	0.53	10.78	<.001
Trust -> Product Attitude	0.50	9.92	<.001
Product Attitude -> Purchase Intention	0.64	9.43	<.001
Product Attitude -> WOM	0.48	7.25	<.001

Table 4.8: Path coefficients

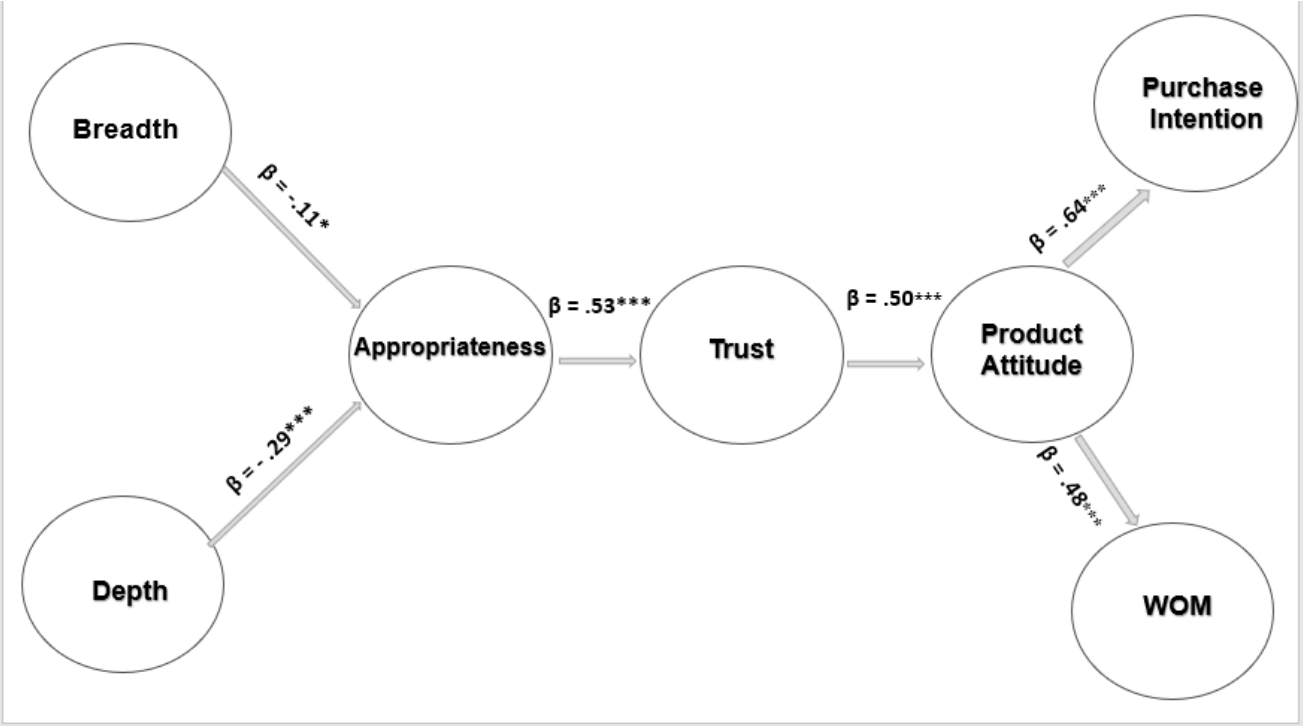

Figure 4.4: Serial mediation model for study 1 showing the path coefficients and significance between variables.

Mediation Analysis

Tests were carried out to explore whether the serial mediation model worked in sequence and the mediators appropriateness, trust, and product attitude mediated the IVs and the DVs (Hayes, 2017); the results are outlined in Table 4.9. Mediation was determined using the bootstrap method (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), with a 95% confidence interval to determine significance. For both Breadth and Depth IVs to the DVs Purchase Intention and WOM, indirect-only mediation was established, via the sequence of mediators Appropriateness, Trust, and Product Attitude (X. Zhao et al., 2010). These findings support H4, H6, H9 (a) and (b), and the final hypothesis H10. According to Zhao et al. (2010), indirect-only mediation means that the mediators identified are consistent with the hypothesized theoretical framework. Additionally, interesting significant results for participants' age and gender were found on WOM and purchase intention through the mediators trust and product attitude, but appropriateness was not a mediator in those relationships.

Appropriateness was found to be an adequate mediator in this relationship. However, to test the necessity of this mediator in this relationship, potential competing models have been tested and examined for goodness of fit. Running the model without appropriateness indicated no pathway, which supports the critical role that appropriateness plays as a mediator. Thus, the test supported initial conceptualization and specifications of the original model.

	Nonmediatied		Mediated model						
	Pathway c'		Pathway c		Eff		95% Bootstrapped Indirect effect		
	β	P	β	P	β	P	LLCI	ULCI	Mediation Type X.Zhao,
Breadth -> Appropriateness -> Trust -> Product Attitude -> Purchase Intention	-0.008	0.791	-0.077	0.045	-0.018	0.037	-0.038	-0.003	Indirect only
Breadth -> Appropriateness -> Trust -> Product Attitude -> WOM	-0.046	0.148	-0.128	0.006	-0.013	0.035	-0.028	-0.002	Indirect only
Depth -> Appropriateness -> Trust -> Product Attitude -> Purchase Intention	-0.044	0.175	-0.063	0.19	-0.05	0.00	-0.075	-0.03	Indirect only
Depth -> Appropriateness -> Trust -> Product Attitude -> WOM	-0.06	0.057	-0.026	0.524	-0.037	0.00	-0.058	-0.022	Indirect only

Table 4.9: Mediation results

Additional Exploration of Age

The interesting main effects age shown in MANCOVA and the significant results of age as a covariate on PLS elicited some supplementary analysis. A second MANCOVA was conducted with participant's age as an IV and controlling for influencer gender along with participant's gender. Subjects were split into two groups, with those from 18-34 being categorized as "younger" and those 35 or over categorized as "older", a similar approach is categorizing age has been used in Rubin (1975); Kvavilashvili, Cockburn, & Kornbrot (2013); and van Dinteren, Huster, Jongsma, Kessels, & Arns (2018). The number of participants in each condition is provided in table 4.10.

IVS	Condition	N
Depth	Low	233
	High	226
Breadth	Low	233
	High	226
Participant Age	18-34	290
	Older than 34	169

Table 4.10: Total number of participants in each condition.

A MANCOVA was conducted. Pillai's Trace was considered when looking at multivariate tests, which showed that the Depth and Age were significant ($p<.001$ and $p=.003$ respectively), which means that there is significant difference between groups. The analysis of MANCOVA and interactions between IVs are presented below in table 4.11.

Variable 1	Variable 2	F (1,449)	P	np^2
age	Appropriate	.334	.564	.001
	Trust	10.253**	.001	.022
	Product Attitude	.011	.918	.000
	Purchase Intention	.239	.625	.001
	WOM	.578	.448	.001
gender	Appropriate	1.184	.277	.003
	Trust	2.672	.103	.006
	Product Attitude	.195	.659	.000
	Purchase Intention	.015	.902	.000
	WOM	.399	.528	.001
Depth	Appropriate	43.065**	.000	.088
	Trust	.153	.696	.000
	Product Attitude	1.007	.316	.002
	Purchase Intention	1.073	.301	.002
	WOM	1.756	.186	.004
Breadth	Appropriate	4.508*	.034	.010
	Trust	2.801	.095	.006
	Product Attitude	2.039	.154	.005
	Purchase Intention	2.198	.139	.005
	WOM	5.368*	.021	.012
Influencer Gender	Appropriate	.575	.449	.001
	Trust	.018	.895	.000
	Product Attitude	.004	.951	.000
	Purchase Intention	.029	.864	.000
	WOM	.000	.996	.000
Depth * Breadth	Appropriate	1.229	.268	.003
	Trust	.399	.528	.001
	Product Attitude	1.346	.247	.003
	Purchase Intention	.115	.735	.000
	WOM	1.042	.308	.002
Depth * Participant Age	Appropriate	4.735*	.030	.010
	Trust	.284	.594	.001
	Product Attitude	.204	.652	.000
	Purchase Intention	.655	.419	.001
	WOM	.263	.609	.001
Breadth * Participant Age	Appropriate	.205	.651	.000
	Trust	.032	.858	.000
	Product Attitude	1.882	.171	.004
	Purchase Intention	1.318	.252	.003
	WOM	.686	.408	.002
Depth * Breadth * Participant Age	Appropriate	.651	.420	.001
	Trust	.187	.666	.000
	Product Attitude	.007	.934	.000
	Purchase Intention	.269	.604	.001
	WOM	1.078	.300	.002

Table 4.11: *Denotes significant results. Border line significance of breadth with product attitude and purchase intention.

The results of MANCOVA revealed significant main effects of age on trust (M=-.409, p=.001). Participants aged from 18-34 had higher mean trust (M=3.233) than older

participants (M=3.642). Thus, younger participants had more trust towards the influencers than did the older participants.

Also, Depth and Age had significant interaction effects on appropriateness at (p=.030). In the low Depth condition, there was a significant difference between how younger and older generations perceived the appropriateness of disclosures (p=.05). Ages 35 and above were more inclined to perceive low depth disclosures as more appropriate (M=6.159) than people aged 18-34 (M= 5.801), on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 is 'Inappropriate' and 7 is 'appropriate'. This gives an indication that the older group are somewhat more forgiving in terms of appropriateness with regard to shallow disclosures than the younger group. However, there was no significant difference between age groups regarding the appropriateness of the high disclosure, where both considered it inappropriate.

Discussion

Social media influencers are important marketing agents in the digital world (Yuan & Lou, 2020). However, the overlap of contexts in social media makes it more complicated to keep boundaries between private and professional lives (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017). Although social media influencers disclose much of their personal life (Marshall & Redmond, 2016), the results of this study have revealed this might not be good for the companies collaborating with these influencers for advertisement, in terms of the impact it has on consumer purchase intention and WOM.

High depth and breadth of social self-disclosure negatively impacted perceived appropriateness of the disclosure. This is aligned with Collins and Miller's (1994)

prediction in their meta-analysis, suggesting that the positive impact of self-disclosure may break at extreme levels of intimacy (high depth), as it may be evaluated as inappropriate and a violation of social norms, especially if it occurs between strangers. However, they were not able to test this due to the difficulty of drawing comparisons across studies. Moreover, these findings fit with previous research on disclosure appropriateness in the context of SNS's (Lin & Utz 2017); participants perceived high depth disclosures less appropriate than the low depth disclosures. Bazarova (2012) also found that preceived appropriatenesss depended on depth of disclosure; the deeper the disclosure, the more likely it is precieved to be inappropriate, due to the mismatch between a public context of disclosure and its intimate.

The present research also aligns with Norton et al.,'s (2007) "less is more" effect. They found that more information about others (high breadth) leads, on average, to less liking, while ambiguity (i.e., lacking information about another) leads to liking. They found that increased information (high breadth) led to less liking without regard to the valence of the information, because the more the disclosure recipient learns about the discloser, the more they are likely to discover themselves to be dissimilar.

In like manner, the findings of this study confirm that the results of research on traditional marketing on salesperson's social self-disclosure (Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2001) also apply to the context of the SMI-customer/follower relationship. SMIs must be cautious when disclosing intimate personal information while advertising for companies, as this might backfire, with negative results for purchase intention and WOM. High depth and breadth of social self-disclosure is perceived as inappropriate and is likely to negatively impact purchase intention, WOM, and product attitude in an influencer-follower context. This

impact has been found to be mediated through perceived appropriateness, trust, and product attitude.

influencer gender of the influencer did not have any significant impact on any of the dependent variables. By contrast, participants' age has been observed to have a significant interaction with depth on appropriateness. In the low depth condition, the perception of appropriateness differed significantly between the two age groups, where older participants (35 and over) found the disclosure more appropriate than participants aged 18-34. However, in the high depth condition there was no significant differences between the two age groups, where both considered it inappropriate.

A causal relation between social self-disclosure (breadth and depth) and purchase intent and WOM can be inferred. High depth and high breath of social self-disclosure led to negative consumer outcomes mediated through appropriateness, trust, product attitude. These findings contradict the positive impact that self-disclosure is has been shown to elicit in the interpersonal relationship and CMC literature (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2018; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016; Lin & Utz, 2017; Mazer et al., 2007; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002). Previous research on bloggers' social self-disclosure by Hunag (2015) have found that social self-disclosure by bloggers increases affective trust in the blogger, which positively impacts product attitude. Yet the current study on SMIs contradicts this, affirming that social self-disclosure by a travel influencer negatively impacts consumer's purchase intention and WOM intention. This negative impact has been found to be mediated through perceived appropriateness, trust, and product attitude. This implies that the impact of

a social media influencer's social self-disclosure on consumers is aligned with that of a salesperson (Andersson et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2001).

A possible explanation for this is that such disclosures violate the expectations and norms associated with the context of SMIs' engagements with followers on SNSs. As Collin and Miller (1994) predicted, the relationship between the discloser and the recipient and the nature of the interaction are likely to play an important role in determining the impact of disclosure on the recipient. The unique form of the relationship (i.e., influencer-follower) and the interaction might have played a role in the negative results, as might the length of the relationship.

Chapter Summary

In summary, a causal relation between social self-disclosure (breadth and depth) and purchase intent and WOM could be inferred through this experimental study. High depth and high breath of social self-disclosure led to negative consumer responses mediated through appropriateness, trust, product attitude. This implies that the impact of a social media influencer's social self-disclosure on consumers is aligned with that of a salesperson (Andersson et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2001).

Perceived appropriateness of the disclosure in study one had significant interactions with all variables in the conceptual model, indicating that the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure can indeed affect consumer outcomes and confirming the prediction that perceived appropriateness would be the key mediator in this process. Hence, study two intends to manipulate perceived appropriateness

regarding public social self-disclosure to validate the critical mediating role perceived appropriateness plays in this process.

Finally, the generalizability of the present results is limited. While the present research used a method, which is closer to natural interactions in social media platforms, it nevertheless has limited ecological validity. While the stimuli are similar to real Instagram posts in every way possible and are pre-tested to ensure realism, a more naturalistic setting is recommended for future replication. Also, although experiments have the advantage of increased internal validity, it is necessary to continue to critically assess their external validity. Thus, future research on self-disclosure should attempt to study more naturally occurring self-disclosures in the context of social media influencers, through examining existing relationships between a real influencer and their followers.

Also, the differences in cultural diversity within the sample limits the generalizability. Due to small samples from countries such as the UK and Italy, cultural differences could not be robustly assessed and compared to each other or to the US sample, which was the largest. Thus, future research should try to find out if the impact of social self-disclosure by SMIs on consumer outcomes hold across cultures.

Chapter 5: Study Two

Introduction

Study one found that social self-disclosures by travel influencers negatively impact consumers' purchase and WOM intents. This relationship was mediated by consumers' perceived appropriateness of the disclosure, trust, and attitude towards the product/service mentioned in the Instagram post. Appropriateness has been observed to significantly correlate and interact with all dependent variables. Additional exploratory testing in study one revealed that the conceptual model developed did not hold without perceived appropriateness of the disclosure. This indicated that it is likely to be the key mediator in this process. Hence, given the need for validity in mediator relationships, it is recommended that the first mediator is manipulated as an independent variable (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010; Smith, 1982; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). If such manipulations are unavailable, this might lead to systematic bias and a loss of efficiency (Schmitt, 1994). Thus, manipulating appropriateness will enable the unbiased tracing of causal effects (Smith, 1982). Therefore, this second study intends to experiment with appropriateness as an independent variable.

The role of perceived appropriateness is critical in determining reactions towards self-disclosure behaviour (Lin & Utz, 2017). Bazarova (2012) has found that intimate disclosure in public CMC is often perceived as inappropriate. It has proven difficult for researchers to determine whether the impact of the disclosure on the receiver was a result of the intimacy (i.e., depth) of the disclosure or its perceived appropriateness. For example, Baruh and Cemalcılar (2015) altered the level of appropriateness of the disclosure by manipulating the level of disclosure intimacy, making it difficult to

determine whether the resulting decreased attraction is because of the high-intimacy or high-inappropriateness.

Furthermore, Lin & Utz (2017) tried to get around this issue through pre-testing the appropriateness of the disclosure and including a simple priming statement legitimizing public self-disclosure. They informed their subjects that many social network users feel at ease keeping their postings as a digital public diary on SNS, aiming to minimize the difference in the perceived appropriateness of high- and low-intimacy disclosure messages. Yet, though they tried to make intimate public self-disclosure appear as appropriate as possible, it was still rated as slightly less appropriate than non-intimate public self-disclosure. This indicated that it is difficult to disentangle the concepts of perceived intimacy and perceived appropriateness in relation to public self-disclosure on social media.

Although depth and appropriateness are distinct theoretical concepts, researchers have found them to be naturally correlated and difficult to manipulate independently in experiments (Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2015; Bazarova, 2012; Lin & Utz, 2017). In the current study this issue is avoided by priming participants for different levels of appropriateness, in addition to separating the appropriateness stimuli from the disclosure stimuli, which allows us to more effectively tease apart the two distinct constructs. Manipulating primed appropriateness ensures that the major effect is coming from perceived appropriateness and will shed light on how the different levels of perceived appropriateness impacts consumer's trust, product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM.

The aims of this second experimental study are: First, to verify the results of study one and validate the serial mediation model, by adopting a similar conceptual model and dependent variables. Second, to determine the importance of appropriateness' role in this process. Particularly, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent does the perceived appropriateness of social self-disclosure by travel influencers play a role in impacting consumption behaviour?
- If heightened social self-disclosure by an influencer on social media were deemed appropriate, would it shift consumers' behavioural intentions from negative to positive?

This chapter is organized in the following manner: First, the study design, the measures, and the manipulation check are discussed. Then, the sample is described. Afterwards, the results are laid out, followed by a discussion. Finally, the conclusions of study two are presented, and its limitations are considered.

Design

This study features a web-based between–subjects ANCOVA experiment featuring three priming condition. Lin & Utz (2017) assert that an online experiment is closer to real-life SNS browsing experience than a lab setting. Participants were primed to either think that it is appropriate, moderately appropriate, or inappropriate to publicly disclose intimate information on SNSs. Participants were unaware of the influence of the prime. Schmitt (1994) recommended that priming studies contain both visual and verbal information, as the presentation of one stimulus, called the prime, tends to alter the

perception and interpretation of a second target stimulus. Thus, the priming stimulus involved seeing a news article asserting that experts on self-disclosure based at Ivy League Schools state that sharing intimate and private details about oneself and one's personal life publicly on SNSs is considered either: very appropriate, moderately appropriate, very inappropriate.

The following instruction was displayed before the stimulus was presented: *Please read this carefully. You'll be given 30 seconds to read. You can't proceed until the 30 seconds reading time is up. Experts on self-disclosure on social media claim that* **.."** Then, the picture of the news highlight is displayed. The following figure 5.1 is an example of one condition- the appropriate prime condition (for full stimuli see appendix 3.1).

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It's Good to Get Personal in Your Social Media Posts

Experts on self-disclosure based at Ivy League Schools state that sharing intimate and private details about ourselves and our personal lives publicly on social media is considered very appropriate, as deep public disclosure has now became the norm on social media. In fact, a series of empirical studies proved that people perceive deep public disclosure on social media as being authentic and real which in turn will benefit the image portrayed to connections online. For example, a person that shares their emotions, feelings, and issues concerning their relationships is now considered very appropriate when posting on social media.

Figure 5.1: Appropriate prime condition

The stimuli were made to be identical in terms of the word-count and the text apart from the phrases indicating the different priming conditions. Stimuli were randomised via Qualtrics' randomisation function, which is a well-known survey tool used in previous research in this field (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Kim & Song, 2016; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

First, participants were asked to read and acknowledge an informed consent declaration prior to completing the survey. Participants were then shown one of the three conditions of the prime (public disclosure on SNSs is: *very appropriate*, *moderately appropriate*, or *very inappropriate*). Afterwards, the participants were shown an Instagram post by a travel influencer that contains a high depth social self-disclosure along with a brief review of a resort experience. The participants saw the following message before being shown the post: "*@An_Obsessed_Traveler is a well-known Instagram travel influencer with just over 60,000 followers. The influencer regularly travels around the world and shares experiences with followers. The influencer expressed receiving sponsorship from brands regularly. In the next page you will see an Instagram post by this influencer, it is very important that you read this carefully."*

Since study one revealed insignificant results for influencer gender, the post was gender neutral. The gender neutrality was operationalized as follows: the caption underneath the picture gave no indication of the influencer's gender; and the picture in the post did not portray the influencer, but rather a picture of the mentioned resort. Hence, the post was gender neutral. All conditions saw the exact same picture and caption. Thus, everything in the Instagram post remained equivalent across

conditions. The caption in the post featured self-disclosure about family issues, which is considered high depth (Altman & Taylor, 1968) (see appendix 3.3).

The self-disclosure post was presented along with the following instruction: *"Please imagine you see the following post in your Instagram Feed, posted by one of the travel influencers that you follow. Please look carefully at the post."* A timer was set within the survey tool to ensure that participants spent at least 6 seconds looking at the stimulus, confirmed by Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree (2016) via an eye-tracking study to be the average amount of time attended to picture posts on social media. Afterwards, the measures needed to test the paths within the specified model (illustrated in Figure 5.2) were presented in a randomized order, along with demographic information and social media usage questions. The same dependent variables as in study one were used (i.e., trust, product attitude, purchase intention and WOM), which provides further validation of the model.

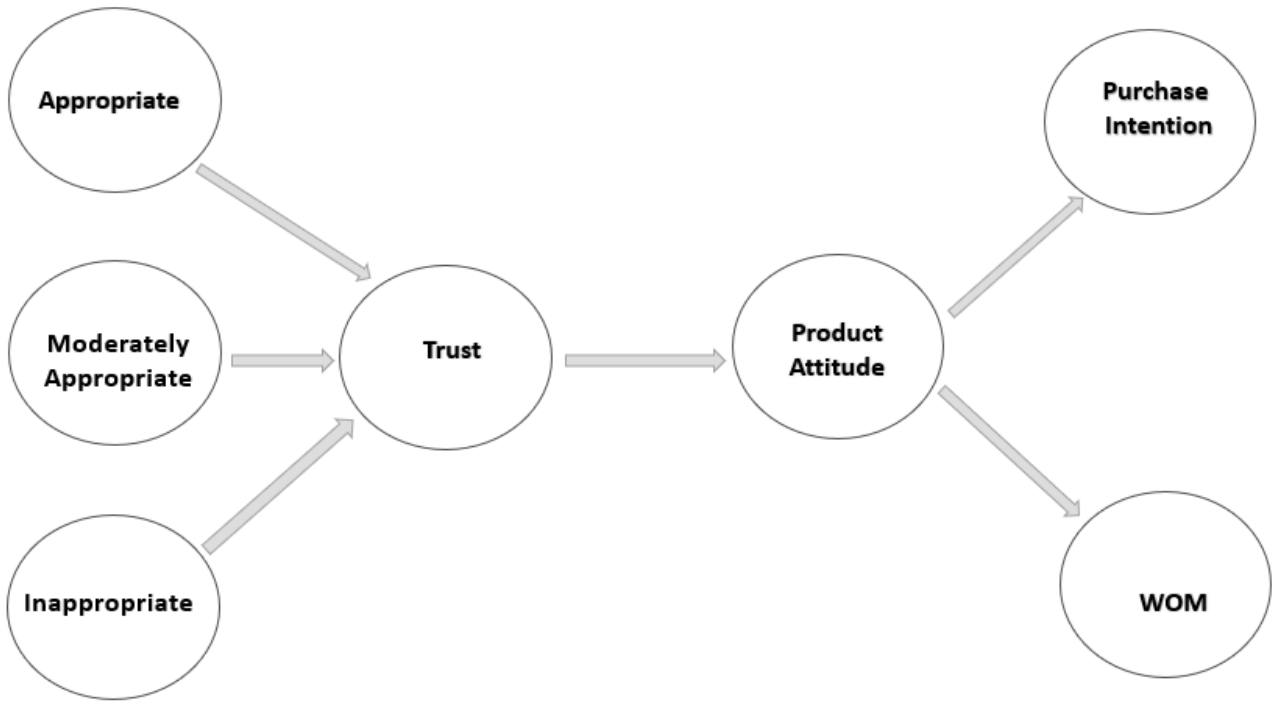

Figure 5.2: Influencer Self-disclosure model- second version

Measures

The design of study two, including the measures and the sequence of measures, is similar to study one. Measures from the specified model are detailed in Table 6. Subsequently, trust, product attitude, purchase, and WOM intent were measured using multi-item scales. All dependent variables were measured using the same scales and items mentioned in study one, with 7-point Likert scales (7= strongly agree, 1= strongly disagree) (see study one-chapter three for full details on measures).

Sample

A purposeful sampling technique was used, with the respondents being adult Instagram users that follow travel influencers. The sample has been recruited and compensated through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka, & Reinikainen, 2019). An online sample allows a larger and more heterogeneous sample of participants (Lin & Utz, 2017). To improve the quality of the answers, some control measures were implemented, such as restricting responses to those who had a validated approval record of above 90%, enabling an anti-ballot stuffing setting, and inserting a hidden timer when the stimulus is displayed (Stubb et al., 2019).

A total of 368 participants completed the survey. Through pre-testing the length of the survey, it was found that the minimum time required to complete the survey is three minutes. Thus, participants that spent less than three minutes answering the questions were removed (n = 16). Moreover, participants who failed to answer the attention check question about what the experts said in the stimuli were excluded (n = 86). Through this data cleaning we control for biases that might come from this method or sample. Thus, the number of remaining participants considered for data analysis is

(n= 266). The sample consisted of (43.6%) Male and (65.4%) Female. The majority of the sample (67.1%) were aged between 25 to 44 years, and the mean age was 35.59 (SD = 10.98). In terms of Instagram usage, (25.6%) of participants had been using it for two years (M = 3.80, SD = 2.06). The participants were predominantly from the US (77.8%), India (14.7%), and the UK (1.5%), with (6.5%) from other countries. 61.7% of the participants had a bachelor's degree or higher (For a full demographic description check table 1 in appendix 3.4).

Pre-Analysis

An ANCOVA was conducted to explore the effects of the appropriateness priming conditions on trust when controlling for participants' age, gender, and Instagram usage intensity. This test was conducted prior to further mediation analysis with PLS-SEM, as the ANCOVA directly tests the manipulation on trust. Following Marder et al., (2019) this two-phase analytical approach is adopted to test experimental manipulations, which comprise components of process models. Table 5.1 and 5.2 below show the descriptive of the data.

Condition	N
Appropriate	104
Moderately Appropriate	72
In appropriate	90

Table 5.1: total number of participants in each condition.

Variable	condition	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Trust	Appropriate	4.63	1.21	104
	Moderately Appropriate	4.13	1.22	72
	Inappropriate	4.17	1.09	90

Table 5.2: Descriptive statistics for trust variable under each condition.

Assumptions

First, the normality of trust was assessed. Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk both had significant results (p= .001, p= .015 respectively), indicating that the data is not normally distributed, violating the normality assumption for ANCOVA. However, ANCOVA is relatively robust to violations of normality (Field, 2013). Furthermore, although in ANOVA there is little need for multicollinearity testing, given that it tests a single dependent variable, this is assessed here for further statistical tests later (i.e., mediation analysis). The highest correlation coefficient between dependent variables is .76 (between product attitude and WOM intention), meeting the assumption of non-multicollinearity between dependent variables, based on a cut off .80 (Berry & Feldman, 1985). The correlation table is provided below (see table 5.3). Finally, the main ANCOVA confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variance, via Levene's test of equality of error variances, which was not significant.

Correlations

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(10)Appropriate										
(11)Moderately appropriate	R = -.488**									
(12)Inappropriate	R = -.573**	R = -.436**								
(13)Trust	R = .193**	R = -.104	R = -.101							
(14)Purchase Intention	R = .020	R = -.069	R = .043	R = .534**						
(15)WOM	R = .083	R = -.040	R = -.048	R = .626**	R = .761**					
(16)Product attitude	R = .112	R = -.101	R = -.021	R = .573**	R = .743**	R = .763**				
(17)Participants Age	R = -.047	R = .122*	R = -.066	R = -.147*	R = .011	R = .107	R = .065			
(18)Participants Gender	R = .021	R = .041	R = -.060	R = -.029	R = -.019	R = .046	R = .028	R = .113		
(10) Instagram usage	R = -.088	R = .091	R = .006	R = -.046	R = -.046	R = -.043	R = -.039	R = -.200**	R = .038	

Table 5.3: correlations table, showing the r values for all variables (* denotes p<.05, ** denotes p<.001).

Although there is some uncertainty regarding normality, ANCOVA can be performed on this data given the relatively large sample size (n= 266), which meets the assumption of sufficient sample size for ANCOVA (Schmider, Ziegler, Danay, Beyer, & Bühner, 2010). Also, the sample has relatively equal sample sizes for each group, as shown in table 5.1. In addition, Field (2013) asserts that for larger sample sizes, it is debatable whether you need to test for normality of residuals, given that these tests are highly sensitive and data rarely passes them. If the *n* per cell is fairly large, then deviations from normality do not matter much because of the central limit theorem, according to which the sampling distribution of the mean approximates the normal distribution, regardless of the distribution of the variable in the population (Vasey, Michael W.; Thayer, 2007). Field (2013) affirms that the F test overall is remarkably robust to deviations from normality and that the skewness of the distribution usually does not have a sizable effect on the F statistic. Therefore, given the generally accepted robustness of ANCOVA testing (Olejnik & Algina, 1984; Schmider et al., 2010; Vasey, Michael W.; Thayer, 2007) and the need for covariant control, it is safe to assume that ANCOVA is suitable of use with this data. Furthermore, the results will be further validated with a non-parametric assumption-free method: i.e. PLS-SEM for the mediation test, which is the main test for this study, while ANCOVA was conducted for exploratory reasons. Hence, we will proceed with analysis with caution.

Manipulation Check

Before conducting the main experiment, two pre-tests were conducted to ensure that the participants were indeed primed for the specified condition as intended. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the priming stimuli on participants' perceived appropriateness of public self-disclosure on Instagram, with

the conditions Appropriate, Moderately Appropriate, and Inappropriate. *Appropriateness* was measured with a semantic differential scale adapted from Bazarova (2012) and Lin & Utz (2017), using 7-point Likert scales (1= Appropriate, 7= Inappropriate). The perceived appropriateness of public self-disclosure on Instagram was measured as follows: "*I think that sharing personal and intimate details on Instagram is: Appropriate-inappropriate, suitable for social media-not suitable, normal to share on social media-out of place in the context of social media, proper-improper*."

There was a significant effect of the prime conditions on perceived appropriateness at the $p<.05$ level for the three conditions [$F(2, 57) = 4.45$, $p= .016$]. Post hoc comparisons using the LSD test indicated that the mean score for the Appropriate condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.76$) was significantly lower than the Inappropriate prime condition ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.76$, $p = .002$ -one-tailed), indicating that it was considered more appropriate than the Inappropriate prime condition. The Moderately Appropriate condition was viewed as less appropriate ($M = 4.092$, $SD = 1.21$) than the Appropriate condition, this difference approaching significance ($p = .054$ -one-tailed). The data also showed that the moderately appropriate condition was viewed as more appropriate than the inappropriate condition, though the difference was only approaching significance ($p = .10$). The pre-test overall supports the efficiency of the manipulation; however, since the differences between the intermediate condition and the two extremes were only approaching significance, this thesis will be exercise caution with regard to the robustness of the manipulation. However, considering modest nature of the sample size and resulting lack of power of the pre-test, and the fact the means were as expected and the p-values supportive, this thesis finds satisfactory support for use of the manipulation, though it will proceed with caution.

Another pre-test was conducted to check for the perceived appropriateness of the self-disclosure in the Instagram post without being exposed to the prime. The pre-test was conducted to ensure that the self-disclosure in the Instagram post was perceived to be moderately appropriate and high depth as intended. A one sample t-test against the mid-point of the scale (4) examined the perceived appropriateness of the self-disclosure post and confirmed that the post is considered moderately appropriate (t = -2.54, M = 3.26, p = .019). Another one sample t-test against the mid-point (4) was conducted to examine the perceived depth of the self-disclosure post. *Depth* was measured through a seven-point semantic differential scale with three items, as follows: *The post message is: intimate-nonintimate, personal-impersonal, deep-superficial* (Bazarova, 2012) (1 intimate - 7 non-intimate).The results confirmed that the disclosure is considered high in depth (t = -5.35, M = 2.60, p<.001). Therefore, the pre-test confirmed that the self-disclosure post was considered high in depth and moderately appropriate. Hence, we proceed with the main experiment.

ANCOVA

A one-way ANCOVA was conducted to determine a statistically significant difference in trust between the appropriateness priming conditions, when controlling for participant's gender, age, and Instagram usage intensity. Results confirm that there is a significant effect of the appropriateness priming conditions on trust after controlling for participants' age, gender, and Instagram usage intensity F(2,260) = 4.48, P = .012, partial $\eta^2 =$ .033. The ANCOVA is presented below in table 5.4.

IVs and CVs	DV	F (2,260)	P	np^2
Priming condition		4.48	.012*	.033
Participant age	trust	5.80	.017*	.022
Participant gender		.056	.81	.000
Instagram usage		.950	.331	.004

Table 5.4: the effect of prime conditions on trust when controlling for participants' age, gender, and Instagram usage.

The ANCOVA results show significant main effects of priming condition and participant age on trust F(2,260) = 4.48 , P = .012, partial $\eta^2 =$ .033 , F(2,260) = 5.80 , P = .017, partial $\eta^2 =$ .022, respectively. To examine the main effect of prime condition, a pairwise comparisons was conducted. When participants were primed to think that public self-disclosure is appropriate on social media (Appropriate prime condition), it had a significant positive effect on trust, with a positive mean difference (MD = .425 p = .02) compared to the Moderately Appropriate prime condition. On the other hand, when they were primed to think it is inappropriate (Inappropriate prime condition), this had a significant negative impact on trust, with a negative mean difference (MD = -.454, p = .007), compared to the Appropriate prime condition. However, the Moderately Appropriate condition had no significant effect on trust compared to the Inappropriate prime condition (p = .87). The means for Trust were (M= 4.61) in the Appropriate condition, (M= 4.18) in the Moderately Appropriate condition, and (M= 4.15) in the Inappropriate condition, (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Overall, the results support H3 i.e., that perceived appropriateness is positively associated with trust; when social self-disclosure is considered appropriate it leads to higher trust, and vice versa. Thus, with the support of this ANCOVA, and the results from study one, and based on the conceptual framework set out in Chapter 2, the mediation model is tested using SmartPLS (Hair, Hult, & Ringle, 2014).

Mediation Analysis

Model Fit

Harmann's common factor test was run to check for potential common method bias, finding that 48.97% of the variance was explained by one factor, which is below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), and therefore satisfactory. Furthermore, all validity and reliability assumptions of the model has been evaluated and were found satisfactory, as follows. Assessments of discriminant validity, composite reliability scores, Cronbach's α values all exceeded the recommended value of 0.8 (see table 5.5), in support of good reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Nunnally & Bernstein., 1994). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores exceeded the accepted threshold of 0.5 to support convergent validity of the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Based on Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria, all the square roots of the AVE values exceeded the correlations among latent variables. Further, the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations are acceptable (<0.9) (Henseler et al., 2014). Multicollinearity was examined by assessing the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all constructs and items. VIFs for the models were acceptable at the Hair et al. (2016) recommended threshold of 0.2 to 5.0. Also, cross-loadings (shown in Table 5.6) indicate that all items fit in the assigned factor and no other. Together, these figures support the validity and reliability assumptions of the constructs.

	CR	CA	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Product Attitude	0.90	0.90	0.75	**0.865**			
2. Purchase Intention	0.94	0.94	0.83	0.808	**0.911**		
3. Trust	0.87	0.87	0.52	0.655	0.597	**0.722**	
4. WOM	0.95	0.95	0.85	0.825	0.808	0.689	**0.924**

Table 5.5 Data Validity. Note: CR = Composite reliability; CA = Cornbach's Alpha. Figures in diagonal (bold) are the average variance extracted. Figures show the diagonal are the bivariate correlations between constructs.

Before proceeding with the path analysis, we considered the overall plausibility of the specified model. The overall fit is assessed through the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of 0.042, which is below the most taxing threshold of 0.06 proposed by Hu & Bentler (1999). Therefore, the specified model provides a plausible explanation of variance in consumer outcomes and indicates a good fit of the model to the data.

Measure	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Trust	Talk freely to this person about difficulties you are having in life knowing that he/she would want to listen.	4.07	1.69	0.38	0.36	0.64	0.48
	Freely share your ideas, hopes, and feelings with this person.	3.84	1.75	0.44	0.39	0.74	0.48
	This person displays warmth and caring attitude towards the followers.	4.33	1.54	0.50	0.46	0.79	0.52
	If I shared my problems with this person, I know he/she would respond constructively and caringly.	4.74	1.30	0.49	0.48	0.75	0.49
	I would rely on this influencer's tourism reviews.	4.19	1.58	0.48	0.47	0.63	0.57
	I think this influencer provides unbiased opinions.	4.87	1.34	0.54	0.42	0.76	0.47
2. WOM	Discuss with your friend the recommendation of the influencer.	4.58	1.77	0.78	0.76	0.65	0.94
	Recommend the resort mentioned in the post to them.	4.70	1.80	0.79	0.76	0.67	0.95
	Suggest the resort the influencer mentioned.	4.81	1.81	0.72	0.72	0.59	0.88
3.Product Attitude	I have positive thoughts about the resort mentioned in this Instagram post.	5.30	1.17	0.86	0.69	0.58	0.71
	I think the resort mentioned in this post is good.	5.42	1.02	0.83	0.67	0.53	0.69
	It would be worthwhile to try the resort described in this Instagram post.	5.21	1.25	0.90	0.74	0.59	0.74
4. Purchase Intention	I would consider booking a room in the resort mentioned in the post.	4.87	1.46	0.72	0.89	0.54	0.74
	I would intend to explore the possibility of reserving a room in the resort mentioned in the post.	5.03	1.36	0.74	0.92	0.54	0.74
	I am very likely to consider staying at the resort mentioned in the post.	5.05	1.40	0.75	0.92	0.55	0.73

Table 5.6 Psychometric properties: 1 is trust, 2 is WOM intent, 3 is product attitude, 4 is purchase intent.

Path Analysis

The prime conditions were dichotomised using dummy variables (converted into categorial variables that take values of 0 or 1 only). For a categorical variable with *k* levels, *k*-1 new variables will be created, such that one condition (the reference condition, in this case the Inappropriate prime condition) is coded as zero for all dummy variables, and that all other conditions have a value of 1 for exactly one of the dummy variables, and 0 for all others. Thus, dummy variable *x1* is 1 for observations in the Appropriate prime condition, and 0 otherwise, and dummy variable **x2** is 1 in the Moderately Appropriate prime condition, and 0 otherwise. (see table 5.7 for a summary of this dummy coding).

Prime Condition	**New variable 1 (x1)**	**New variable 2 (x2)**
1 Appropriate	1	0
2 Moderately appropriate	0	1
3 Inappropriate	0	0

Table 5.7: Dummy Coding

Path coefficients were tested through the bootstrap procedure, with a sample of 5000 (Hair et al., 2011). The results are summarized in Table 5.8 below. Differences in the three prime conditions did not have a significant direct effect on the IVs purchase intention and WOM after being exposed to the stimuli ($p > 0.05$ in all cases). However, significant direct effects were acquired from IV to mediators and from mediators to DV's, which resulted in indirect mediations (Zhao et al., 2010). Specifically, the appropriate condition vs. inappropriate condition had a significant effect on trust ($\beta = .196$, $t = 2.79$, $p = .005$), in line with H3. While the Moderately Appropriate vs.

Inappropriate conditions did not have any significant effects on trust (p = .09). Trust was positively associated with product attitude (β = .69, t = 15.18, p<.001) in line with H5. Likewise, product attitude was highly associated with purchase intention and WOM (β = .82, t = 22.61, p<.001 and β = .83, t = 27.24, p <.001), in line with H7 and H8.

Path	β	t	P
Appropriate prime -> trust	0.196	2.79	0.005
Appropriate prime -> WOM	0.01	0.23	0.82
Appropriate prime -> Purchase Intention	-0.09	1.77	0.077
Moderately Appropriate prime -> trust	-0.07	1.37	0.09
Moderately Appropriate prime -> WOM	0.05	1.01	0.31
Moderately Appropriate prime -> Purchase Intention	-0.02	0.39	0.70
Moderately Appropriate prime -> trust	0.003	0.04	0.97
trust -> product attitude	0.69	15.18	<.001
product attitude -> WOM	0.83	27.24	<.001
product attitude -> Purchase Intention	0.82	22.61	<.001

Table 5.8: Path coefficient

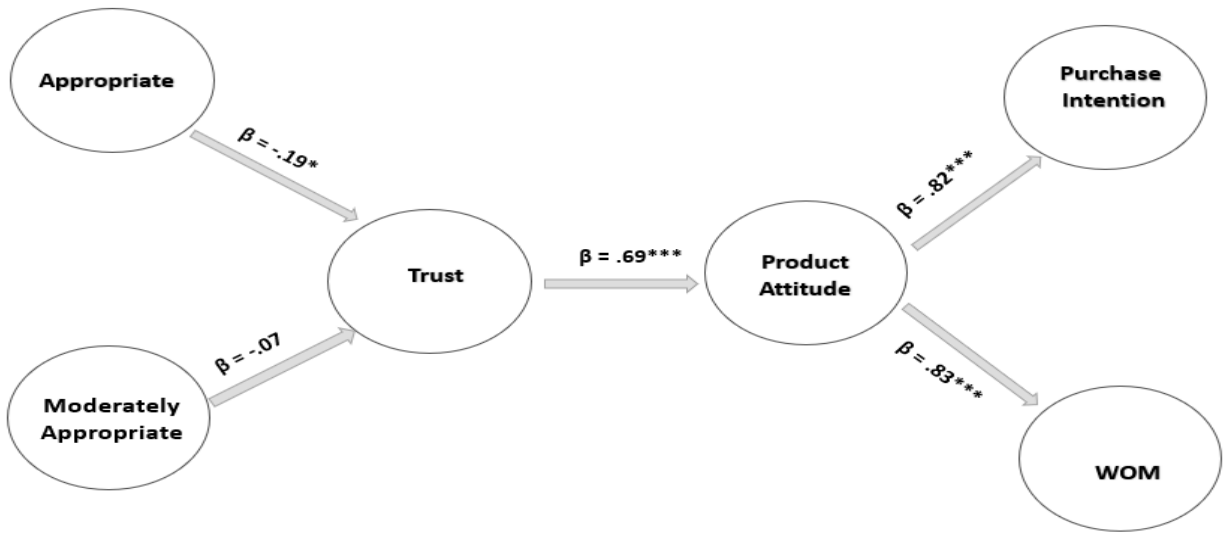

Figure 5.3: Serial mediation model for study 2 showing the path coefficients and significance between variables.

Mediation Analysis

Tests were carried out to explore whether the serial mediation model worked in sequence and the mediators trust and product attitude mediated the IV and the DVs (Hayes, 2017). The results are outlined in Table 5.9. Mediation was determined using bootstrap methods Preacher & Hayes (2008), where significance is determined at the 90% confidence interval for the indirect effect. Zhao, Lynch, and Chen's (2010) categorization was used to determine the type of mediation. For the Appropriate and Inappropriate prime conditions (IV) to the DVs Purchase Intention and WOM indirect only mediation was established for the sequence of mediators trust and product attitude, supporting H6 and H9 (a) and (b). Yet, for the Moderately Appropriate prime condition no significant effects were found through the specified model.

	Non-mediated		Mediated model						
	Pathway c'		Pathway c		Eff		90% Bootstrapped Indirect effect		
	β	P	β	P	β	P	LLCI	ULCI	Mediation Type X.Zhao,
Appropriate -> trust -> product attitude -> WOM	0.01	0.82	0.082	0.269	0.111	0.009	0.03	0.199	Indirect only
Moderately Appropriate -> trust -> product attitude -> WOM	0.05	0.31	-0.014	0.841	0.002	0.972	-0.08	0.093	No effect
Appropriate -> trust -> product attitude -> Purchase Intention	-0.09	0.077	-0.017	0.81	0.11	0.01	0.029	0.197	Indirect only
Moderately Appropriate -> trust -> product attitude -> Purchase Intention	-0.02	0.7	-0.077	0.279	0.002	0.972	-0.079	0.094	No effect

Table 5.9 Mediation results

Discussion

Results of study two support the critical mediating role played by perceived appropriateness in the relationship between social self-disclosure and consumer outcomes, where the developed model does not hold without perceived appropriateness as a mediator. The results of this study agree with and further validate the patterns found by study one. Trust, product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM varied significantly in response to the different appropriateness priming conditions. The same self-disclosure resulted in different reaction from consumers depending on the appropriateness level primed for. The Appropriate priming condition, resulted in positive outcomes, while in the Inappropriate priming condition resulted in negative outcomes. The lack of a significant difference between the Moderately Appropriate and Inappropriate priming conditions, suggests that even when a disclosure is slightly or moderately inappropriate it may negatively impact followers' trust. Hence, influencers must be extra cautious with their public social self-disclosure on SNS.

The results of this study indicate that regardless of the depth of the disclosure, the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure have a critical impact on consequent variables of interest. Thus, even if the self-disclosure is high depth, if it is perceived to be appropriate, then it will positively impact consequent variables. This further validates the decision to use appropriateness as a mediator in this relationship, supporting H4. Thus, the results suggest that perceptions of appropriateness in relative to social norms is the key mediator in this whole process. Indeed, perceived appropriateness of the disclosure seems to be the turning point in the disclosure-consumer behaviour relationship, which can make or break the sale. This is in line with Lin & Utz (2017), who found a positive effect of high disclosure intimacy on perceived

closeness, but a negative effect on social attraction. When they dropped the cases in which participants perceived the disclosure as inappropriate, the positive effect of manipulated intimacy on perceived closeness was stronger, and its negative effect on social attraction disappeared.

In this experiment, when particpants were primed to deem public self-disclosure as appropriate, they did precieve it as more appropriate and vice versa. This indicates that with time and the change of norms if public self-disclosure on social media is normalised, it might be perceived as appropriate. Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak (2018) suggest that social media is changing the perceived appropriateness of different disclosures over time and across populations as social norms change and as users gain experience with medium. Hence, users' preception of appropriateness might differ over time, and with it behavioural intentions may also change. Moreover, media articles and expert comments about disclosure are often found on the web e.g. on the subject of downsides of TMI (Designer Librarian, 2018), which this study has found to have a priming impact on readers. Hence, such an implicit prime can accordingly impact readers' reactions towards the disclosures they receive online.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this study has confirmed that the perceived appropriateness might be the turning point between consumers' positive and negative reactions towards social self-disclosure. The current study contributes to the literature on communicative norms and expectations guiding SNSs perceptions around public self-disclosure, and the behavioural reactions by consumers in response to self-disclosure by SMI. Through understanding the importance of norms of disclosure to SNSs and linking these to

consumers' reactions, we can better predict what types of self-disclosure may lead to positive or negative marketing outcomes.

In addition, the use of a priming experimental method is novel in research around the perceived appropriateness of self-disclosure. Previous studies had problems disentangling and independently manipulating disclosure intimacy and appropriateness in experiments (Lin & Utz, 2017). However, with the manipulation of primed appropriateness we were able to get around this issue. Also, through the pre-test of the appropriateness of the topic in the self-disclosure stimulus, it was ensured that participants considered the topic moderately appropriate, confirming that the results were due to the priming condition.

Like other research, this study is not without limitations. While the present research used a stimulus (a fictional Instagram post), which is closer to natural interactions on SNSs, it nevertheless has limited ecological and external validity. Future investigations in this field may need to move into more naturalistic settings on real SMIs examining more natural behavioural reactions. In addition, the fact that the differences between conditions for some dyads were only found to be approaching significance is a limitation of the study and therefore one must be cautious in generalising the results. Though this thesis regards the manipulation as satisfactory, given that the issue is most likely caused by a lack of statistical power in the pre-test, to increase overall validity of findings on the role of appropriateness as a mediator between self-disclosure and downstream variables, future research should aim to validate the manipulation with a greater sample size, as well test other stimuli that manipulate appropriateness at different levels. Also, the indirect effects were assessed at a 90%

confidence interval, which is a relatively common practice within social science research especially when directional hypotheses are provided (e.g., Lavertu, Marder, Erz, & Angell, 2020; Reer & Krämer, 2014; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012). Also, because the overall findings related to the mediation were replicated over two experiments this provided extra assurance of the acquired results. However, future research should aim to experimentally replicate these findings with a larger sample size, benefitting from increased power with a more stringent level of confidence. Finally, the sample holds cultural limitations as much of the sample came from the USA compared to other countries such as UK and Italy, which limited the possibility of comparison between countries. Hence, future research might benefit from a more even cultural distribution between countries in the sample.

The findings have practical implications for SMIs, and companies involved in influencers marketing. SMIs might want to more carefully manage their audiences and/or the content they share, or at least take more caution with what they share, avoiding information that is overly intimate, or information on inappropriate topics (Muscanell et al., 2016). Because study one confirmed that social self-disclosure negatively impacts consumer outcomes and study two has emphasised the important role that perceived appropriateness has played as a mediator of this relationship, these results require explanation and in-depth investigation. Thus, study three—a qualitative interview study—is intended to further these objectives in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Study Three

Introduction

Study one found that social self-disclosure by travel influencers is negatively associated with consumers' purchase intent and WOM intent. This relationship was mediated by consumers' perceived appropriateness of the disclosure, consumers' trust in an influencer, and attitude towards the product/service being mentioned in the post. Note that while the results may generalise to other networks, in all of the present studies Instagram is used. Furthermore, study two emphasised the critical mediating role that perceived appropriateness played in this relationship. The results of this study affirmed that the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure has a critical impact on determining the effect of this disclosure on consequent variables of interest.

Building on study one and two, study three aims to shed light on the negative impact that self-disclosure has on consumer outcomes, as revealed in the prior studies, despite the positive results it has been shown to produce in the interpersonal and CMC literature. Hence, this study aims to explore the reasons for the negative association between influencers' social self-disclosure and consumer outcomes. Furthermore, this study aims to provide additional qualitative support for the conceptual model. The above aims will be reached through the following research questions:

- Why is there a negative association between social self-disclosure by travel influencers and consumer outcomes?
- What do followers consider appropriate self-disclosure by a travel influencer?

This chapter will start by explaining the study design and procedure. Then, the findings will be examined. Subsequently, a discussion of the result will be provided, along with links to literature in the field. Afterwards, the conclusion and contributions of this study will be presented. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed, and future research will be suggested.

Procedure

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews. This structure has several advantages, such as offering an in depth understanding of participants' perceptions and reactions towards social media influencers' self-disclosure, and a capacity to follow up flexibly on participants' answers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In addition, semi-structured interviews feel close to everyday conversations, but with a guided purpose (Bryman, 2015). Thus, although the interview adopts a semi-structured approach, it allows space for new questions to emerge during dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Liu et al., 2016; Truong & Simmons, 2010).

The interview comprises two parts. The first involves questions about the travel influencers that the participants follow, and the disclosures made by these influencers presented using an in-person 'show-and-tell' interviewing technique (Gelineck & Serafin, 2012; Lambert, 2017; Zaman et al., 2012). The second part includes showing the interviewees four fictional Instagram posts by travel influencers that portray different levels of self-disclosure (high to low depth) (see Appendix 1.1 for all posts displayed). In this section of the interview the participants were asked to read the post and comment on any interesting aspects of it. The purpose of this is to stimulate more

discussion around influencers' disclosures, similar to techniques used by Bates, Mccann, Kaye, & Taylor (2017). See Appendix 1.1 for the full interview questions.The placement of mentioning the resort name or service varied between the posts to explore whether this makes a difference on how participants respond to the self-disclosure, given that in study one and two it was fixed at the end of the post.

Sample

Purposive snowball sampling technique was used (Bryman, 2015). Preliminary contact was initiated through the Postgraduate Research office, by sending an email to postgraduate and undergraduate students in the business school. The email asked for potential participants that follow travel influencers on Instagram to take part in interviews. Then, these initial connections helped establish contacts with others that follow travel influencers on Instagram (Bryman, 2015). The adequacy of this sample has been verified by the saturation of themes (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002), which showed that sufficient data had been collected; saturation is a point at which additional interviews no longer improve themes or no new themes have been found (Bryman, 2003).

A student sample was chosen in this study, as opposed to online samples in study one and two, due to convenience, as it is easier to reach out to people that follow Instagram travel influencers within students. In addition, this sample provides cultural diversity among the students' backgrounds, compensating for the unequal percentages of cultural diversity in study one and two samples.

This study involved twenty semi-structured face-to-face interviews with followers of Instagram travel influencers. Interviews took place in mid-2019. The decision was made to stop at 20 interviews as theoretical saturation was reached (Morse et al., 2002).

The participants were either UK citizens or UK based international students who were following travel influencers on Instagram (see table 6.1). Five participants were male, while the rest were female. Five of them were undergrad students, while the rest were on postgraduate (masters & PhD) programs. The mean interview length was ~43 minutes. In terms of the usage intensity of the participants, the majority have declared that they use Instagram on daily basis from 25 minutes up to 4 hours a day, while the average daily usage for all participants is around 2.5 hours daily. In terms of how many years they have been using Instagram, the majority were using it for around six years.

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Instagram Usage Intensity	Interview Duration
Thomas	Male	23	Masters	Daily/ 2 hrs	1:00:15
Kristina	Female	26	PhD	Daily/ 3 hrs	33:44
Stephen	Male	31	PhD	Daily/ 2 hrs	45:00
Hallie	Female	31	PhD	Daily/ 1 hr	26:24
Sally	Female	19	Undergrad	Daily 7 to 8 hrs	38:05
John	Male	50	PhD	Daily/ 2-3 hrs	1:03:58
Abdu	Male	26	PhD	Daily/ 1-2 hrs	39:49
Jackie	Female	22	Undergrad	Daily/ 4 hrs	51:29
Eva	Female	23	Undergrad	Daily/ 1-2 hrs	29:41
Amelia	Female	21	Undergrad	Daily/ 2-3 hrs	45:30
Emma	Female	25	Masters	Daily/ 2 hrs	45:19
Suzan	Female	28	PhD	Daily/ 2 hrs	48:03
Ella	Female	27	PhD	Daily/ 1 hr	1:05:00
Katie	Female	29	PhD	Weekly/ 2 hrs	38:02
Nadia	Female	36	Masters	Daily/ 1 hr	1:01:00
Nora	Female	19	Undergrad	Daily/2 hrs	28:42
Sylvia	Female	27	Masters	Daily/ 2 hrs	32:00
Dina	Female	28	Masters	Daily/ 1-2 hrs	36:17
Layla	Female	28	Masters	Daily/ 2-3 hrs	32:53
Andrew	Male	27	Masters	Daily/ 2 hrs	35:05

Table 6.1: participants' background

Participants reasons for using Instagram varied. In line with Instagram user motivations found by Sheldon & Bryant (2016) and Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree (2016), participants reported that they use Instagram to check updates and daily posts from influencers, friends, and/or family. Also, many participants stated that they use it as a diary to post their own updates and document their lives. Others said they use it to view the world through other people's lenses and see how others represent their lives in photos. In addition, some participants with specific interests use Instagram to follow experts in these fields. For example, people who are interested in cooking, beauty, fitness, art, gardening, photography, fashion and design followed influencers focused on these interests (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Mainly, the majority of respondents were interested in photography and travel, and hence followed travel influencers for this reason.

Findings

Jacobs et al., (2001) categorised marketers' self-disclosure into *exchange-specific* and *social self-disclosure*. They defined Exchange-specific self-disclosure as the disclosure of personal information to meet a product and service needs, and as such it is considered essential to the pending exchange. Social self-disclosure is defined as the disclosure of personal information beyond that needed to make an exchange (Andersson et al., 2016). Adapting this definition to a travel influencer context, means that exchange-specific self-disclosure is the disclosure of personal information in relation to the travel experience to persuade followers of the recommended destination, service, or product. For example, a travel influencer's disclosure of his morning habit of running in relation to his talk about a city's well-established running

routes is considered an exchange-specific self-disclosure. On the other hand, social self-disclosure is when a travel influencer discloses personal information that is not related to travel. For instance, a travel influencer that discloses a health condition without it being related to the travel experience is considered a purely social self-disclosure.

Exchange-specific self-disclosure will be referred to as *travel self-disclosure* hereafter because it is more relevant to the travel context than *exchange-specific self-disclosure*. However, it is important to differentiate between travel content and travel self-disclosure. Travel content refers to general travel information without reference to personal information, while travel self-disclosure is disclosure of personal information in relation to the travel experience. On the other hand, social self-disclosure is disclosure of personal information that is not related to the travel experience. A comparison table and a Venn diagram are represented below for better demonstration of the difference between the three concepts (see table 6.2 and figure 6.1)

	Personal information	**Travel information**	**Examples**
Social self- disclosure	Yes	No	A travel influencer that disclosing their diabetes without it being related to the travel experience.
Travel self-disclosure	Yes	Yes	A travel influencer disclosing their hay fever while talking about the weather in the city.
Travel content	No	Yes	A travel influencer talking about sightseeing locations.

Table 6.2 The differences between social self-disclosure, travel self-disclosure, and travel content.

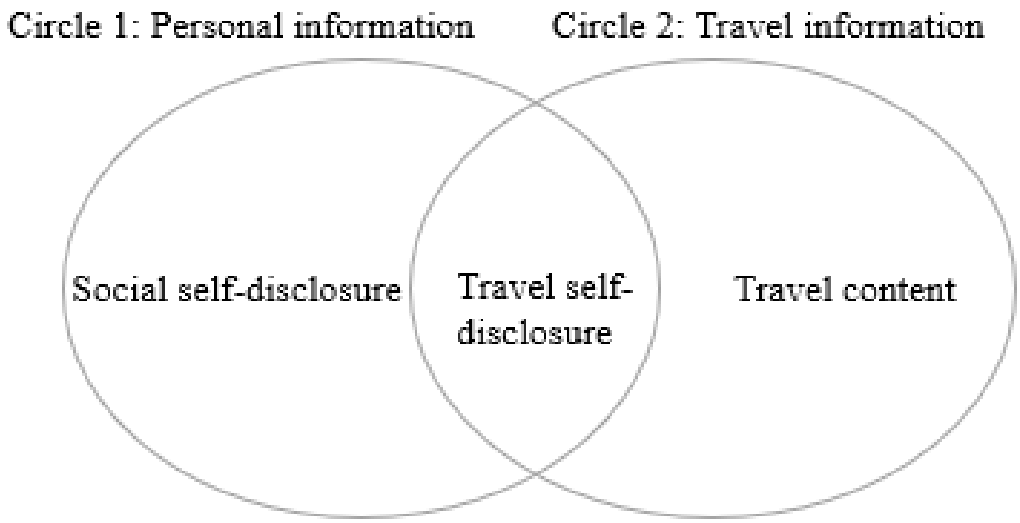

Figure 6.1 Venn Diagram represnting Travel self-disclosure

The Venn diagram represents the relationship between *social self-disclosure*, *travel self-disclosure* and *travel content*. If the two circles represent the sets of *personal information* and *travel information*, then:

- $social\ self\ disclosure = personal\ information\ \setminus travel\ information$
- $travel\ content = travel\ information \setminus personal\ information$
- $travel\ self\ disclosure = personal\ information\ \cap travel\ information$

Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) Travel Content, (2) Promotional Content, (3) Travel Self-disclosure, (4) Social self-disclosure, (5) and Trust in an influencer, which is an integrated theme. An integrative theme is a theme that permeates all the other themes coded in the template (King & Brooks, 2017). As mentioned in the methods chapter, this analysis started with a couple of a priori themes

generated both from the literature, and from study one and study two; social self-disclosure and appropriateness. The final template is presented below:

Final Template

1. **Theme one:** Travel Content
   1.1. A non-tourist perspective
   1.2. Unique Photos
      1.2.1. The photo should do the talking

2. **Theme Two:** Promotional Content
   2.1 Disclosure of Affiliation

3. **Theme Three:** Travel Self-disclosure
      3.1 Personal Context Around a Travel experience
      3.2 Self-Reflection and Depth of Thought

4. **Theme Four:** Social self-disclosure
   4.1. Social Self-disclosure vs. Travel Content
   4.2. Influencer's Social self-disclosure
   4.3. Boundaries of Appropriate Disclosure
      4.3.1 Balancing Social Self-disclosure with Travel Content
      4.3.2 Mutual Exclusivity between Social Self-disclosure and Promotional Content
      4.3.3 Appropriateness of Content
      4.3.4 Appropriateness of Delivery
         4.3.4.1 Overtness
            4.3.4.1.1 Subtle Disclosure of Personal Vulnerabilities
            4.3.4.1.2 Overtness in Promotions
      4.3.5 Authenticity
         4.3.5.1 Genuineness
            4.3.5.1.1 Genuineness in Social disclosure
            4.3.5.1.2 Genuineness in Travel disclosure
         4.3.5.2 Being Real
            4.3.5.2.1 Being Real in Social self-disclosure
               4.3.5.2.1.1 Perfection Vs. Being Real
            4.3.5.2.2 Being Real in Travel disclosure
            4.3.5.2.3 Being Real in Promotions

5. **Theme Five:** Trust in an Influencer- an Integrated Theme.
   5.1. Trust and Photos
   5.2. Trust and Promotional content
      5.2.1. Research as a Self-protection Mechanism
      5.2.2. Trust and Transparency in disclosure of Affiliation
   5.3. Trust and Social self-disclosure
      5.3.1. Similarity and Relatability
   5.4. Authenticity and Trust
      5.4.1. Being Real and Trust
      5.4.2. Mutual Exclusivity, Genuineness, and Trust

1. Travel Content

Discussions about travel influencers led participants to affirm that they desired influencers to provide them with travel content. Participants described two types of travel content; travel information through photos and through text. They stated they preferred a non-tourist perspective through the text, and that the photos should show unique travel experiences.

1.1 A non-tourist perspective

In terms of travel content, the majority of participants emphasised that they prefer influencers to give a verbal or visual context on destinations that provides a non-tourist perspective. Andrew (Male, 27, Masters) gives an example illustrating what is meant by giving a non-tourist perspective on a city*:*

"In Singapore there's a little India which is a sea of people demographically very narrow, young men in a certain age between this and this who have come to work there and that gives you a sense of the energy of Singapore, but then also the sadness of being foreigners who are not able to integrate into the life of this beautiful city. If you look at the average tourist blogger who goes to Singapore, you just see Santa Rosa and orchids and the beautiful townhouses, and you have no sense of the sadness and the texture and the unevenness of the challenges of these cities. So, I really appreciate people who are able to give that colour and that texture."

The participant expresses his feelings of appreciation for influencers that can capture the larger context of a city, which represents the real flavour of the city rather than a touristy representation. He describes that the majority of tourists and influencers featuring Singapore only capture tourist attractions with little attempt to capture the

reality of the city in regards of different demographics and how they are interacting in the city such as little India in Singapore.

Participants also stated that providing such a non-tourist perspective on cities makes them like and feel closer to an influencer. John (Male, 50, PhD) explains why: *"It is really interesting for me to know what the influencer observes about a city like the changes of the expressions on the faces."* He gives an example of a travel influencers he follows:

"The influencers I follow they're much more observant they talk about the people. A travel influencer that I follow went to Barcelona and talked about how different the faces are on the Metro and the people are just a little bit quieter and more introspective than they were before the economic crash. These observations are really important especially in big tourist cities to get a sense of what is lifelike for people."

A non-tourist perspective about a city is not just statements of background facts, but also an influencer's subjective observations about the city and its people. The interest and importance of this perspective is derived from followers' desire to know what life is like for people who actually live in these cities, especially in big tourist cities that people usually only know one side of the city, the tourist side.

Culture, according to participants, is an essential part of a city's context. They stressed that giving a non-tourist perspective on a city includes understanding its culture, exploring the less touristy parts of it, and active engagement with the locals. Hallie (Female, 31, PhD):

"'Lost with purpose' (an influence she follows), she went to this ritual gathering in Pakistan where there were Sufi saints dancing and doing hookah and even hashish (i.e., weed). An outsider might think this is a crazy place with people shouting and dancing, but she was able to explain the reason behind why they were doing this. It was a shrine of a Sufi saint and once a year they gather on his death anniversary and these rituals have some meaning. So, this makes you understand their culture more instead of just judging by seeing it from the outside."

The influencer's ability to portray even the dark sides of a culture in a positive way and provide such a non-tourist perspective by explaining the reasons behind what people are doing was appreciated and was a source of followers' admiration for the influencer.

Participants expressed frustration towards travel influencers who do not invest time to learn about the unique aspects of a city, its culture, and its people through active engagement with the locals. Amelia (Female, 21, Undergrad) says:

"It annoys me when people travel but don't really experience the culture, they don't really know what people live like in that country. For example, my dad is Mauritian and loads of tourists that go to Mauritius they're just on the beach they never even meet the people from the country. So, if I see travel Instagrammers just going around taking photos of themselves, it really annoys me."

She emphasises that this is achieved through interacting with people and being interested in their culture, and stresses its importance as a way of getting to know what it's really like to live there.

In summary, providing a non-tourist perspective is preferred by followers, and is considered important travel content. It is important because it allows travellers to understand what it is like living in these cities. This perspective cannot be achieved through capturing tourist traps; rather it can be acquired through an influencer's active engagement with the culture, local experiences, and interactions with the locals. Thus, for example, it includes observations such as changes in peoples' expressions over the years as a result of economic hardships, which gives followers a sense of the true essence of a city. This perspective can be conveyed through either written description, or using images, or both.

1.2 Unique Photos

The findings reveal that photos are considered an important form of travel content because it can be the main reason for initially following an influencer. Andrew confirms that a beautiful image might be the initial reason for following a travel influencer: *"They will have hooked me with an arresting image for me to follow them."* Dina (Female, 28, Masters) as well says: *"If somebodies' Instagram photos doesn't look nice, then I wouldn't follow them."* She contributes the importance of photos to the nature of Instagram being a photo application (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), stating *"It's all about the aesthetics on Instagram."*.

This emphasis on photos also arises from the nature of travel influencers' followers, who are often interested in photography. Eva (Female, 23, Undergrad) explains: *"For me if I was following an influencer I look firstly for the photos because I'm a photographer and I love photos."* Also, Sylvia (Female, 27, Masters) says: *"The first*

thing I notice in a travel influencer is their photos. If they look nice and intriguing, it portrays the trip like a nice experience." Photos are also important because they are the first point of contact between an Instagram travel influencer and their followers.

The content of a photo plays a big role in followers' attitude towards the featured destination. Layla (Female, 28, Masters) says: *"If this person just shares Instagram posts of them in a nice dress, what does that tell me about the place? Not much."* Clearly, the content of photo and what it is portraying matters for followers. *"A photo of two people sat on a surfboard is not going to make me want to go to Bali. What's going to make you want to go to Bali is seeing photos of cool things there, the food…etc.." (Eva).* Photos that do not feature unique travel experiences do not incite followers towards the destination.

Adventurous activities portrayed in a photo were found to be positively perceived by participants. Jackie (Female, 22, Undergrad) comments on a photo of a stimulus post and describes the kind of photos she finds interesting:

"I've seen lots of beach pics, that's not necessarily going to make me go. I think they could have got a better photo if they were trying to make people go. I follow this travel influencer and she swam with sharks in South Africa and it's so cool. Her photos are just like so raw and amazing and just like talking about the experience of swimming with sharks". Thomas (Male, 23, Masters) gives an example of interesting photos posted by influencers he follows: *"So these guys they're very adventurous. I saw some skiing videos for them in Canada, it was crazy. That's something I don't usually see and so I appreciate seeing that. It's just quiet adventures… I'm not that bothered by beaches and people in swim shorts and stuff like that. I'm much more interested in like*

earthy things." Simply, posting typical photos, such beach shots, is not as motivating for travellers as unique photos of activities that show an adventurous or novel aspect of destinations.

Photos of unique and interesting places, cultures, food, and activities are what engrains the destination in the follower's heads and motivates behavioural intentions. Nora (Female, 19, Undergrad) commented on a stimulus post by saying *"I like this photo. You can see them obviously doing something which is always nice because you know it's something that you could do if you went there and it does give more information which I would find useful."* She confirms that photos of fun or interesting activities are motivating because it feels like followers can do the same thing if they visit that destination. Also, Dina (Female, 28, Masters) indicated that a photo showing a fun activity makes her pay attention to where it was taken and creates the desire to experience it too. She says, commenting on a stimulus post that included a photo of a travel influencer getting tickled by an elephant:

"This is the kind of post I would find cool on Instagram. I like it! Automatically seeing this, I'm like where is she? Phuket, Thailand OK. I would definitely want to experience something with elephants. So that's something that would make me read the post. It's a cute a photo. It's giving her a kiss on the cheek."

Photos of activities positively impacted followers' attitudes towards destinations because it engendered a desire to experience the same activity.

From the above discussion it is clear that unique photos are an important form of travel content, as they are the initial point of contact between followers and influencers, hence influential to Instagram users' decisions to follow. Also, unique photos played a

major role in positively impacting followers' behavioural intentions. Photos that feature interesting activities, food, environments, and cultures were found the most interesting, unique, and the most effective in grabbing followers' attention.

1.2.1 The Photo Should Do the Talking

Participants stressed that although the caption, i.e., the text underneath the photo, should not be neglected, photos should do the talking. While Instagram allows both text and visual content, it is categorised more of a visual application than a textual one (De Veirman et al., 2017). Participants indicated that they need the caption to give them key information, but with no more text than is necessary. Commenting on a stimulus post Stephen (Male, 31, PhD) says: *"For example, where it says the resort's beach was so beautiful, it doesn't need to say that because I can see that... on Instagram the photos should do the talking."* Participants suggest that what is clear from the photo should not be redundantly represented in the text.

Furthermore, some participants expressed a dislike of lots of text, which causes them to detach from the post and not read it. *"I hate lots of text. What I love about Instagram and what makes it far better than any other social media is how simple it is and the more complex it's getting the more I am distancing myself from it. So, one photo tiny little bit of text that is enough for me. So, I'm not going to read this, I won't. I'm going to separate away."* (Thomas, Male, 23, Masters)

In addition, Katie (Female, 29, PhD) commented on a stimulus post by saying: *"The text is too long for Instagram. Let the photo or the video talk more than the text or use vlogs to tell stories."* However, how much text is too much cannot be determined precisely from the data because too much in the eyes of one person might not be too much for another. However, overall participants that talked about too much text were referring to stimulus posts that had a caption comprising twenty lines of text, while none of the participants commented on the length of the post that had ten lines.

Moreover, participants expected that there should be a connection between the photo and the caption. For example, Abdu (Male, 26, PhD) commented on one of the stimulus posts: *"There is no relation between the image and the text; the text does not reflect the photo"* He had an implicit expectation that the photo and the caption in the post should be a reflection of each other. Andrew also comments on a stimulus: *"I think in a way the photograph is an evidence of the claims. For example, in the photo here you don't see the resort, the meditation, and the cycling. You see this elephant which isn't mentioned. I would be much more interested to see these beautiful images from villages or temples she talks about."* Although the text should not say something the photo is already saying, the two should not be completely unrelated.

In summary, participants wanted the images in a post to function as evidence for what is claimed in the caption. Although captions should relate to the images they accompany, they should not describe what is clearly seen in a photo. The amount of text was critical in the decision to read or not read a caption; too much text resulted in followers' loss of interest.

2. Promotional Content

In contrast to travel content, promotional content was associated with negative reactions from followers: *"Most of the influencers totally shifted to being a business and are just full of commercials to be honest, which is disgusting."* Nadia (Female, 36, Masters) expresses her disapproval of the trend among influencers to shift from authentic engagement to advertising products. In addition, Emma (Female, 25, Masters) expresses her feelings of dislike and frustration towards influencers' who are continuously advertising; *"I don't like the influencers that are very overtly promoting brands and things like that. I tend to avoid those I find them kind of annoying."* Influencers that are heavily promoting most of the time can cause followers to avoid them. The fact that a certain content is part of a commercial was enough to turn followers off.

Furthermore, followers' product attitude is negatively impacted by promotional content. Ella (Female, 27, PhD) says: *"When social media influencers advertise something whether they disclose it as advertisement or not, I usually get a very negative feeling towards this brand."* Ella gives an example:

"I'm not sure if you're familiar with anaesthesia lenses but their advertisements are all over influencers accounts. I do not buy this brand because I feel like it's overpriced because of how much they put into advertisements. So, I think the advertisement was bad for the company to win me as a customer. It might not be as good as they say it is because it's a paid advertisement. This is not to say that everyone who is paid to advertise something is not being honest, but the way it is advertised makes me feel sceptical of the brand."

Over-advertisement through social media influencers might backlash on the company instead of getting people interested in the brand. Since followers are highly sensitive towards promotions, companies employing several popular influencers to talk about their brand at the same time might lead to negative reactions from followers.

Moreover, promotional content provokes followers' scepticism about influencers' honesty, along with concerns of being advertised to: *"Whenever I see that something is advertised, I don't know why I automatically reject it. Although sometimes it's really helpful, but it makes me question their validity whether it was real or not whether what they're posting is just because of the money or do they really like it."* (Suzan, Female, 28, PhD) The participant declares that promotional content leads her to reject the recommendation, although she admits it might be useful. She attributes her negative product attitude and rejection to her scepticism around the sincerity of the influencer's opinion. Since the influencer is getting paid for it, what they are saying might be only for the sake of the advertisement. Hence, she rejects it to mitigate feelings of being deceived.

Participants are highly sensitive towards posts that seem to be sponsored or that are promoting a specific brand. A participant comments on one of the stimulus posts by saying: *"This post is ultimately leading to the fact that they are promoting adventure Austria. I'm aware now, because I got older and wiser, I guess, but also because we're seeing so much more of this that it's just come to manifest all your Instagram feed with Promo."* (Jackie, female, 22, undergraduate) Participants are hyper-alert to the smallest sign suggesting that a post is an ad, such as mentioning the service name,

even if the influencer has not explicitly specified that it is an ad. For example, a participant commented on a stimulus post: *"I think that this person is sponsored to advertise for this particular resort. I can see he kept repeating the resort name twice or so and he focused on the resort rather than the experience or the island itself."* (Katie, female, 29, PhD) Participants seem to think that once the influencer directly mentions the name of a resort, it is automatically a paid advertisement. This is an unfortunate finding for professional influencers. People are becoming more aware of influencers' marketing and thus are critically filtering the messages from influencers. Through the data it is apparent that people will rush into conclusions and assume the post is an ad if it recommends a product or service, and will quickly reject such posts, although now it is a standard regulation to disclose affiliation (Goanta & Ranchordas, 2019).

In summary, promotional content was faced with extreme negativity from followers. Product attitude was negatively associated with influencers' marketing content. Respondents expressed scepticism towards the sincerity of influencers' recommendations. In addition, they expressed worry about being sold to, and hence were highly alert to indicators of advertisements in influencers' posts.

2.1 Disclosure of Affiliation

Disclosure of affiliation is when an influencer reveals to their followers that they have a financial affiliation related to the travel experience they are recommending. Whether a post is sponsored or not, vagueness and unclarity around its commercial nature engenders distrust and scepticism. Ella (female, 27, PhD) expresses how disguising

affiliation can harm a follower's trust in an influencer: *"She is [talking about an influencer she follows] paid by companies, but she denies, this makes me sceptical about her content. I do not trust her."* Also, Sally (female, 19, undergrad) confirms this *"Sometimes they are like we did this whole trip with two thousand pounds but it's like no you didn't because they received free things. So, obviously it's much cheaper if they lie about things."* Undisclosed affiliation makes followers sceptical about an influencer's claims.

To mitigate the negativity towards promotional content, influencers must be transparent and upfront with their followers about such content. In line with research by Carr & Hayes (2014) participants expressed acceptance towards influencers that explicitly disclose affiliation: *"Because they talk about it, it's more explicit, it's more obvious. I think it's fine if people own up to it. Like if they're saying that they're advertising something, I don't find that as bad at all."* (Amelia, Female, 21, Undergrad) She attributes her acceptance of promotional content to the influencer's explicit disclosure of affiliation. The majority of participants agreed that influencers' honesty regarding promotional content is key to turning the previously discussed negativity and scepticism towards promotions into acceptance. Dina (Female, 28, Masters) says: *"I don't mind influencers being paid for advertising that's fine, but as long as they are honest about how they feel about it and they are honest about whether it's bad or not."* She explains that her acceptance of sponsored content is conditional on the influencer's honesty about the affiliation and their opinion of the product/service.

Declaring affiliation was associated with positive perceptions about the influencer, such as credibility and honesty. Sylvia (female, 27, masters) says of one of the stimulus posts:

"I find this one more credible because they' admit that their whole trip was organized by this travel agency and it's more obvious. I'd be more likely to try this travel agency because they're honest about it. I don't like the sneaky kind of posts that try to cheat you into going somewhere."

Interestingly, disclosing the sponsorship not only made it acceptable in the eyes of the followers but also positively affected their behavioural intentions. Sylvia stated that she would be willing to try the advertised service because the influencer disclosed affiliation.

Goanta and Ranchorda, (2019) clarify that although some governments and social media applications have set regulations regarding influencer marketing practices, such as requiring influencers to declare paid content, not all influencers adhere to this practice. If influencers want followers' approval, however, it is to their advantage to disclose affiliation. Unless affiliation is disclosed, promotional content results in negative attitude towards influencers and products/services advertised. On the other hand, when affiliation is disclosed it is more acceptable and trusted. In addition, it has been associated with positive perceptions towards the influencer and positive product attitude.

3. Travel Self-disclosure

Travel self-disclosure was demanded by participants and was associated with followers' positive behavioural intentions. Travel self-disclosure has been described by participants to fall into two categories; these are: an influencers' personal context in relation to the travel experience, and their depth of thought and self-reflection regarding the travel experience.

3.1 Personal Context in Relation to the Travel Experience

Travel self-disclosure can take the form of sharing personal information that gives personal context about the travel experience. This context includes giving details about one's self such as one's background information, circumstances, and personal activities, which provides context on the travel experience.

Examples of such contextual travel self-disclosure are presented by the participants. For example, Layla (female, 28, masters), when asked what makes an influencer's travel experience seem real to her, answered: *"I think sharing an experience from beginning to the end. Walking me through the experience like packing, going to the airport, arriving to the hotel, what they do, their activity."* The travel self-disclosures respondents described included things influencers pack in their bags, their journey to the airport and the hotel, which are personal information giving context on the travel experience. This *'walking me through the experience'* as the participant describes it, is what makes the post real in her eyes. Sally (female, 19, undergrad) gives another example: *"Actually, I do love when travel influencers share packing tips, the products they use on the plane and skincare, and share food share exercise. I love seeing how*

they live around traveling." She describes this personal context as sharing *'how they live around travelling'.*

Having context on cities that travel influencers visit is clearly desirable content, but there is less certainly about followers' desire for personal context regarding the travel experience. John (male, 50, PhD) explains that both personal context and context about a destination are equally important*: "I follow them because they tend to produce content that gives context. It's important to get context on them and to get context on the cities."*

Personal context on travel experiences such as talking about what interests them in the space, their relationship to it, how they were affected by it, and what it meant to them, can be a reason for following a travel influencer, because it enhances followers' ability to judge the place accordingly. John says: *"Having context really helps me to get an idea of was this a good place or a bad place it helps you also to get a sense of the authenticity of the comment."* Interestingly, he criticises a travel influencer he follows because she doesn't provide personal context: *"You get no sense of how they got from the airport. You get no sense of what breakfast was like at the hotel. These little things matter."* When this kind of travel disclosure is not available, participants feel that the influencer's content is lacking something important.

Sharing personal context around a travel experience builds followers' interest towards the influencer and their travels. Kristina (Female, 26, PhD) gives an example: *"I recently followed a travel influencer. She's about motherhood and travel. So, she*

travels with her kids and talks about like how to do that better like infinite flying[1] I don't have kids, but it interests me. … She even shares like what happens if you run out of diapers and how can you make a diaper out of cloth if you need to in an airport."

Kristina expresses her positive perceptions of a travel influencer that shares personal details which sets the context of traveling with kids. Although the participant does not have children, yet this kind of contextual travel self-disclosure have motivated her to continue following this influencer. This interests her because it gives her a fuller picture of the experience, as a way of experiencing travel by proxy. She explains that this is also valuable to her because the influencer is 'keeping it real' (see subtheme 4.2.2. below):

"I like that she's more honest about travel so she doesn't just post like really fancy photos she posts her kids on her story throwing a temper tantrum and like how she deals with them in airport...I like that it's not overly curated like she's just actually filming what's happening instead of picking and choosing very carefully only when her kids are happy." (Kristina, Female, 26, PhD)

Kristina suspects that some influencers fake experiences by only showing the perfect side of it, while this influencer shows reality with its two sides, which is something she likes about this influencer.

Findings confirm that this type of disclosure is associated with follower's positive reactions. John (male, 50, PhD) says: *"I like that I'm getting a sense of them in the space, their feelings, their blisters, their incredible meals, their emotions, and their*

[1] A lifestyle characterised by constant travel

defeats. It's about living vicariously that seems to be a really important thing to me." He explains the desirability of such context by its ability to give followers a sense of living the experience with the influencer. Layla also likes this kind of context from a travel influencer and defines it as the background and personal circumstance of the influencer in relation to the travel experience. She says:

"I like knowing the background behind this person why they visited these places? what were the circumstance? did they visit alone or with friends, or with family? Did they travel with a kid or as a couple? This really influences how I take their advice. *I like knowing that kind of information because to me that's part of the experience."*

The participant precisely described this kind of context as 'part of the experience'. Providing such context was associated with followers' positive perceptions towards the destination and motivation towards adopting the influencer travel recommendation.

Additionally, this travel disclosure creates a deeper connection between influencers and followers:

"I think the place helps sets the context, but I think the deeper connection you want to have with your audience is through talking about who you meet, who you are with, or what you did in the location. Again, location is important, but who are you with. Yeah, it's more important." (Stephen, male, 31, PhD)

This type of context was claimed to be even more important in building the connection with followers than providing context about the destination.

Personal context in relation to travel experiences was found to be interesting to and desirable by followers. It was important because it helped followers to assess the suitability of the destination for them, created a connection between followers and influencers, and generally was associated with positive attitude towards featured destinations.

3.2 Self-reflection and Depth of Thought

Another effective form of travel self-disclosure is self-reflection and depth of thought. When participants were asked what they like about the travel influencers they follow, Emma (female, 27, PhD) answered: *"I would say depth of thought in the caption so it's a combination of what they're learning when they're traveling and also how deeply they've thought about and understood why they're traveling why they're traveling to that particular place."* She defines this depth of thought as an influencer's ability to articulate the lessons learned from their travel experience, and their ability to reflect and disclose the reasons that led them to travel to this specific destination. Emma stresses that what she is interested in is more *"Internal lessons that they're learning rather than external things."*

Participants have also stated that such a disclosure creates feelings of closeness between them and the influencer. When Andrew (male, 27, masters) was asked what makes him feel closer to an influencer he answered: *"That complexity, the flavour, the contrast, their real experience. What they are learning how they are growing? These are really interesting for me."* Clearly, followers want to know what an influencer is learning from their travels and how they are growing as a result. Kristina (female, 26,

PhD) described this type of disclosure as a stream of consciousness: *“I think the captions that she writes are usually very long and detailed and are often Like just stream of consciousness. So, it makes me trust her more.”* The participant states that this is something she likes about this influencer and even is a reason to trust her.

Emma gave an example of such a disclosure shared by one of the influencers she follows:

“OK. So, the caption says: simplify. Sometimes when I'm traveling and taking photos, I get so caught up in showing the whole scene that I fail to see the intricate details of a particular area. It's only when I stop trying to focus on everything at once that I'm able to notice beautiful details in the landscape like in these images. The same can be true in life. By focusing on too many things at once it can be easy to miss what is truly important. Only once you give yourself permission to stop trying to do it all, to stop saying yes to everyone, can you make your highest contribution towards the things that really matter. And then what he did was he took like past photographs and he zoomed in on one teeny, little section of them and they're beautiful.”

In this example we can see that the influencer provides the travel self-disclosure in the form of depth of thought and reflection on internal lessons learned on this trip and how this is relevant not just his photographic practice, but also his personal life more generally.

Self-reflection and depth of thought were found to be an effective, well-liked form of travel disclosure. It comprises both an influencer’s ability to reflect on their reasons for

traveling and choosing a specific destination, and on the lessons learned from their travels and how they are growing as a result. This kind of disclosure was a factor in followers' liking, closeness, and trust towards an influencer.

4. Social Self-disclosure

4.1 Social Self-disclosure vs. Travel Content

Participants stressed that travel content is more interesting to them than an influencer's social self-disclosure, which emphasises the importance of travel content provided by travel influencers. *"If I were to follow a travel account, it would be to learn about the destination not to learn about the person who runs the travel account. I would not be super interested in their family back story."* (Nora, Female, 19, Undergrad) According to the majority of participants, a travel influencer's content should mainly be travel related, since the main reason behind following them is to learn about destinations. For example, Suzan (female, 28, PhD) states *"I'm following them for the sake of traveling not for the sake of knowing their personal lives. So, it's better to narrow the focus."* Stephen (male, 31, PhD) strongly confirms this. *"If I follow a travel influencer, I really want to get a good idea about where I should and should not go to, and I don't want to know about their abortion."* Participants declared that the main reason for following a travel influencer is for travel content.

Generally speaking, travel influencers' social self-disclosures mostly generated negative reactions from followers, which further confirms results of study 1. Many participants stated that social self-disclosure can lead them to lose interest in a travel influencer and even unfollow them. For instance, Layla (female, 28, masters) said: *"I followed a travel influencer and then suddenly she turned into a mommy blog. I*

followed her specifically for her travel tips and stuff. Once I lose that, I lose interest. I think they have to give people the content they want." She continues to explain:

"I think it's essential for someone who is on social media to stick to what they're there to do, having specific content. For example there is this influencer that I follow that travels to very interesting places. I follow her specifically because she makes travelling and exercising away from home so easy and fun, but now I see her sharing too much about her personal life and about her boyfriend and it's just too much. It's so annoying. I unfollowed her."

These quotes emphasise that the context of travel influencers is different from other speciality influencers, because people follow travel influencers for their speciality in travel. Thus, people feel frustrated when they deviate away from the main purpose of the account, and in some cases, it leads to losing interest in the influencer and unfollowing them.

4.2 Influencers' Social self-disclosures

Although participants stated very clearly that they are not interested in social disclosure, but the reality of what is happening in social media is different. Nadia (female, 36, masters) explains that social media influencers are sharing a big part of their personal life with their followers. She says:

"Everything is out in the public. They think that they're not telling you anything, they're in a way in denial. With time, they feel that they're speaking to their best friends when they're speaking to the screen; not actually realizing that they're talking to more than one hundred thousand people and telling them a story about when she was a kid and what happened with their family."

Interestingly, although influencers know the actual number of their followers, Nadia thinks they are almost in denial of the fact that they are disclosing on public outlets. This is due to the amount of social disclosure they share; they talk as if they are talking to their a close friend rather than treating their public disclosures cautiously (Bazarova, 2012). Facing invisible and ill-defined audiences in public forms of SNSs communication, people have difficulty determining who is in their audience and grossly underestimate its size (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013). Not knowing their actual audience, they anchor behaviours on perceptions of "imagined" audiences or their mental photo of whom they are communicating with (Bazarova & Choi, 2014).

When participants were asked to recall examples of social disclosure shared by the travel influencers they follow, the actual quantity and detail of disclosure was astonishing. Participants gave examples of influencers' disclosure that varied in depth and breadth, from biographical and superficial information such as nationalities, family status, education, work, and daily routines, to major life milestones such as pregnancy, marriage and even challenges and negative life experiences. A participant gave an example representing high breadth of social disclosure by a travel influencer.

"The travel couple I follow disclosed their baby and the pregnancy. You know about how they met in Italy even though they're both Australian. You know about the jobs they did beforehand. You know about who does what in the boat, who does the piloting and who cleans and that's all through me just following them on Instagram." (Thomas, Male, 23, Masters)

The data contains many examples of highly intimate social self-disclosure. Kristina (female, 26, PhD) gives an example of a high depth disclosure that an influencer shared on the platform through their public account.

"One influencer that I follow recently came out as a lesbian on the platform, but she was previously with a man and she comes from a Mormon family in the States. So, she has like talked a lot about that disclosure and her family's reaction which was negative and her struggle with that."

Amelia (female, 21, undergrad) gave another example of a disclosure, which she described as both private and very personal. *"A lot of them post about their mental health, that's quite personal details. Like Cindy will post in detail about her struggles with anxiety and depression and even like how it physically affects her like she gets rashes and things like that."*

Although participants stated that they are not interested in social disclosure, as discussed in the previous theme, it is evident from many examples in the data that many of the travel influencers they follow do share high levels of breadth and depth of social disclosure. This further emphasises that self-disclosure is the norm in social media communication (Marder, 2018).

Participants expressed their concerns regarding influencers' privacy due to their public social disclosures. They believed that social disclosure threatens the privacy of the influencers.

"There are some dangerous people and accounts out there. I think if you give someone an inch, they'll take a mile and take advantage of the fact you're trying to be

honest. There are people with malicious intent on Instagram, so I think they've got to be careful and I guess lots of travel influencers are starting families and having babies, they do need to protect themselves." (Jackie, female, 22, undergrad)

The participant claimed it is risky to be disclosing personal details publicly because it might be used harmfully by dangerous people.

Other participants asserted that if the influencer chooses to be open in their disclosures, some followers will not respect the influencer's boundaries regarding privacy.

"Some influencers would announce something private and then they would say give me my privacy or I'll speak when the time is right because she feels that she owes the audience in disclosing this information. You are not obliged, but because you have opened your doors, the audience feel that they should know… You showed us and told us everything about you; and now when it comes to this bad situation, you're not going to tell us. It's not up to you! You feel that at the end of the day, the followers own you. So, when you start fighting for your privacy, they're just like whaaat?!" (Nadia, female, 36, Masters)

She explains that by sharing social disclosure on public accounts, influencers automatically loose the right for their own privacy in the eyes of their followers.

In addition, participants said that knowing too much personal information about the influencers they follow makes them feel like creeps. Kristina (female, 26, PhD) affirmed that she thinks she knows an influencer she follows 'well' because they share social

disclosures. Yet, she also felt that knowing this amount of personal information about them is creepy. *“I feel like she posts a fair amount, so it feels like I know her. I know her kids, I know her partner, and I know where she is. Maybe that's a little creepy.”* Hallie (female, 31, PhD) confirms this: *“It's like you're following your friends because I just feel like I know them now. You know like stocking their life on Instagram. It's kind of creepy. Well, it's true... I feel like I'm their creepy stalker friend.”* Despite feelings of creepiness, the participants also developed parasocial relationship due to exposure of social self-disclosure (Kim & Song, 2016). She describes developing feelings of being their friend, although in reality this friendship doesn’t exist. Parasocial relationship is defined as an imaginary relationship to a person whom one knows well but who barely knows the other (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Nora (19, female, undergrad) said (of influencers), *“If they told me too much, I would feel like a creep.”* So, how much is too much? and is there an acceptable amount of social self-disclosure?

4.3 Boundaries of Appropriate Self-disclosure

The findings revealed that the appropriateness of self-disclosure is an important condition for generating positive reactions from followers affirming findings of study 1 1 and 2. The data suggest that the appropriateness of a self-disclosure can reverse followers’ negative reactions. Surprisingly, the findings revealed that appropriateness of disclosure was not only about the content of the disclosure, but instead specific boundaries have also been found to define appropriate public disclosure by Instagram travel influencers. Specifically, these include balancing social self-disclosure and travel content, mutual exclusivity between social self-disclosure and promotional content, appropriateness of the content of disclosure, appropriateness of the delivery of disclosure, and authenticity. The boundaries of appropriateness disclosure made a

big difference in reversing followers' usual negative reactions towards it. More explanation will be presented in the following themes.

4.3.1 Balancing Social self-disclosure and Travel Content

From the discussion in theme 4.2 (influencer's social self-disclosure), it is clear that participants favoured travel content over social disclosure, while influencers continue to disclose much of their personal lives through their public outlets. We can see that followers are uneasy with too much social disclosure, but the question arises: Is all social disclosure undesirable and perceived negatively by followers? Or, might a certain amount of social disclosure be needed to keep followers hooked and engaged with the influencer?

Influencers' social self-disclosure and travel content are not an 'either-or'; rather it is a balancing act to reach a desirable point and mitigate followers' negative reactions. John (male, 50, PhD) discusses this in the following quote,

"I find it more compelling when people are able to show you who they are and how they're feeling, but I'm more interested in their honest experiences of the places that they're going to than how they are dealing with their inner demons and what is going on in their life. Terrible thing to say, but you know I'm really going to benefit if I learn that they went to Naples and they absolutely hated it but then they went to Ancona and it was the best thing in the world and they wish they'd never gone to Naples. I would much rather learn that than their sister's dog died, and they had a really hard time because it was like a family member. You know that humanizes them and I think it's definitely the case for me that I'm more engaged by people who seem

to be more human and more open and more candid, but then I do feel some people overshare."

This quote makes an important point about the desired balance between travel content and social disclosure. The participant is not keen on influencer's social disclosure, yet he is not able to engage or find the influencer interesting unless they are somewhat open and candid in their social disclosure. He explains that social disclosure humanizes influencers.

While we can discern a general rule of thumb that travel content is more desirable from a travel influencer than social disclosure, participants also made it clear that some amount of social disclosure makes an influencer more interesting and engaging. Kristina (female, 26, PhD) says:

"I don't think I would find it as interesting if they didn't tell me about their personal life. Like sometimes because I know that, I want to keep checking in on them and seeing how are they doing, what's happening in their life. In general, I enjoy seeing other people's lives and I'm genuinely interested in what happens with this woman's relationship and what happens with this other woman's father."

Eva (female, 23, undergrad) agrees; *"The more I understand about you, the more I'll be interested in you."* Moreover, Abdu (ale, 26, PhD) said *"The more people disclose, the more engaged I am with them."* Apparently, social self-disclosure can attract followers' interest and engagement.

Other participants expressed feelings of connectedness due to some amount of social disclosure by an influencer; *"It gives you the connection. So relatively 'McQueen' [an influencer he follows] does less personal disclosure, so you feel you're not as connected with him, whereas 'Kara and net' [an influencer couple he follows] are telling a life story."* (Stephen, male, 31, PhD) Hence, we see that not all social disclosure leads to negative outcomes, as suggested by both marketing literature and study 1 in this thesis.

This balance was found to humanize influencers in the eyes of their followers. When Hallie (female, 31, PhD) was asked if she would like to know more about the personal lives of the travel influencers she follows, she answered:

"To a certain extent it's okay because it makes you look more human as I said, but if it's full of that then I don't think it's okay because I'm following that person because they are a travel influencer. So, no I wouldn't like it if it gets too much to a certain extent it's all right."

We see here that it is not an 'either-or' situation, but a matter of balance. It seems that a balance between travel content and social self-disclosure is indeed needed to attract people and keep them engaged. So, rather than asking *should travel influencers share social disclosure or not?,* the question becomes—*how can influencers reach a desirable balance between social disclosure and travel content?*

This acceptable balance dictates the acceptable proportion of social disclosure in comparison to travel content. Participants explain that travel content should be the

majority of the influencer's content, and social disclosure should not exceed 20%. Stephen (male, 31, PhD) further elaborates on the point that although a certain amount of social disclosure is needed, it should be kept to a minimum.

"I think it's a balance here. On the one hand, people follow Kara and Net for example, because of their travels and not because of their personal life. I think it's important to talk about your personal life, maybe like 10, 20 percent, not more than that. Anything more than that, you are taking away from the actual content that people follow you for and you're actually losing followers in the process."

This clarifies the balance a travel influencer should pursue when disclosing; not fifty-fifty, but rather approximately eighty-twenty travel content versus social disclosure.

Giving more than twenty percent social disclosure takes away from the main point of the account, i.e., travel. Hence, followers may leave if the balance shifts from the desired set point. Kristina (female, 26, PhD) made the point that social disclosure should not take over the main message of the account, i.e., travel content:

"For instance, with those two Instagrammers they're both travel accounts and now they have a lot more personal things and products and whole other storylines happening. Sometimes people get upset and they are like I only follow this account for travel, now I'm not getting the content that I originally Wanted. You'll find comments like I thought this was a travel account and now it's like a lesbian relationship account."

Therefore, if influencers devote a big part of their content to social disclosure, they risk negative reactions from followers; but if they are a closed book, where followers know nothing about their personal lives, they risk losing interest and engagement.

Social self-disclosure and travel content by travel influencers don't represent an 'either or' situation; participants are less interested in social disclosures, but they did express some positive reactions towards it such as engagement and connection. Thus, a balance represented by 80% travel content to a 20% of social disclosure was deemed acceptable by followers.

From this theme we concluded that the amount of social self-disclosure presented is critical. Neither too much social disclosure nor completely none is the best approach to social self-disclosure by travel influencers; rather, a balance is better perceived and reacted to by followers. Limited social disclosure appears to humanize influencers and gives followers a sense of connection, but this is achieved through presenting just a hint or a small portion of the influencer's personal life rather than immersing the followers in it, which defeats the purpose of the account. However, an important question is: are there other factors playing a role in making self-disclosure generate positive or negative reactions, other than the quantity? The answer is in the remaining themes that follow in §4, representing further boundaries of appropriate disclosure.

4.3.2 Mutual Exclusivity Between Social self-disclosure and Promotional Content

It was very clear from the data that participants thought social self-disclosure should be kept separate from promotional content; participants were not able to digest the idea of combining the two. They felt it was weird to start with an intimate social disclosure and then end with promotional content. Suzan comments on a stimulus post:

"I just find that this post is weird. So, I love that at the beginning he mentioned that he is trying to focus on his relationship. That's nice, but why at the end he mentioned that he visited this resort. It's better just to keep the post dedicated for this specific thing, which is focusing on their relationship. Mentioning a hotel make me question it. So, don't make a story, I'm not a fool. Just tell me straightaway what you want to speak about, the resort!"

The quote portrays participants' scepticism regarding a post that combines promotional content and social disclosure. The participant expressed impatience with posts that use a personal story leading to a selling attempt. This caused participant to feel that the influencer was trying to fool them, first into believing the personal story (social disclosure), and then buying into what they are selling (promotional content).

The mix between social self-disclosure and promotional content in one post led participants to question the authenticity of the disclosure, whether it is a true story or is the story being used to sell the followers a product or a service. Suzan continues to explain how she feels when encountering a post that integrates social disclosure and promotional content:

"It shows that this is sponsored in away. At the beginning when I read the story, I'm like 'oh okay so they've got some family issues that they're trying to deal with', but once I read the name of the resort 'The Maldivian Resort' I felt like what I read was just nonsense. Give me the real story, you're just promoting it.… The stories can be real, but I just don't like that they are using their personal stories or showing that they're vulnerable to promote something else. I didn't feel it was real I felt like he was making it up just to tell us about the resort."

This further illustrates how the combination of personal and promotional content makes followers sceptical and lose trust.

Negativity towards social self-disclosure was intensified when social self-disclosure was integrated in a post with promotional content, the most undesirable types of content by followers. The combination of social disclosure and promotional content was associated with resentment and feelings of being manipulated or used.

"Sometimes it feels disconnected when they have a lot of disclosure and then they try to sell me something explicitly. I think it actually turns me off because it feels like such a shifting gear. Like If you're looking at their story and they are talking about their struggles with their dad's health problems. And then the next is like, yeah buy this yoga mat. It just feels very disconnected and then it's difficult for me to trust that because even though I believe that they're talking about their struggles in a genuine way I also feel like okay it's like an emotional rollercoaster watching them... I also feel like some sense of resentment that I might be like emotionally manipulated to stay." (Kristina, female, 26, PhD)

In such unacceptable posts social disclosure is used to present a story or an issue that is then solved through the promoted travel experience, whether explicitly or implicitly. Participants don't necessarily disbelieve the social disclosure here; however, they find it difficult to trust an influencer who uses a personal story to sell something.

Furthermore, this mutual exclusivity between social disclosure and promotional content applied not only to textual content, but also to the connection between visual

and textual content. For example, posts that included a photo portraying a promotion for a hotel with a caption presenting a pure social self-disclosure were rejected by followers. Participants explained that there should be a connection between the photo and the disclosure. Participants felt uncomfortable reading a text of social disclosure with a photo that is irrelevant to the disclosure. Abdu (male, 26, PhD) comments on a stimulus post presenting a social disclosure with a photo of a resort: *"I feel uncomfortable reading this with a photo not related. It seems that he just wanted to tell us this story and choose any photo to go with it."* Commenting on the same post Thomas (male, 23, PhD) agrees:

"If the text is about a family, I'd rather see a really beautiful photo of the family instead of showing blocks of houses where there's no human in the photo. There's no sense of personal presence here while this is such a personal description, I would rather see them all eating dinner together. Even if the photo is a little bit blurry and fuzzy but you can see they're happy. I think that'll be far more powerful."

This emphasises the mutual exclusivity boundary. When photos are presenting promotional content and not reflective of the social disclosure in the caption, followers react negatively. Thus, it is advised that influencers keep social disclosure and promotional content separate as much as possible.

4.3.3 Appropriateness of the Content of Self-disclosure

The content of a self-disclosure is critical to determining its appropriateness. Participants emphasised that not all topics are suitable to be shared publicly on social media: *"I don't see that somethings are proper to be shared in public. It's just my perspective."* (Nadia, female, 36, Masters) Appropriateness of content was specifically

an issue regarding social self-disclosure, whereas none of the participants addressed the appropriateness of exchange-specific disclosures. Hence, it is safe to assume that all travel disclosure is appropriate in terms of content.

Several personal topics have been determined as being inappropriate for public disclosure by influencers. In line with Muscanell et al., (2016), political opinions were considered unsuitable for public disclosure by travel influencers. Andrew (male, 27, masters) said: *"As a travel blogger, you don't really have to tell me whether or not you're horrified by the election of Donald Trump Because I'm not coming to you for political analysis."* Suzan (female, 27, PhD) agrees: *"When they share their political ideas especially if I don't believe in those political ideas, I'd rather not know about them."* She explains that influencers sharing political opinions risk conflict with their followers' political ideas. In like manner, Sally (female, 19, undergrad) advises influencers against political disclosure: *"It's not really a good idea to start talking about your political opinions on Instagram because you'll lose a lot of followers."* Talking about political opinions as a travel influencer is believed to result in losing followers. This can be linked to followers' main purpose for following a travel influencer, i.e. travel information content. Hence, political opinions seem distant from this purpose.

Furthermore, in line with Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte (2017), topics that include self-harm, such as suicidal thoughts, are considered an inappropriate content for public disclosure by influencers.

"I'd say talking about suicidal thoughts I would find very challenging. I don't think it's really an appropriate setting to deal with that. You may be bringing up questions

that are momentarily especially potent or challenging for people in your audience. So, I think it's just part of bourgeois politeness, you shouldn't talk about this in front of strangers. But then also there's a certain kind of duty of care to your audience." (Sylvia, female, 27, masters)

Participants considered it selfish of an influencer to share such disclosures, as it can be triggering to some followers. In addition, it was deemed an inappropriate topic to be discussed with a stranger, let alone with thousands of strangers on a public outlet.

Sexual topics were also considered inappropriate to be addressed publicly on social media: *"Talking in detail about your bodily functions is inappropriate."* (Amelia, female, 21, undergraduate) This is supported by Muscanell et al.,'s (2016: see discussion in Chapter 2) findings, though sexual disclosure was not clearly defined in the data, as the definition might be different from one person to another.

Interestingly, inappropriate content was found to include disclosures about others. When Katie (female, 29, PhD) was asked what is considered inappropriate disclosure to her, she said:

"I think talking in depth about their partner or like bitching about people… I mean if I was a travel couple Instgramer I would hate it if my partner talked about our problems in public". She explains: *"I think it's fine to talk about yourself, but it's crossing a line when you start talking about other people because they didn't really ask or consent to this presumably."*

Ella (female, 27, PhD) strongly agrees and considers such a disclosure crossing a red line:

"if she wants to disclose information about herself, she needs to make sure that it's not disclosing information about other people in her family…. I think that sharing personal information especially not about yourself is inappropriate. This is like a red line that she's crossing if she shares information about her husband, her kids. They did not choose to be on social media."

The majority of participants agreed that the main reason for considering disclosure about others inappropriate is the non-consensual invasion of others' freedom of choice and privacy. When shown a post that has high disclosure regarding the influencer's family Nora (Female, 19, Undergrad) commented: *"I feel like family matters shouldn't be on social media because it's no one's business. We're just people on screen that don't know you. So, I don't think you should share anything about your family."* Also, when Amelia (female, 21, undergrad) viewed a stimulus that included an influencer's disclosure about their family, she stressed the reason for considering it inappropriate is the likelihood that the family didn't approve such a disclosure: *"I guess their family didn't really consent to this."* Most participants emphasised that family's private issues especially should not be disclosed, as it is considered sacred.

In summary, the social self-disclosure topics that participants considered inappropriate for public disclosure are political, sexual, self-harm, and disclosures about others. Nevertheless, there were also disclosures considered inappropriate despite not falling within these categories of inappropriate contents. Instead, they were considered

inappropriate because they violate the boundaries of the appropriate delivery of disclosures.

4.3.4 Appropriateness of Delivery

From the answers provided by participants in this qualitative study, the scope of appropriateness has been refined and expanded to not only cover content, but also other boundaries including the way the disclosure is delivered. Appropriateness of delivery was determined through the overtness of the disclosure. The more subtle the disclosure is, the more appropriate it is perceived by participants.

4.3.4.1 Overtness

Appropriateness of delivery was determined through the level of overtness of the disclosure (i.e., the bluntness, intensity, and explicitness of the disclosure). The more overt the disclosure, the more inappropriate it is perceived and vice versa. This theme was particularly clear regarding social disclosure and promotional content. In terms of social self-disclosure, the need for low overtness only emerges in disclosures of vulnerabilities—in this context referring to hardships and challenges in personal life (Bunker, 1997). The continuum of overtness in delivering vulnerable disclosure ranges from displaying intense emotions to subtle cues. The more subtle the disclosure, the more appropriate it is perceived by participants. Likewise, promotional content was better regarded when delivered in a subtle way.

4.3.4.1.1 Subtlety in Disclosure of Personal Vulnerabilities

Ella (female, 27, PhD) explains how the two ends of the spectrum from overt to subtle are perceived differently:

"These two posts although they include high vulnerability, but it does not feel that they came out of control. It feels like they had the time to think about what they will say, and they had a purpose for saying it. So, it was coming from a very strong perspective. However, in the case of the influencer who was crying in response to hate messages, it felt like she was out of control she wasn't thinking about what she's saying and how it will affect others, while these seems well planned for a specific purpose. So I think it's how it's obvious that she's trying to reach out to people in her situation not just talking about herself."

The participant stresses that the delivery of the disclosure affects how an influencer is perceived. On the one hand, high overtness through intense expressions such as crying gives the impression that the influencer is not in control of their emotions and did not take time to think about their disclosure. Furthermore, this way of delivering a disclosure was considered selfish because it indicates a lack of attention to how it might impact others. On the other hand, low overtness presented in a subtle disclosure of vulnerabilities gives the impression that the influencer took time to think about their disclosure. Nadia (female, 36, masters) confirms

"I feel that some of them get too emotional and they lose the essential or positive points in the whole situation, while some of them want to reach out and tell you, hey, this is happening. Believe me tomorrow is going get better. You know, they have a positive vibe."

Low overtness in the disclosure of personal vulnerabilities also suggests a higher purpose for sharing, such as helping others in the same situation.

Disclosure of vulnerabilities can be considered either a sign of strength or weakness depending on the overtness of the disclosure. Even negative disclosures that may be disturbing to hear can be received well and considered a sign of strength when presented in a subtle way. However, the same disclosure can be perceived as a sign of weakness if it appears emotionally out of control. Katie (Female, 29, PhD) further elaborates on this point:

"*Disclosing a negative experience can be either a weakness or a strength depending on the way you disclose it. If you want to attack the others and show yourself as the victim, I think it shows you as a weak person. But if you talk about the negative experience that you went through to get a lesson and show others how you managed to keep going and overcome these challenges, I think it presents strength in this way."*

Highly overt disclosure of vulnerabilities indicates selfishness as the influencer uses their disclosure to feel better either by lashing out, seeking attention, or gaining empathy from followers.

When Thomas (male, 23, masters) was asked to give his opinion about influencers' disclosure of vulnerability, he said:

"I think definitely it's verging on the stronger side to show your vulnerability but not to play on it too much. I think the audience has got to know the vulnerability is

there, but it's got to be quite subtle. Maybe it's a British thing but I hate when people are too open about things. I want them to sort of hide it. I like that to be done in a roundabout way, in a subtle way."

Participants considered subtlety of delivery essential to the appropriateness of a social self-disclosure. Such restraint is considered a sign of strength, whereas overt disclosure of vulnerabilities was rejected. Thomas gives an example:

"This influencer I follow he is strong, he is vulnerable, he is all the contrast. I like contrast and I don't like that contrast to be shouted, I like it to be whispered. He's a writer, too and in his books, he weaves his vulnerabilities in but the whole book isn't about him dealing with depression. It is like this is me gardening and I have found that nothing builds my mood more than putting my hands into the soil. And so, you're exposed to his vulnerability and you're exposed to his solution to that vulnerability, but it is disguised by the broader book of whatever he's writing on. So, you know about it as he brings it in but it's not the centrepiece."

In this quote subtlety is explained by not centring the disclosure on the vulnerability, but rather the disclosure should be presented in a roundabout way or disguised by a solution to the situation. The more subtle the disclosure of vulnerability, the more acceptable; while the more overt, the worse it is perceived.

Furthermore, the subtlety of the disclosure makes it more believable. Jackie (female, 23, undergrad) confirms:

"Cindy [a travel influencer she follows] *talks about deep things and although it's deep it's not like too much. She's not like dramatic about it. It's just like kind of talking how you would to a friend about something serious that happened in your life."*

She equates subtle disclosure of vulnerabilities by an influencer to how a person would disclose something serious to a friend. She describes that this makes it more believable than the disclosures that a person would just want to tell them "calm down".

High overtness in disclosing vulnerabilities through intense expressions such as crying was negatively perceived. The majority of participants said it is undesirable, disturbing, and uncomfortable to be exposed to a disclosure that seems out of control. Furthermore, participants associated this with weakness. As Dina (female, 28, masters) says:

"An influencer I follow was crying because of some hate messages in her comments. I felt she was very vulnerable and weak. She wasn't able to control her emotions and not show her weakness to the people who would like to see it. It felt like she was out of control. To me it was very disturbing."

Sylvia (female, 27, masters) also describes her discomfort with similar overtness from an influencer:

"Sometimes she talks and cries into the camera and I find that very difficult to watch. I think it's just my disposition. It makes me feel like if you're crying why you're holding your phone. It makes me a little bit uncomfortable to be seeing that level of intimacy into their emotional life."

The degree of overtness can also be judged by the period spent talking about the disclosure. Dwelling on vulnerabilities may cause followers to lose interest in an influencer. Eva (Female, 23, Undergrad) confirms,

"If someone lost a family member, I wouldn't expect them to dwell on that for months… If they dwell on that experience for too long, people are just going to lose interest. I think it's essential for them to share a post and move on."

She also reacts negatively to influencers "dwelling on" negative experiences—that is, continuing to post on a negative topic over a long time:

"I don't like it when people dwell on their sad experiences for too long because it's really upsetting especially if it's someone I have followed for years, in my opinion and this is probably very selfish to say, but I lose interest just because it's so much negativity and I don't want that."

To her, Instagram is a space for entertainment and forgetting about daily stressors and being exposed to highly overt disclosures of negative experiences turns an otherwise positive space into a place of contagious negativity, which in turn impacts her negatively.

In summary, the degree of overtness in disclosing vulnerabilities impacted the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure. Highly overt disclosures represented by intense displays of emotion was associated with respondents' negative reactions, such as feelings of discomfort and negative perceptions about the influencer such as weakness, negative energy, selfishness. On the other hand, subtle disclosure of vulnerabilities was positively perceived and deemed appropriate.

4.3.4.1.2 Overtness in Promotions

Overtness in promotions ranges between intense selling attempts to subtle recommendations. Sally (female, 19, undergrad) says: *"I'd buy into what they're saying if the person comes across like they're not just trying to sell all the time, but that she's making a generally good recommendation."* Although influencers are advised to disclose affiliations, they need to deliver the promotion subtly, as a recommendation rather than a sales pitch. Thomas (male, 23, masters) explains an influencer's subtlety in promotions is positively associated with perceived genuineness:

"When I think about influences, I need them to be relatable in the sense of being genuine people that we're not doing a message about a better product. So, for example not so much selling the products but being genuine like 'we needed to get new sails for the boats it was here.' So, if I was interested in boats, I would note that would be good."

On the other hand, participants characterised high overtness in promotions as intense selling, and equated it to a salesman knocking on their doors. Amelia (female, 21, undergrad) describes a stimulus post by saying: *"This just seems like a salesman come into my door. it's just a bit intense."* This further confirms the negative perceptions associated with highly overt promotions.

Participants confirmed that the way a promotional post is delivered impacts their behavioural intentions. If a promotional post is presented in subtle way, it can avoid the usual negativity towards promotions. Ella (female, 27, PhD) commented on a stimulus post saying: *"The way he mentions the spa is very subtle. It's a good way to*

mention the place they stayed at. I might look into this resort actually and check it out."

In like manner, Suzan (female, 28, PhD) comments on a stimulus post:

"*I think I would consider viewing this travel agency that he mentioned because he isn't talking a lot about it. I loved how he mentioned like I was so happy with the service. If you guys are going, check them out. It's like throwing the ball in your field."*

Subtlety in delivering promotional posts was thus confirmed to positively influence purchase intention and attitude towards the promoted service.

In summary, high overtness in promotions is displayed in an intense selling attempt, while low overtness is displayed in a subtle recommendation of the promoted service/product. Highly overt promotions are negatively reacted to and negatively associated with followers' behavioural intentions. On the contrary, subtle promotions are better perceived and can positively impact behavioural intentions.

4.3.5 Authenticity

Authenticity may be understood as the combination of *genuineness* (sincere representation of self) and '*being real'* (presenting a complete or unfiltered view of self, as opposed to showing only the good parts of one's life). The authenticity of disclosures was also found to be an important factor in followers' acceptance of both personal and travel self-disclosure. Thus, it is one of the boundaries of appropriate disclosure. When participants were asked what characteristics are desirable in an influencer, they indicated that being authentic is important. Thomas (male, 23, masters) says: *"I hate to use the buzzwords but what I am looking for in an influencer is real authenticity, like a real person who's got a real life. I love that. I love real life with real issues."* Across the literature authenticity is consistently defined as

encapsulating what is genuine, real, and/or true (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014; Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Spiggle, Nguyen, & Caravella, 2012). In this research, the same definition has been found transferable to the context of social media influencers' self-disclosure.

It is important to note here that when discussing the themes genuineness, authenticity, and keeping it real, the participants referred to them interchangeably as attributes of both the influencer and their disclosure. The authenticity of an influencer and of the disclosure cannot be separated.

4.3.5.1 Genuineness

Participants revealed that genuineness of an influencer was a major reason for liking them. When Hallie (female, 31, PhD) was asked what she likes about the travel influencers she follows, she answered: *"They just seem very genuine people, like the kind of people I'd like to be friends with. It's kind of like following friends."* The genuineness of an influencer created what is known in the literature a parasocial relationship (Kim & Song, 2016). This theme of genuineness was persistent in the data. Genuineness was demanded in both travel and social self-disclosure.

4.3.5.1.1 Genuineness in Social self-disclosure

Authentic disclosure has been judged by its genuineness. When Sally (female, 19, undergrad) was asked what kind of social disclosure she would like a travel influencer to share, she said: *"Talking about their emotions and being genuine about it."*

Genuineness in social disclosure can turn followers' negative reactions towards social self-disclosure to positive; for instance, Emma (female, 25, masters) mentions a social disclosure that has two features of undesirable disclosure—too much text and high depth—but because it is perceived to be genuine, it earns her respect:

"There is a woman I follow who has a lot of mental health issues and she does talk about them a lot and she's very genuine about it like she will just kind of tell people how it is and having like deep revelations and thoughts and I respect that. And I don't think that she's not genuine."

Being genuine in social disclosure has been associated with followers' feelings of respect and appreciation.

Social self-disclosure was a major determinant of an influencer's genuineness. Participants stated that influencers that give live documentation of their day are more likely to be perceived as genuine. For example, Abdu (male, 26, PhD) relates genuineness to documentation of daily life: *"I feel close to the couple because they more or less just documenting their life, so they just film everything. It doesn't feel corporate at all it feels genuine."* Perceiving an influencer as genuine elicited positive reaction from followers such as feelings of closeness towards the influencer. In addition, it is interesting that the participant used the word 'corporate' as an antonym to genuineness. If genuineness means being true to one's self (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), then for influencers the opposite of this is not being true to one's self for a commercial purpose, whether for gaining sponsorships or followers.

Furthermore, participants explain that they detect genuineness in social disclosure through the subtlety of the disclosure, which emphasises the interconnective nature of themes in this data. Jackie (female, 22, undergrad) confirms this relation between genuineness and subtlety*: "It's genuine in the way it was written it's a couple of lines and it's just quite chill and normal not trying to make some magical point out of it."* This is contrasted to emotionally out of control actions such as crying. Participants did not think that filming oneself while crying is representative of a genuine disclosure*: "If she's crying in front of the camera, it seems a little bit disingenuous."* (Dina, Female, 28, Masters) Therefore, the data points to a positive interaction between genuineness and subtlety; the more subtle a disclosure, the more it is perceived as genuine.

Another way followers determined the genuineness of a social disclosure through was whether it included a promotion. Mixing social disclosure with promotion in the same post negatively impacts perceived genuineness of the influencer. Sylvia (Female, 27, Masters) comments on this: *"I kind of think they're being paid, or they use this to make money. So, I know that it's not a lot genuine. I just look at photos and stay quite aware of not just believing anything they say."* While when the post does not seem like a promotion, it is perceived to be genuine. *"I feel like it's genuine maybe because there isn't much details about the agency or the resort."* Separating promotions from social disclosure was perceived as genuine, as opposed to posts that integrate both in the same post.

In summary, genuineness in social disclosure was a crucial factor in identifying it as authentic. It contributed to feelings of liking, closeness, parasocial relationship,

appreciation, and respect towards the influencer. Genuineness seemed to be associated with an influencers' openness, transparency, and willingness to reveal without too much crafting or editing of the post. Genuineness in social disclosure was detected in a number of ways such as an influencer documenting their life in a spontaneously, subtlety in disclosure, and mutual exclusivity between social disclosure and promotional content, which further illustrate the connection between different themes.

4.3.5.1.2 Genuineness in Travel Disclosure

Another way genuineness was detected is through travel disclosure. Influencers that feature a tourist attraction in their travels were judged less genuine than influencers that portray unique travel experiences. John (male, 50, PhD) explains how genuineness appears in travel disclosures:

"I get the feeling that some people they go to a city they see what are the cliché viewpoints and then go and take photos in exactly that position. In a sense it's like the American tourist in London you know in a red phone box with one leg up in the air. There's something kind of disingenuous that suggests that maybe you've not really engaged with the place."

Participants stated that when influencers feature tourist attractions, they seem less genuine, because it gives the impression that the influencer is not fully engaged with the place and instead is looking for content that will be most interacted with to gain more followers.

Furthermore, genuineness in travel disclosure means having one's own taste and preferences show in their travel experience. John again:

"I think it's disingenuous if you arrive in a city you take out your map you open up Instagram you look at the 5, 6, 10 places that are most photographed and then you go there. It feels like you've not really discovered that city. You're having that experience curated by other people. You're simply looking to see what kind of content will be interacted with and there's nothing of your preference or your taste or your choices that are really reflected in that. You could be somebody who knows nothing about the space and appreciate nothing about the place they are in."

According to participants, if the influencer goes to the most photographed touristy places, it takes away from the authenticity of the travel experience and the influencer. It gives an indication that the person does not appreciate the place and have not interacted authentically with the experience. This relates back to subtheme 1.1 (providing a non-tourist perspective), which was considered a desirable type of content demanded from a travel influencer.

For a travel experience to be genuine and authentic, it has to reflect the influencer's own preferences, choices, and taste; otherwise, it doesn't feel like they explored a unique side of the city, but instead as if they just recapitulated what thousands of tourists are doing, no different from the average tourist. Therefore, genuineness in travel disclosure is shown through an influencer presenting a unique experience, making them seem like a knowledgeable person who appreciates the places they are visiting.

4.3.5.2 Being Real

An influencer's ability of being real was another cue determining influencer's authenticity. To discover the meaning of this theme, participants were asked how they judge if an influencer is being their real self. Thomas (male 23, masters) answered: *"Real life is to show the bad bits, but real life is also not just bad bits. It's not always accomplishing goals and stuff that is just dumpty, dumpty, dump this in my life. There's ups, there's downs, there's bits in the middle."* The answers revealed that this 'being theme basically refers to a balancing act. Being real depends on an influencer's ability to portray both sides the good and the bad, the ups and the downs, whether that is in regards of personal or travel self-disclosure.

4.3.5.2.1 Being Real in Social disclosure

In the context of social self-disclosure, Nora (female, 19, undergrad) identified an influencer as real due to their ability to portray both sides of life and talk about their personal struggles: *"She talked about her struggles. A lot of people come off social media as if they were born like this and didn't go through struggles to get to where they are today."* Jackie (female, 22, undergrad) gives an example of an influencer she follows being real by sharing a difficult experience with followers:

"She struggled during pregnancy and she actually end up having IVF. I think people would appreciate knowing that because if their life look so ideal, they probably think 'Oh look at her she just got married and she got pregnant' but she explained how she actually tried for ages with her husband to get a child and then end up having Fertilization treatment to help her get pregnant."

Being real not only leads followers to accept and appreciate disclosures, but also it serves as a way of reaching out to others going through the same situation. Again, this shows how these concepts contribute to authenticity.

Disclosing personal negative experiences, if delivered correctly, was found to have a positive impact on followers' perceptions towards the influencer. John (male, 50, PhD) explains how realistic disclosure impacts his perceptions towards influencers:

"It makes me more interested in them. You know that they're more like real people rather than just social media handles. They start to flesh out as people and you get a sense of them and how they perceive themselves, the challenges that they are dealing with, the aspirations that they have, the things that motivate them, and how comfortable they are in their own skin."

In addition, Amelia (female, 21, undergrad) describes the effect on her by saying*: "I think like that reminds me that we're all human. Like they're not on this insane pedestal. It reminds me that they're real people."* Likewise, Hallie (female, 31, PhD) also thinks that influencers' disclosure of their struggles makes them seem human and hence have a deeper connection with them:

"It definitely gives you a human side of somebody who you can see only on the screen. You get to understand the human side of it. They are not just actors on a social media screen. It's a human who is having problems just like you. So, you feel more connected to them."

Disclosures of hardships by influencers demonstrates them being real and humanizes them in the eyes of their followers.

Participants repeatedly asserted their appreciation to influencers' disclosure of negative life experiences—even those who, when initially questioned, said they did not want to know about influencers' personal lives. On deeper questioning, participants acknowledged that such disclosures represent a more vulnerable side of an influencer as opposed to the perfect side that influencers usually portray. For instance, Suzan (female, 28, PhD: quoted above in subtheme 3.1 as saying "*I'm following them for the sake of traveling not for the sake of knowing their personal lives.*") after further reflection describes her reaction to an influencer's disclosure of not being able to balance life between her career as an influencer and motherhood. She says:

"I think being an influencer and sharing how vulnerable she felt just made me happy because those people have a huge effect on our lives and a lot of studies say that depression rates are starting to get higher among social media users because all the photos that we see are so perfect. So, when blogger shares a negative experience or post a photo of their child having a tantrum or that they are not happy in their life, it just makes me feel content in my life and what I have instead of just watching what other social media influencers post then question how many times I am missing out."

This has led her to express her appreciation to the influencer for her disclosure:

"Immediately after this post I left a comment and I told her thank you for sharing your experience. I really needed that because I just gave birth and I'm feeling overwhelmed. With that post she touched a part in my heart. So, now every time I'm seeing her joyful posts, I know that she's also a human just like me. So, it kind of made her real, or a person, a human."

It is clear from the data that being real in disclosures can portray influencers humanely. Emma (female, 25, masters) confirms feelings of closeness towards realistic

influencers: *"It makes me feel like we are closer than in reality we are because they do a good job of portraying themselves as real people not as flawless."* Participants indicated that 'being real' draws them closer to an influencer, by contrast to most influencers who pretend to be perfect or, as she describes, it 'flawless'.

In summary, being real in social disclosure is characterised by disclosing both the good and the bad sides of an influencer's personal life. In particular, an influencer's disclosure of personal struggles has been found to positively associate with followers' feelings of connectedness, closeness, appreciation towards the influencer. Furthermore, such disclosure has been found to humanize influencers and present them as real people rather than just people on screens.

4.3.5.2.1.1 Perfection Vs. Being Real

Being real in disclosure was described by participants as if it was an antonym for perfection. Participants stated that travel influencers can demonstrate being through openly disclosing imperfections in their lives. Thomas (male, 23, masters) confirms this desire for being real and rejection of perfection: *"I'm much more interested in imperfection and I like things to feel very human and real."* In like manner, Abdu (male, 26, PhD) praises some influencers because they don't pursue perfection: *"I think there are some influencers that do a good job of not putting on a perfect face."*

On the other hand, participants expressed negative perceptions regarding influencers who portray a 'perfect' life. Stephen (male, 31, PhD) considers perfection problematic

as it represents an unreal version of an influencer's life, as if they are hiding another side of their life:

"There is a travel blogger I follow that I have no sense about them as a person because they say very little about themselves and everything that you see is just perfectly curated and you know that that's not anybody's life. That curation it's problematic it's not their real life."

In addition, Layla (female, 28, masters) finds it difficult to relate to influencers portraying perfection: *"If it's all bubbly, it's unrelatable. It probably isn't something I would follow or something I'd be interested in, but I know it's not real."* Perfection undermines realness and causes followers to lose interest and eventually unfollow the influencer.

Participants also claimed that being exposed to influencers' 'perfection' negatively impacts their mental health. Katie (female, 29, PhD) says:

"We're being exposed to so many edited photos, so many "perfectionists"; and I'm putting that in quotations because they might not really be perfect but they're showing that they are perfect in that moment. That used to affect me in a negative way. Imagine following a travel influencer and you're stuck in your PhD life and you're like 'when am I going to have the time to travel?' You kind of envy them. While I'm very busy with my life as a mother of two looking for five minutes to have a shower and then I'm following an influencer with her hair and makeup done in an amazing place and you can't help but compare your life to theirs."

Such seemingly perfect presentation of influencers lives leads followers to envy them, comparing their lives to influencers' lives and feeling miserable in their own lives.

In summary, perfection was found to negatively relate to followers' perception of an influencer's realness, contribute to followers' loss of interest, and negatively impact followers' mental health.

4.3.5.2.2 Being Real in Travel Disclosure

This being real theme also applies to travel disclosures. Followers judge influencers on being real by whether they disclose negative travel experiences or not. John (male, 50, PhD) clarifies this:

"When you're traveling and you're exhausted accidents do happen; you lose and forget things, things go in the wrong directions, which very few travel bloggers seems to have missed a flight, got on a bus in the wrong direction, left a carrier a bag with their lunch on the train. I mean that just doesn't seem to happen to many people whereas it's certainly happened to me from time to time."

Layla (female, 28, masters) similarly affirms that even the slightest bit of realness in travel disclosure makes a difference; *"Even if you share like we went to this place and the climate was really humid and I had a few mosquito bites and I used this cream. I know it's not big but it's real! But it's something that happens!".* Being real in travel disclosure seemed to be important for participants because they wanted to know that such negative travel experiences happens to everyone—even travel influencers.

Being real in travel disclosure has been found to increase followers' feelings of closeness towards the influencer. Kristina (female, 26, PhD) says: *"The moms who are travel influencers, I'm not a mom, but I feel closer to them because they are*

showing more realistic depictions of travel. So, I feel closer to those influencers who show that you can do it but also are honest, it's challenging." In this example, being real is displayed through honesty in portraying travel with children as a challenging experience, but doable. This 'being real' in disclosure had the advantage of drawing the participant closer to the influencer, although the participant doesn't necessarily relate to this disclosure as she doesn't have children.

In summary, being real in travel self-disclosure meant sharing negative experiences that influencers encounter during their travels. Such disclosures were positively linked with feelings of connection and closeness.

4.3.5.2.3 Being real in Promotional Content

Being real is also required in promotional content, which is presented through conveying the good and the bad side of travel products or services. Thomas (male, 23, masters) explains liking an influencer couple because they are realistic in presenting promotional content:

"What is really good about them is that they tell you if the product is bad. So, if they get something and its rubbish, they'll say do not buy this it is absolute rubbish. If someone did that every now and then and if they were open and honest about the bad side. For example, like saying if you're coming to this resort don't bring a large family because there's just nowhere to eat for large families, then I would think that these people are more real. They're not selling scripts."

He equates being real in promotional content to honest criticism of products and services, which he explains is important: *“They have to be vulnerable about the places or the products they're dealing with and if they're not then I instantly don't have the same connection with them. So, I would like happily to see influences showing you different parts of their lives on their travels such as bad rooms their staying in, bad moments, good moments, human moments.”* John (male, 50, PhD) agrees and gives another example of how being real is demonstrated in promotional content:

“I was in Florida, I stayed at a really economical hotel, but they had this beautiful swimming pool and I was jet lagged so I was waking up early. I was able to have breakfast every morning by the pool at sunrise. That's quite spectacular, but on the other hand the air conditioning unit broke and flooded the floor of my room. So, for two days I had a huge fan and an extractor in my room. And for me it was important to share both of those things.”

It is important for followers that an influencer portray both sides of promoted products and services, the good and the bad, for it to feel real.

Showing both sides in promotional content and the travel experience gives an indication that the influencer is authentic, real, and human, which builds the connection between them and their followers. A persistent association between being real and the humanization of the influencer was found in the data; when an influencer is being real in their social disclosure, travel disclosure, and promotional content, this humanizes them. This in turn can lead to drawing them closer to their followers and building a connection between them and their followers.

Authenticity was a critical factor determining followers' reactions to influencers' disclosures. Influencers' authenticity was discerned through the being genuine and real on their disclosures. Being genuine and real were both desired by followers in both personal and travel self-disclosure. These attributes were associated with positive perceptions and reactions towards the influencer.

In summary, the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure included having the right balance between social self-disclosure and travel content, separating social self-disclosure and promotions, appropriateness of content and delivery of the disclosure, and the authenticity. These boundaries were found to be able to generate positive reactions from followers.

5. Trust in Travel Influencers- an Integrative Theme

Trust was found to be an integrative theme in this dataset, as it permeates most of the themes in the template and infuses much of the discussion whatever the foreground issue was (Service et al., 2014). To respondents, trust meant believing an influencer, buying into their claims, and acting on their recommendations. Several variables have been found to impact followers' trust. Travel content such as photos and promotional content significantly impacted trust towards influencers and their recommendations. In addition, feelings of similarity and relatability arising from influencers' social disclosures (provided they were within the boundaries of appropriateness) played a critical role in establishing trust in an influencer. Transparency, disclosure of affiliation, and authenticity were also indicators of an influencer's trustworthiness. Behavioural

intentions have been reported to positively associate with trust. As trust increases, followers' behavioural intentions increase, too.

5.1 Trust and Photos

Travel content in the form of photos can positively impact followers' trust and behavioural intentions. Layla (female, 28, masters) says:

"*If I see one Instagram post going to Cambodia for example I wouldn't be interested but if I see a lot of Instagram posts sharing different experiences in Cappadocia then I'll trust that person automatically much more than the person who shared one or two posts."*

Put simply, the more photos about a destination, the higher the trust. We can't determine from the data what is considered 'a lot of photos', but clearly a single photo from a travel influencer is not enough to build trust in what they say about the destination, nor is it enough to incite a follower to plan a trip. Commenting on a fictious post Emma (female, 25, masters) confirmed that a single photo is insufficient to inspire her for a destination unless she was planning to go there already: *"Just seeing a single photo like this would never motivate me to take a trip to Austria, but if I was already planning one, seeing a photo might point me to that particular travel agency."* Emma shows that such travel posts are most effective in the case where a person is already thinking of doing the activity or visiting the destination featured; in which case, even if the post was a single photo, it might cause the consumer to act on it. Nevertheless, generally people are more likely to act on an advertisement if they see many photos confirming that it is worth visiting.

While the quantity of photos shared from a location is important to build followers' trust, the content of the photo even more important. Photos that include interesting activities were associated with increased trust towards influencers' recommendations, as they motivate the follower to try the same experience. When asked what encourages her to act on a recommendation, Layla (female, 28, masters) answered:

"*The more details and I think also perhaps the activities they do. So, if it's just them posing on a rooftop or in the pool then not really, but if it was them doing something cool something interesting, I think that's definitely something I would trust because I want to experience that as well."*

Photos of activities was found to build followers' desire to try the same experience and hence increase their trust.

Some participants have even declared that a good photo has been the reason behind their previous travel related purchases. Eva gives an example:

"Last summer I was in Canada traveling around the West Coast and I'd see travel influencers saying go and eat in certain places. I guess especially if you're a tourist in a country it's very easy to go to the tourist traps so picking up food tips is great. I remember that we saw these adverts for these soft tacos it's called Taco Vino in Vancouver and they looked amazing and we were like we're going to go there."

In addition, Nadia (female, 36, masters) says that a travel influencer she follows featuring beautiful photos of countries motivated her to consider the destination. She says: *"He gives you a beautiful artistic photo of that country that you don't even think about going to or traveling to, which keeps you thinking I should go and check it out*

some day." This illustrates the power of photos in creating positive attitude towards a destination.

However, it is worth mentioning that participants listed other factors that played a role in acting on an influencers' recommendation other than the attractiveness of a photo—such as affordability, feasibility, and accessibility. Moreover, influencers who are locals were more effective to inspire people to follow their recommendations (Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018). An example that combines all these factors in one situation is given by Amelia (female, 21, undergrad): *"He was posting lots of photos of Bali and saying it was really nice and I was on a year abroad in Singapore, so I was like that's really close and the flights are cheap why not."* From this, we see that trust can arise from photographs' ability to corroborate the claims an influencer is making.

5.2 Trust and Promotional Content

Trust in a social media influencer might be hard to achieve because of the negative perceptions associated with influencers' marketing and promotional content discussed earlier. Some participants implicitly indicated that they do not trust advertisements from travel influencers. This is because they believe that most of influencers' travels are paid advertisements.

"I think I'm a bit sceptical with all the travel influencers that I follow because I know that for them it is a job. If I would like to take some of that advice, I'd like to take it with a pinch of salt. I'm assuming they'd been paid at least what I call a trip for free." (Jackie, female, 22, undergrad)

This quote clearly illustrates the amount of scepticism followers have towards influencers' travel advice.

On the other hand, other participants have explicitly said that they would not trust paid posts from travel influencers. *"When it comes to advertisements, I just skip. I don't trust anything that they show."* (Katie, Female, 29, PhD) The data suggests that followers' assumptions that a post is part of a promotion directly impact trust negatively. When Sylvia (female, 27, masters) was asked if she trusts travel advice from travel influencers she said: *"I think with the ones that are like half hashtag ad on them or you know that their being paid maybe not so much just because obviously their being paid to do it. It might not be as good as they're saying."* Sally (female, 19, undergrad) also expresses scepticism and negative product attitude due to promotional content: *"My first reaction to that is to immediately distrust them because they mentioned the place these stayed at. It just makes me feel like they're advertising it."* This following shows the negative relationship between promotional content and trust, meaning that when sponsorship is detected trust is affected negatively. Abdu (male, 26, PhD) also says: *"I don't trust them I kind of think they're being paid or like they use this to make money."* Hence, the integrative theme of trust actively role relates to the theme of promotional content.

Other themes have interacted with this negative relationship between promotional content and trust. When Suzan (female, 28, PhD) was asked if she trusts travel influencers, she answered:

"Not everyone. So, one of them she's more now into advertising. I'm seeing more sponsored videos or sponsored photos and she travels with companies. So, it makes me question her post whether it was real or not because she's being paid for it…Some other influencers I really like to follow like Mariam, she never posted an ad. So, I think it makes her real."

An interaction was found between being real and the negative relationship between trust and promotional content. The less promotional content an influencer posts, the more they seem real, and this increases followers' trust. Genuineness was also observed to interact with this relationship; promotional posts decrease perceived genuineness, and hence they are less believable. *"I kind of think they're being paid, or they use this to make money. So, I know that it's not a lot genuine. I just look at photos and stay quite aware of not just believing anything they say."* (Andrew, male, 27, masters) These connections between themes further confirms the interconnective nature of the template, as it presents a network of very connected themes.

5.2.1 Research as a Self-protection Mechanism

When a promotion is detected or assumed, trust decreases and other mechanisms to protect oneself are developed, such as properly researching the advertised service or product before adopting the recommendation. When participants were asked if they trust travel recommendations from influencers they follow, they emphasized the need to do their own research. Ella (female, 27, PhD) said about a travel influencer she follows:

"I wouldn't take her advice without proper research because I always have this feeling that they are paid to say what they are saying, and this makes me question

their honesty. I wouldn't just head there without proper research, but I appreciate that they have some content that I can actually go and research on it."

Participants properly research a travel recommendation before adopting it due to scepticism that it might be a paid sponsorship.

This distrust of promotional content underpins the research behaviour. Hallie (female, 31, PhD) says: *"I don't think one can completely trust their advice because a lot of the time they can be sponsored from the tourism companies. If I am going to travel, I would get some tips and tricks from these influencers and then do my own research."* Followers consider research a protection mechanism against falling for an endorsement of a product/service that is part of a commercial agreement, rather than a sincere recommendation.

5.2.2. Transparency in Disclosure of Affiliation and Trust

Because of negativity towards promotional content, undeclared sponsorship negatively correlated with trust, whereas transparency in disclosing affiliation was a major reason for trusting an influencer. Sylvia (female, 27, masters) confirms that transparency in disclosing affiliation makes her trust an influencer:

"I think if they're very forthcoming with saying when it's an ad to me that's always a sign that it's more trustworthy. If the person is very open and honest about it like saying this is my link and I receive this amount of compensation if you purchase this, then I'm like okay at least they're telling me when they're selling something and when they're like just giving their opinion. So that's the first thing I think is transparency."

The above quote shows the importance of disclosing affiliation, as this will not only increase their trust and make them receive the post better, but also cause the influencer to be perceived as honest, open, credible, and transparent. Nora (female, 19, undergrad) also states that she feels closer to an influencer couple due to their transparency in disclosing affiliation: *"They're transparent in the sense that they tell me that the way they make money is by selling photo filters. They sell filter packages and that's how they travel around the world."* Hence, transparency is an important indicator of an influencer's trustworthiness.

5.3 Trust and Social self-disclosure

A major reason to trust an influencer was what followers know about them through self-disclosure. This further confirms that a balance between social disclosure and travel content is needed not only to keep followers engaged but also to gain their trust. When Katie (female, 29, PhD) was asked if influencers' social self-disclosure has an effect on her, she answered: *"It makes you believe them, it makes you connected to them because you see a major part of their lives."* Nora (female, 19, undergrad) also explicitly answered that it makes her trust them more:

"Their disclosures definitely makes me feel closer to them like friends because I think the more you know about somebody, the more you can trust them. Yeah, I would say it makes me trust them more, which is weird actually because you would think if they were more professional then I would trust them more. But I think it's the opposite effect with Instagram because if you're following an influencer you kind of get invested in them and want to know what's going on with them."

Although travel content was more desirable, it seems that self-disclosure is more effective in building trust. Nora explains that though self-disclosure is not considered professional in the case of salespeople, it is different with influencers, where self-disclosure builds a friendship-like relationship as followers get invested in the influencer's personal life, creating a feeling of closeness and trust. Specifically, SMIs may be seen more as marketers when they are promoting a brand, out of this promotional context SMIs may instead be viewed more as friends, eliciting positive emotions towards the influencer if they keep within the boundaries of appropriate disclosure. Particularly, self-disclosures that create feelings of relatability and similarity between influencers and their followers were the most effective in creating trust, which will be discussed in the following subtheme.

5.3.1 Similarity and Relatability

Similarity and relatability play a critical role in building trust in an influencer. Followers can develop feelings of similarity and relatability towards influencers through influencers' social disclosures. Social self-disclosure can contribute to building followers' trust through feelings of similarity and relatability that are generated through social disclosures. Andrew (male, 27, masters) explains that his trust in others is built on the similarity between him and the other person: *"For example, let's say I was a lawyer. I would rather follow other lawyers who go on their travels and I would trust them because they're similar to me and they're doing that from the same point of view as me going on holiday."* Also, Abdu (male, 26, undergrad) states that similarities between him and an influencer positively impacts his trust and behaviour**:** ***"****If I know more about them and they are not similar to me then I wouldn't follow their advice. This works both ways; I would trust them more if they are similar to me."* He explains

that similarity is a pre-requisite for relating and, hence inciting behavioural intention, *"So if I know that a person has similar background or he likes the same things that I like, I will relate to him more and if he had fun in a particular trip, I think I might as well have fun."*

Relating to an influencer's disclosure is another factor increasing followers' trust. Ella (female, 27, PhD) attributes how much she trusts an influencer to how much she relates to them: *"How much I would trust their advice depends on how much I relate to the person."* Relating to an influencer was also found to positively impact behavioural intention. Ella comments on a stimulus posts by saying:

"I can relate to this post. This makes me consider this place and feel that it's actually a place that I can go to because she talks about how she come from a poor background and that she doesn't expect everyone to be able to travel. So, she shows how traveling is something that you can do even if you're someone who isn't rich or have a lot of free time. She makes travelling something accessible for more people."

Respondents asserted that feelings of relatability can derive from influencers' disclosure. *"The longer I follow someone, I feel the closer I am to them. The more I know about them and understand their lifestyle, I also feel related to them. It's all about relating to a person."* (Sally, female, 19, undergrad) She further explains how knowing more about the influencer may positively impact her behavioural intentions: *"I am more likely to follow their advice because again they make themselves relatable and it's easier to understand the experiences they've gone through."* With social disclosures an influencer can make themselves relatable to their followers, and followers can better understand their experiences because they know them better.

5.4 Authenticity and Trust

5.4.1 Being Real and Trust

Being Real in travel disclosure, as explained previously, is the disclosure of both the good and bad parts of a travel experience. Being real contributes to higher trust in the influencer and their recommendations. The following quotes highlight this positive association between being real and trust. Nora (female, 19, undergrad) describes the reason she likes the travel influencers she follows: "*They're real people. They don't act like everything's perfect. That's why I trust their opinion on the countries they go to."* When Kristina (female, 26, PhD) was asked what makes her trust a certain influencer she follows, she answered: *"I think because it seems like her stories are more honest and she shows positive and negative things. I think it makes me trust her more."* Jackie (female, 22, undergrad) adds to that:

"*Seeing them be honest about the trip like when things go wrong or like not being perfect all the time, they seem more believable because they don't just talk about how beautiful and perfect everything is. They talk about both sides of it. You know like things that go disastrously wrong. So, I kind of I trust them more."*

Being real means honesty in showing both sides of an experience. It gives followers good reason to increase trust in an influencer and their recommendations.

Being real impacted trust positively, which in turn impacted behavioural intentions positively. John (male, 50, PhD) states that influencers are more likely to positively influence his behaviour if they share negative parts of a travel experience:

"*I am more likely to follow their advice because I think they would be more candid about the experiences that they had. For example, they would be more likely*

to say I went somewhere and I didn't like it and I really think that is the test of a travel blogger. If everything is fantastic and amazing and perfect, then you know that there's going to be a lot of false positives in that. Of course, they will have had bad experiences their experiences might have been completely average like most people's experiences. If you just say everything is great, then you're refusing to exercise your judgment."

Honesty in disclosing negative parts of a travel experience earns followers' trust, while portraying an experience as perfect raises suspicions that the influencer has not been completely honest. Layla (female, 28, masters) gives an example:

"Sharing too much of a good experience in my opinion and not disclosing some of the difficulties you go through, goes against your credibility. For example, there is this blogger I follow, and she recently travelled with her seven months baby. You know this can be hectic it includes keeping them entertained on a plane, but to her it was completely like all rainbows and the experience was perfect and we love traveling with the baby. I know for a fact that it's not as simple or as perfect as she made it seem. So, this just affected her credibility in my eyes."

Influencers that do not demonstrate being real in their disclosures are perceived less trustworthy.

5.4.2 Mutual exclusivity, Genuineness, and Trust

Mixing social self-disclosure in a promotional post is perceived to be disingenuous. Hence, it negatively impacts followers' trust, confirming the importance of mutual exclusivity between social disclosure and promotions. Amelia says, of a stimulus post that combines social self-disclosure with promotional content: *"I find it a little*

unbelievable It just sounds a bit fake and ridiculous. Like 'I remembered the poor districts of my childhood whilst doing activities arranged by the hotel.' I don't know it sounds weird that they would. It doesn't sound very genuine." Participants found this intersection between social disclosure and promotional content in one post to be disingenuous and inauthentic, which led them to disbelieve the influencer and decreased trust. This relationship represents an interaction between the mutual exclusivity theme, trust, and genuineness. The mixture of social disclosure and promotions is negatively associated with perceived genuineness and trust in an influencer.

Discussion

The current study aims to provide additional qualitative support for the conceptual model and explore the reasons for the negative association between influencers' social self-disclosure and consumer outcomes revealed in studies one and two.

The series of interviews revealed an interconnected network of themes, specifically regarding the type of content followers desire from a travel influencer. Respondents stated that they equally valued travel self-disclosure and travel content by influencers, while they were less interested in an influencer's social disclosures.

Followers of travel influencers particularly demanded a non-tourist perspective on destinations. Providing unique photos was also found to be desired, and to have a positive impact on behavioural intentions. This agrees with Schmitt's (1994) finding advertising for certain sectors such as travel, textual information is typically minimised,

and images are favoured, because pictures (with or without accompanying text) influence consumer attitudes more effectively than words alone. They argue that consumers notice pictorial content first and use it to interpret the verbal content, and therefore that visual information critically determines consumer memory and attitude. However, the effect of photos on respondents' attitude towards the destinations depends on the quality and content of the photos. Unique photos featuring interesting cultures, environments and activities were most effective in creating positive attitude towards a destination.

Participants described desirable travel self-disclosure as including personal context around the travel experience, in addition to self-reflection and depth of thought. Such travel disclosure also has a positive impact on followers' trust and behavioural intention. This aligns with Gilliam & Zablah (2013), who found that a business story told by a salesperson that focuses on the product is more effective than a personal story, particularly in one-time encounters. They found that business stories were an important predictor of consumers' attitude and purchase intentions. Specifically, they suggest that salespeople would be well-served by focusing on product stories told from a business point of view.

Photos and travel content providing a non-tourist perspective were found to increase followers' trust. Travel self-disclosure and travel content were both found to play a role in increasing followers' trust toward the influencer, which in turn induced positive behavioural intentions. This accords with Huang's (2015) finding that bloggers' *product*

evaluation self-disclosures increased cognitive trust by readers, as it satisfies their need for product information.

And yet, participants recalled a large amount of social disclosure shared by travel influencers they follow, varying in depth and breadth, confirming that public self-disclosure is the norm in social media communication (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Although participants clearly stated they are not interested in a travel influencers' social self-disclosures, when describing examples of social disclosures shared by influencers they follow, they expressed feelings of liking (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; Kashian et al., 2017) engagement, empathy, appreciation, connectedness (Utz, 2015), closeness (Lin & Utz, 2017), and even parasocial relationship (i.e., one-way imagined friendships with individuals known only through mediated contact; Kim & Song, 2016). Thus, the question for marketing researchers is not whether social self-disclosure results in positive or negative reactions but rather, under what circumstances is a disclosure likely to elicit positive consumer outcomes?

Several factors play a role in turning followers' negative reactions towards an influencer's self-disclosure into positive reactions, which can be understood as the boundaries of appropriate disclosure. The findings were substantially in alignment with the *Influencer Self-Disclosure Model* (ISDM) (See figure 6.2), and the discussion that follows will be structured around the salient elements of the model.

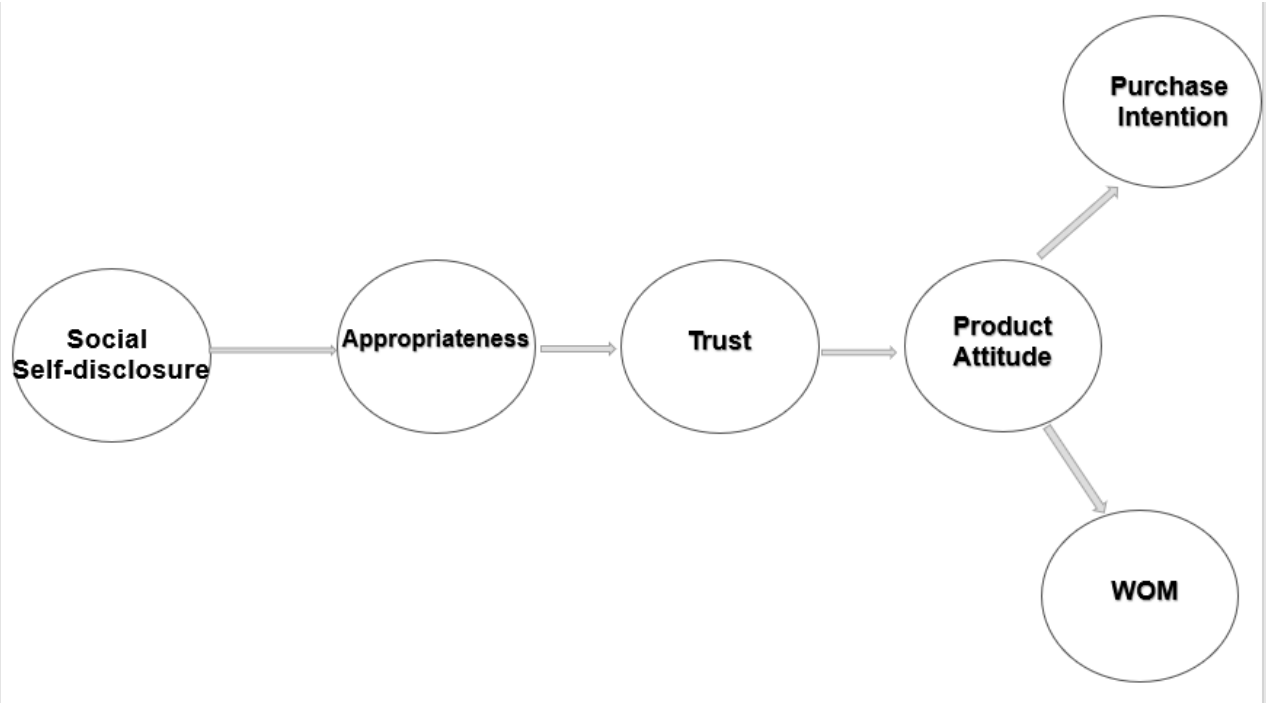

Figure 6.2 Influencer Self-Disclosure Model

Both social self-disclosure and travel disclosure must occur within certain bounds to elicit positive reactions from followers. One significant determinant of appropriateness regarding travel influencers' self-disclosures, was finding the correct balance between self-disclosure and travel information. While participants emphasised that a certain amount of social self-disclosure is necessary to keep them interested and engaged with travel influencers, an excess of social self-disclosure breaks the implicit contract between follower and influencer—that the reason for following the influencer is travel content and travel self-disclosure. In this sense, the particular characteristics of the travel influencer–follower context was found to hugely impact followers' preferences in the type of content and disclosure they desire from influencers. Data pointed towards an optimal balance between social self-disclosure and travel content, of about 80% travel content and 20% social self-disclosure. When social disclosure overwhelms travel content, followers may lose interest and unfollow the influencers.

Furthermore, the appropriateness of both content and delivery of the disclosure shapes followers' reactions, which raises the question "What do followers consider inappropriate self-disclosure by an Instagram travel influencer?" A few topics were considered inappropriate, such as politics, sex, self-harm, and disclosures about others; and broadly, most other topics were considered appropriate. Appropriate delivery related to the overtness of the disclosure; a subtle delivery is considered appropriate. This is in line with Chelune's (1975) argument that the disclosure of intimate information carries with it an appropriate emotional charge. McCorquodale (2019) claims that if an influencer says or does something that offends their community, they can turn against the influencer quickly, and one accusation of insensitivity or ignorance can snowball in hours. Thus, influencers must take care over their self-disclosures and the appropriateness of what they share.

Followers' positive perceptions of influencers and their disclosures was crucially affected by the authenticity of their disclosures, which is also considered a boundary of appropriate disclosure. This agrees with Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak's (2018) suggestion that relationships grow and develop when people reveal their authentic selves through self-disclosure. Authenticity was recognised through an influencers' self-disclosure being genuine and real. The more genuine and real the disclosure, the more feelings of connectedness and closeness towards the influencer emerge. By contrast, the more perfect and less genuine an influencer portrays themself and their travels, the more negative reaction from followers it attracts.

Promotions of travel-related products and services are a big part of the content provided by influencers, though promotional content engendered distrust and negative reaction from followers. This agrees with Wiener and Mowen (1986), who found that claims made by a source perceived to be biased or to have external reasons for making an argument will be discounted by the receiver. Also, Campbell & Kirmani (2000) and Friestad & Wright (1994) found that message recipients who perceive the sender to have an ulterior motive are more likely to perceive the agent as less sincere, undermining trust. This negativity was heightened when social self-disclosure was mixed with promotional content in the same post. While self-disclosures of this sort are seen as natural when developing relationships with friends, in business contexts they might seem manipulative and malicious (Andersson et al., 2016). McCorquodale (2019) indicates that the commercialization of an influencers' content threatens to destabilize the influencer/follower relationship, as it highlights that although this feels like a friendship to the latter, it is a business to the former. Thus, keeping social self-disclosure and promotional content separate is necessary to retain trust and mitigate the increased negativity from followers. This mutual exclusivity between social disclosure and promotional content is another important boundary for appropriate disclosure. This indicates that it might be a possible moderator in the influencer self-disclosure model: future research is recommended to test it empirically.

Additionally, disclosure of affiliation has been found to mitigate this negativity from followers, in agreement with Carl (2008) and Carr & Hayes (2014). Carl (2008) found that when a recommendation comes from a source affiliated with a corporate entity and this affiliation is disclosed, that the information is still considered credible. Carr and Hayes (2014) have found that a blogger was perceived as most credible when

they explicitly disclosed outside bias. Full disclosure of outside influences increases the credibility of the blogger and enhances consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviours.

In agreement with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, all these boundaries of appropriate disclosure have been found to relate to feelings of trust. When social self-disclosures demonstrate appropriateness of content and delivery, balance, authenticity, and are kept separate from promotions, they are found to induce positive feelings such as similarity and relatability, and hence increase trust. If these conditions are not met, the reaction will be the same distrust observed in studies 1 and 2. Being real and genuine in both travel and social disclosure were associated with authenticity, which was positively associated with trust, subtle disclosures were considered to be more appropriately delivered, which also increased trust. This is supported by Collins and Miller's (1994) meta-analysis, which found that people who disclose more intimately tend to be viewed by others as more trusting, friendly, and warm. It is also in line with Huang's (2015) finding that sincere self-disclosures (about products or about the blogger themself) enhances readers' affective trust, because when bloggers share their values, or more personal information, readers feel greater familiarity and emotional attachment to them.

Promotional content decreased trust, as did mixing social disclosure with promotions. However, transparency in disclosing affiliation mitigated this and increased trust, in line with Carl's (2008) finding that the receiver perceives the act of disclosing one's affiliation with a marketing organization as a marker of honesty and trust.

In accord with the ISDM, trust has been found to positively impact behavioural intentions, which further validates the models developed in study one and two. The findings of this qualitative study support the finding that self-disclosure is mediated first by appropriateness which induces trust and then impacts behavioural intentions such as product attitude and purchase intentions. It also provides an explanation for the negative impact self-disclosure had on behavioural intentions in study one and two. In answer to the question “Why is there a negative association between social self-disclosure by an Instagram travel influencer and consumer outcomes?”, the negative association between self-disclosure and behavioural intention found in study 1 and 2 results from the overt delivery of social self-disclosure in the posts, the mixing of social disclosure with promotional content, and the fact that the disclosure included information about others who may have not consented to it. There are other reasons that might negatively impact follower perceptions, such as imbalance between travel content and social self-disclosure, or inauthentic social self-disclosure.

Chapter Summary

In summary, the analysis supported the findings of study one and two, affirming that appropriateness, trust, and product attitude are mediators in the relationship between self-disclosure and purchase intent. The negative impact generated by social disclosure, found in the quantitative studies, was magnified when coupled with a promotion in the same post. When social disclosure is coupled with a promotion of a product or service it is perceived negatively because followers felt manipulated. Thus, both separation between social disclosure and promotions and the disclosure of affiliations are needed to mitigate this strong negative reaction.

Travel content is the main reason for following a travel influencer. Desirable travel content from influencers included non-tourist perspectives about destinations, and photos of interesting activities, food, cultures, and environments. Also, travel self-disclosure, which gives personal context for the travel experiences, was highly appreciated by followers, as was self-reflection and depth of thought. However, social self-disclosure elicited positive reaction only within certain bounds. First, the amount of social disclosure must not exceed travel content, but instead should follow an 80-20 split. Second, it must not be combined with promotional content. Third, it must adhere to followers' sense of what is appropriate, in terms of both content and presentation. Finally, the disclosure must convey an authentic image of the influencer. These norms of appropriate delivery and authenticity were also relevant to travel self-disclosure and promotional content.

As with any research, this study has limitations. As with most qualitative studies the generalizability of this research to other contexts is limited. Specifically, the sample of this study consisted entirely of university students, so, generalisation to other populations is risky. Also, like other thematic methods TA has limitations; it risks fragmenting accounts, presenting under a unified set of themes results derived from across a group of participants (Burton & Khammash, 2010). Future quantitative research can validate the results of this qualitative study. Other limitations will be covered in the conclusion chapter.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, the study contributes to the digital marketing and tourism literature by discovering the underlying reasons for consumers'

negative reactions to travel influencers' self-disclosures. Second, this study revealed the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure in the eyes of followers and consumers, and as such revealed how can the same social disclosure be perceived positively or negatively depending on how it is presented. Third, this research extended the definition of appropriateness, from only considering appropriateness of topic, to include appropriateness of presentation and other factors. As Ziegele and Reinecke (2017) suggest, a better understanding of how people judge appropriateness in SNSs contexts could facilitate the creation of SNSs contexts that encourages self-disclosure about negative topics such as illness, divorce, bereavement, etc, to inform other users, reduce stigma or support those facing similar challenges. Without this qualitative study, relying solely on the marketing literature and our first two studies, we would have erroneously claimed that all social disclosure is detrimental to consumer outcomes. Thus, this qualitative data was essential to the present research, as these results could not have been attained through quantitative approaches.

Chapter 7: Discussion Chapter

Introduction

The overall aim of this research is to provide an initial understanding of self-disclosure by an influencer during a social media advertising campaign and what impact this disclosure has on consumer outcomes in the context of travel influencers. The importance of this research derives from differences between the marketing literature and the social psychology literature on self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is known to elicit different reactions in business settings compared to online and offline interpersonal relationships. In the interpersonal relationship and CMC literature (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2018; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Kim & Song, 2016; Lin & Utz, 2017; Mazer et al., 2007; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002), self-disclosure is known for its positive effects such as increased liking, trust, attraction, and satisfaction; while in the marketing literature (e.g., Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2001) social self-disclosure is known to have a negative impact on the consumer-seller relationship such as decreased trust, liking, and negative social impression towards the salesperson. This paradox motivates the exploration of how public self-disclosure by SMI's impacts consumer outcomes, especially given that influencers are known for sharing big parts of their personal lives.

Influencers are concerned with impression management (also called self-presentation) as they try to influence how others view them, and thereby judge and treat them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). On SNSs multiple audiences with heterogeneous expectations simultaneously become part of a singular 'audience' (Marder, Shankar,

Houghton, & Joinson, 2017), this is defined in the literature as *context collapse* (Marwick and Boyd 2011).

Context collapse blurs the boundaries between professional and personal personas (Archer-Brown et al., 2018; Sugimoto, Hank, Bowman, & Pomerantz, 2015), creating a “duelling relationship” effect, which refers to relationships in which a professional is obliged to fill multiple social roles (Rupert & Holmes, 1997). In an influencer context, dual relationships refer to the formal and informal relationships that can exist between an influencer and their followers: the influencer could function as both a marketer and a virtual friend. SNSs have blurred boundaries that were once well understood in the relationship between marketers and consumers. Due to this, influencers can be uncertain of how to best manage impressions, whether to adopt the persona of a marketer or a friend. More importantly, there is an ambiguity over how consumers view influencers and their self-disclosures, as influencers are arguably both social (i.e., share their personal lives on social networks) and commercial (i.e., use their social media profiles to promote brands). Thus, it is unknown whether their followers regard them more as friends or marketers, and hence how their social self-disclosures impact consumer outcomes.

At present, no existing study has examined the effect of differing levels of depth and breadth of social self-disclosure by SMIs on consumer purchase intent and WOM intention; and how is it perceived and reacted to by followers qua potential consumers. Also, the role of perceived appropriateness of the disclosure as a mediator between self-disclosure by SMI and consumer outcomes has not previously been explored in

marketing studies. Thus, it is of both practical and theoretical importance to examine how social self-disclosure by SMIs impact consumer outcomes in more detail.

Previous chapters determined the impact that social self-disclosure by SMIs have on consumer outcomes: since the purchase decision is the ultimate goal of most marketing campaigns (Fishbein & Eisen, 1975), when advertisers employ an influencer marketing strategy the goal is to form the follower' intentions to buy the product or service promoted by the influencer. The influencer's role is to attract and retain current and future consumers (Eunju, Kim & Zhang, 2008). For an influencer to impact purchase decisions, they must positively influence the customer's opinion and attitude towards the product or service, and for this the customer must have confidence in them: therefore, trust is examined as an endogenous construct (i.e., dependent variable).

Based on this conceptualisation, this chapter will reflect on the results obtained in Studies 1, 2, and 3. First, the negative impact of social self-disclosures by a travel influencer on consumer outcomes will be discussed. Second, the role of appropriateness as a critical mediator in this relationship will be shown. Third, the contents followers most and least desire from travel influencers will be explained. Fourth, the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure are explained. Lastly, trust will be discussed as an integrative theme that brings all these findings together along with an explanation of the negative impact that social self-disclosure generated in experimental studies.

Discussion

The negative effect of SMI self-disclosure

Study 1 showed that social self-disclosures by travel influencers negatively impacts consumer purchase intention and WOM. This negative relationship between high breadth and depth of social self-disclosure and consumers' purchase intention and WOM intention was found to be mediated through the perceived appropriateness of the self-disclosure, trust, and product attitude. Although SMIs disclose big parts of their personal lives (Marshall & Redmond, 2016), the results of this study have shown this might not be good for the companies paying these influencers to promote their products in terms of product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM.

High depth and breadth of social self-disclosure negatively impacted the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure. These findings confirm that the results of traditional marketing on salesperson's social self-disclosure (Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2001) are transferable to the SMI-customer/follower context, indicating that a SMIs might be viewed more as marketers than as friends by their followers especially during a promotional campaign. Thus, SMI must be cautious when disclosing personal information while advertising for companies as this might backfire, with negative consequences for purchase and WOM intentions. However, according to the qualitative findings in study 3, although SMIs may be seen more as marketers when they are promoting a brand, out of this promotional context SMIs may instead be viewed more as friends, eliciting positive emotions towards the influencer if they keep within the boundaries of appropriate disclosure. Therefore, we can conclude that when SMIs are engaging in paid promotions, they are expected to act professionally like a salesperson, and avoid irrelevant personal disclosures. However,

if the disclosure is exchange specific, as in travel self-disclosures, then that is acceptable and in fact desired by followers.

The finding that high depth and breadth social self-disclosures by influencers harms purchase and WOM intentions and product attitude is in line with the prediction in Collins and Miller's (1994) meta-analysis, suggesting that the positive effects that self-disclosure has may break at extreme levels of intimacy (high depth), as it may be evaluated as inappropriate and a violation of social norms. Moreover, these findings fit with previous research on disclosure appropriateness in the context of SNSs (Lin & Utz, 2017); participants perceived high depth disclosures less appropriate than low depth disclosures. Also, Bazarova (2012) found that perceived appropriateness depended on disclosure depth level, as the mismatch between the public context of the disclosure and its intimacy can heighten perceptions of inappropriateness. The present research also aligns with Norton et al.,'s (2007) "less is more" effect. They suggest that more information about others (high breadth) on average leads to less liking, while ambiguity (i.e., lacking knowledge about another) increases respect. They found that increased information (high breadth) led to less appreciation without regard to the valence of the information, due to the cascading nature of dissimilarity.

Through highlighting the importance of appropriateness and the critical role it plays in driving consumer outcomes, the current research contributes to the investigation of communicative norms and expectations guiding consumer perceptions around public self-disclosure by SMIs in a marketing context. It also extends the definition of appropriateness by providing the boundaries of appropriate disclosure by a SMI,

which, as mentioned before, has not previously been addressed in the marketing literature. Hence, this work provides an initial understanding of the appropriateness of marketers' self-disclosures, which can be used to guide future scientific inquiry on this topic. General contributions will be discussed in the conclusion chapter.

In summary, a causal relationship between social self-disclosure (breadth and depth) and purchase intent and WOM has been found. The high depth and high breath of social self-disclosure led to negative consumer outcomes mediated through appropriateness, trust, and product attitude.

Appropriateness: The Key Mediator

Price & Bouffard (1974) explain that while most people can usually judge whether behaviours are socially appropriate or not in familiar contexts, it is usually hard to explicitly spell out the criteria determining appropriateness. The particular characteristics of the behavior, its context, or their unique combination may all play a role. In everyday life we develop an implicit sense the appropriateness or otherwise of a given behavior in a given situation. We know that even some quite common behaviours are more "appropriate" in some situations than others. Price & Bouffard (1974) found that context plays a major role in judgments of social appropriateness.

According to the analysis of qualitative data in Study 3, the following definition for 'appropriate self-disclosure by a SMI' has been developed: *Disclosure in accord with the acceptable boundaries of self-disclosure by an SMI, which are: balancing disclosure vs. travel content, separating social disclosure from promotional content,*

ensuring appropriateness of topic and delivery, and authenticity. The perceived appropriateness of disclosures in Study 1 had a significant relationship with all variables in the conceptual model, indicating that perceived appropriateness can indeed shift consumer outcomes, and thus was predicted to be the key mediator in this process. Hence, Study 2 manipulated perceived appropriateness regarding public social self-disclosures through stimuli priming participants to think it is appropriate, moderately appropriate, or inappropriate to disclose publicly on social media.

Results of Study 2 further confirmed the role that appropriateness played in this process and shed new light on Study 1 by confirming the crucial mediating role played by perceived appropriateness in the relationship between social self-disclosure and consumer outcomes. Trust, product attitude, purchase intention, and WOM varied significantly in response to the different appropriateness priming conditions. The same self-disclosure resulted in different reaction from consumers depending on the appropriateness level primed for. The Appropriate priming condition, resulted in positive outcomes, while in the Inappropriate priming condition resulted in negative outcomes.

The results of this study indicate that regardless of the depth of the disclosure, its perceived appropriateness critically impacts the effect of the disclosure on the downstream variables. Hence, even if the self-disclosure is high depth, if it is perceived to be appropriate, it will positively impact downstream variables. This further validates the decision to use appropriateness as the mediator of this relationship. Thus, the results show that perceptions of appropriateness, determined by the social norms of the influencer-follower context (i.e., the boundaries of appropriate SMI disclosure) are

the key mediator in this whole process. Indeed, the perceived appropriateness of the disclosure seems to be the turning point in the relationship between disclosure and consumer outcomes, which can make or break the sale. This is in line with Lin & Utz (2017), who found a positive effect of high disclosure intimacy on perceived closeness, but a negative impact on social attraction. When they dropped the cases in which participants perceived the high depth disclosure messages as inappropriate, the positive effect of intimacy on perceived closeness were stronger, and its negative impact on social attraction disappeared.

In summary, Study 2 has confirmed that the perceived appropriateness of self-disclosures might be the key variable separating consumers' positive and negative reactions. Through understanding the importance of norms of disclosure on social media, and linking these to consumers' responses, we can better predict what types of self-disclosure may lead to positive or negative marketing outcomes. Thus, SMIs should be mindful of the appropriateness of what they post and carefully manage the content they share, or at least exercise more caution with what they share with followers and not share overly intimate information, or disclose information from inappropriate topic categories (Muscanell et al., 2016).

Desirable Content from a Travel Influencer

Study 3 found that followers had specific preferences regarding the type of content and style of disclosure they desire from travel influencers. It is not a surprise that travel information was found to be the most desirable content by followers, since this is the main reason for following a travel influencer. Travel content refers to general travel

information without any reference to personal information. They appreciated influencers that can provide a non-tourist perspective of a city—its ‘real flavour’. Besides this, photos (as a form of travel content) were an essential factor positively impacting behavioural intentions, as they are the initial point of contact between followers and influencers, and are thus essential to the decision to follow them. Pictures that include fascinating cultures, environments and activities were found to be the most effective in creating a positive attitude towards a destination.

Equal importance regarding content desirability was given to travel self-disclosure by respondents. When participants were asked what they like about the travel influencers they follow, they described two forms of travel self-disclosure: disclosures of personal context about the travel experience, and depth of thought and self-reflection. Such travel disclosure positively impacts followers' trust and behavioural intentions. Travel self-disclosure can mean sharing personal information that gives context around the travel experience. The personal information provided here must be related to the travel experience. This personal context about travel experiences in addition to self-reflection and depth of thought were found to be attractive to and desirable by followers.

On the other hand, participants stressed that they are less interested in a travel influencer's social disclosure as opposed to their travel content and travel-self-disclosures. Social self-disclosure by travel influencers mostly generated negative reactions, confirming the results of Studies 1 and 2.

McCorquodale (2019) distinguishes an authoritative influencer from other influencers as an individual with proven expertise who has gained a significant audience due to being a trusted authority in the space they are covering, which is applicable to travel influencers. However, she says that this type of influencer may not share a significant amount of personal information on their channel. This type of influencer exists to inform their followers about products they recommend, trends, and their latest projects and inspirations. This is in line with the current results, where what participants desire from a travel influencer, as an authoritative influencer, is more travel content and travel-self-disclosure, and little social disclosure. This is to say, followers treat travel influencers differently to other speciality influencers, because people follow them for their expertise in travel. People feel frustrated when the influencers deviate from the primary purpose of the account (i.e., travel). In some cases, it leads to losing interest in the influencer and unfollowing them.

While the scope of the model developed for empirical testing only concerned social self-disclosure, travel self-disclosure (i.e., exchange-specific self-disclosure) emerged from the in-depth qualitative exploration in Study 3 as critical in the travel influencer-follower relationship, which was repeatedly emphasised by participants. This is in line with the marketing literature, providing evidence of the importance of exchange-specific disclosure in driving positive business outcomes (Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013; Huang, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2001). This finding indicated that including exchange-specific self-disclosure in the model will give a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. The final chapter will discuss how this finding can be incorporated in future research.

Boundaries of Appropriate Disclosure

Although respondents in Study 3 stated that they are less interested in travel influencers' social disclosures, and more interested in their travel content, participants recalled a significant amount of social disclosure shared by travel influencers they follow, varying in depth and breadth, confirming that public self-disclosure is the norm in social media communication (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). When participants were asked to give examples of social disclosures shared by influencers they follow, they expressed feelings of liking (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; Kashian et al., 2017) engagement, empathy, appreciation, connectedness (Utz, 2015), and closeness (Lin & Utz, 2017).This raises the question: what makes some social disclosure generate positive reactions while others generate negative reactions? Several factors play a role in turning followers' negative reactions towards an influencers' self-disclosure into positive responses.

Normal life is constrained by unwritten social norms and roles (Leary, 1996), which are not codified or enforced by laws, but are invisible and ubiquitous. Any given micro context has a set of norms, and appropriateness is whatever falls within these scripts, while whatever violates it is inappropriate (Price & Bouffard, 1974). In the micro context of a travel influencer's self-disclosure, these boundaries are maintaining a certain balance of types of content, separating promotions from social self-disclosure, avoidance of taboo topics, respect for the privacy of third parties (appropriateness of content), subtlety in the delivery of disclosures (appropriateness of delivery), and authenticity of the disclosure.

1- Balancing Content

Although participants favoured travel content, they indicated that a certain amount of personal disclosure is needed to keep followers interested and engaged. A balance between content-types is needed to avoid negative reactions from followers. A limited amount of social disclosure makes influencers more relatable and enhances feelings of connection. Data indicated an optimal balance of approximately 80% travel content and 20% social self-disclosure. When social disclosure overwhelms travel content, it buries the content the follower came for, i.e., travel—which may lead to the follower losing interest and unfollowing.

2- Mutual Exclusivity

Participants disliked promotional content, in line with McCorquodale's (2019) finding followers are turned off by influencers who are making money via product promotion, and can be heavily critical of it, threatening to destabilise the influencer-follower relationship. It makes the influencers' role conflict conspicuous, that although the relationship feels like a friendship to the follower, it is a business for the influencer. However, disclosure of affiliation, when a travel influencer admits that their recommendations are part of a paid promotion, was found to mitigate this, in line with Carr & Hayes (2014). Participants expressed acceptance of influencers who explicitly disclose their affiliations. However, negativity towards promotions heightened when it was combined with social self-disclosure in the same post. These generated feelings of resentment and of being manipulated or used in participants. Thus, mutual exclusivity between social disclosure and promotional content is essential to avoid negative responses.

3- Appropriateness of content

The appropriateness of both content and delivery of the disclosure were deemed essential to shaping followers' reactions towards disclosures. Appropriate content encompassed most topics other than a few inappropriate issues, such as politics, sex, self-harm, and disclosures about others, in line with Muscanell et al. (2016).

4- Appropriateness of delivery

The overtness of the disclosure was one factor determining appropriateness of delivery, especially in the disclosure of vulnerabilities. The more overt a disclosure is, the more inappropriate it is perceived and vice versa. Intense displays of emotional vulnerability, such as crying, were considered excessively overt, and were declared to be undesirable by the majority of participants, who described such displays as disturbing, uncomfortable, and out of control. At the other end of the spectrum, the more subtle a disclosure is, the more appropriate it is perceived to be.

Chelune's (1975) argues that the disclosure of intimate information carries with it an appropriate emotional charge. The findings under this theme are in support of Cheshin, Amit, & Van Kleef (2017) findings; trust in a service provider was found to be impacted by the perceived appropriateness of the level of emotional intensity displayed by frontline workers in customer interactions.

In summary, highly overt disclosures of vulnerabilities and intense displays of emotions caused discomfort and provoked negative reactions. On the other hand, subtle disclosures of vulnerabilities were deemed appropriate and perceived

positively. This confirms that self-disclosures *can* be perceived positively, if they are seen as appropriate. Thus, influencers must ensure the appropriateness of delivering self-disclosure to gain followers' approval and elicit positive consumer outcomes.

5- Authenticity

The authenticity of influencers' disclosures is another important boundary of appropriate self-disclosure, which influenced followers' reactions. Across the literature, authenticity is defined as the combination of being genuine and real (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Cohen et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Spiggle et al., 2012), and the same definition was found in the responses of our participants. Authenticity was found in an influencer being genuine and real in their disclosures. The genuineness of a social disclosure was found to create feelings of liking, closeness, appreciation, and respect towards the influencer. Being real was another factor determining influencer's authenticity; it depends on an influencer's ability to portray the good and the bad of their experiences, the ups and the downs, whether that regards personal or travel self-disclosures. Being real in self-disclosure was found to positively relate to followers' feelings of connectedness, closeness, appreciation towards the influencer.

Furthermore, such disclosure has been found to humanise influencers and present them as 'real people' rather than 'people on screens'. The authenticity of disclosures was associated with feelings of connectedness and proximity towards the influencer. On the contrary, the more perfect and less natural an influencer portrays themselves

and their travels, the more it draws negative reactions from followers, in line with McCorquodale's (2019) finding that followers are troubled by the impact of influencers' projections of perfection on their lives. Social media can be said to be moving into an era of 'anti-perfection', towards a more realistic and less deliberately aesthetic presentation.

Trust: An Integrative Theme

All the above findings were connected to feelings of trust. Trust in travel Influencers was found to be an integrative theme, permeating most of the themes and colouring much of the discussion, whatever the foreground issue was.

Feelings of similarity and relatability evoked by an influencers' social disclosures were associated with followers' increased trust. Travel content that provides a non-tourist perspective and unique photos were also found to increase trust (McCorquodale, 2019). Travel self-disclosure was found to positively impact consumer outcomes, which is in line with the traditional marketing literature, looking at salespeople's self-disclosure (Jacobs et al. 2001). The authors found that through exchange-specific self-disclosures, a salesperson is more likely to develop long-term relationships with their customers. Also, Huang (2015) suggested that that greater product-evaluation self-disclosure (exchange-specific self-disclosure, but in the context of blogs), increases blog readers' cognitive trust, because it satisfies their need for information about the product. On the other hand, the author found that social self-disclosure induces affective trust, because when bloggers share more personal information, blog readers gain a sense of familiarity and emotional attachment to them. This, in turn, led to

positive attitudes towards products described in blogs. The current research lends partial support to Huang's findings.

On the contrary, promotional content was found to impact followers' trust negatively. Mixing personal disclosure with promotions also decreased followers' trust. However, transparency in disclosing affiliation reversed this effect, leading to increased trust (Carl, 2008; Carr & Hayes, 2014).

Moreover, subtly delivered disclosures were considered more appropriate, which was positively associate with trust. Furthermore, authenticity (being real and genuine) in both travel and social disclosure were positively associated with trust.

Furthermore, Study 3 shows that trust in an influencer positively impacts product attitude and purchase intention, in line with literature in this field (e.g., Cha, 2009; Grafstorm, Linea & Wide, 2018; Ioanid & Militaru, 2015). Influencers must gain the trust of their followers to be able to influence purchase intentions.

In sum, the findings of the qualitative inquiry in Study 3 validated the model developed in Study 1 and 2, self-disclosure was found to be mediated by appropriateness which induces trust, which in turn impacts product attitude and purchase intentions. Other than validating the empirical studies, it provided essential knowledge describing the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure, which also explains the negative impact of social self-disclosure on consumer outcomes found in Study 1 and 2. A primary reason for this negative association was the overt integration of personal disclosure with promotional content in the experimental stimuli. Without this qualitative study,

relying solely on the marketing literature and our previous studies, we would have claimed unfairly that all social disclosure is detrimental to consumer behaviour.

Chapter Summary

This discussion gave an overview of the results of the three studies conducted to examine the relationship between SMI's self-disclosure and consumer outcomes. First, the negative impact that social self-disclosures by travel influencers had on consumer outcomes was discussed. Then, the role of appropriateness as a key mediator in this relationship was emphasised. Followers' preferences for content from travel influencers was described. Afterwards, the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure (i.e., correct balance of content-types, mutual exclusivity of promotion and self-disclosure, appropriateness of content and delivery, and authenticity) that can reverse followers' negative reactions to influencers' social self-disclosures were explained. Lastly, trust was discussed as an integrative theme bringing all these findings together, along with an explanation for the negative impact that social self-disclosure generated in the previous experimental studies.

In conclusion, social self-disclosures by SMIs generally generate negative impacts on consumers' perceptions of appropriateness, which in turn lead to negative attitudes and behavioural intentions in the travel influencer context. This is especially true in the case where an influencer combines a social self-disclosure with promotional content in the same post. However, this is not to say that all social self-disclosures negatively impact consumers' perceptions. In fact, within specific boundaries social self-disclosure can provoke positive reactions from followers such as increased liking,

feelings of relatability, connection, similarity, and closeness. This in turn leads to further trust in the influencer and the formation of positive attitudes towards their recommendations, creating positive consumption behaviour.

Social self-disclosure within certain boundaries can have a desirable impact on followers. However, the main factors driving consumers' attitude and behavioural intent are the travel content and travel self-disclosure provided by the SMI, as the main reasons for following a travel influencer is to acquire knowledge of travel and destinations. The following chapter will conclude this thesis by presenting the theoretical and managerial implications of the research, alongside overarching limitations and avenues for further research.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis provides both critical knowledge in the field of influencer marketing, and a more thorough understanding of self-disclosure as it relates to marketing more broadly. Specifically, no studies have investigated the impact of self-disclosure by SMIs on consumer outcomes. Current knowledge on self-disclosure in the social psychology and CMC literature affirm that it is the building block for interpersonal relationships, associated with feelings of mutual liking, trust, and relationship satisfaction (for example: Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Kashian, Jang, Shin, Dai, & Walther, 2017). The marketing literature on salespeople's' self-disclosures categorises a salesperson's self-disclosures into social self-disclosure (i.e., disclosure of personal information) and exchange-specific self-disclosure (i.e., disclosure of information necessary to pending exchange: Jacobs, Hyman, & McQuitty, 2001). Current knowledge on social self-disclosure by marketing agents assert that such disclosure is detrimental to brands and should be avoided (Andersson et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zablah, 2013b; Jacobs, Hyman, et al., 2001).

Influencers challenge the marketing orthodoxy, as self-disclosure is known to be central to their success (McCorquodale, 2019). Because influencers are arguably both social (i.e., they share their personal lives on social networks) and commercial (i.e., they use their social media profiles to promote brands), it is unknown whether their followers regard them more as friends or as marketers, and hence how does their social self-disclosure impact consumer behaviour and perceptions. Influencers in this sense are faced with playing conflicting roles in a dual relationship (Leary, 1996; Sugimoto et al., 2015), in which an influencer tries to simultaneously fill two or more

different roles (Rupert & Holmes, 1997), professional and social relationships (i.e., a marketer and a virtual friend). Due to the ambiguity between their professional and personal personas and the potential for unfavorable interpretation by followers, it is crucial that we understand the business implications of such disclosures on influencer-follower relationships, from a business perspective. Thus, this research provides the first understanding of the role of self-disclosure by SMIs on consumer outcomes.

This chapter will provide an overall summary of the key findings from this research. Then, the theoretical and practical contribution of this research will be outlined, followed with the limitations along with recommendations for future research. Finally, an overall conclusion will be provided.

Key Findings

The main factors driving favourable outcomes for followers of travel influencers are travel content and travel self-disclosure, as opposed to social self-disclosure, which was the content least desired by followers. Social self-disclosure by influencers when promoting a brand should be discouraged to avoid unfavorable consumer outcomes. When SMIs are engaging in paid promotions, they are expected to act professionally like a salesperson, and avoid irrelevant personal disclosures. It was found that high depth and breadth of social self-disclosure negatively impacts consumers' purchase intent and WOM intentions. This relationship was found to be mediated by perceived appropriateness, trust, and product attitude.

However, this is not to say that SMIs should avoid all social self-disclosure. Out of this promotional context travel, influencers can benefit from sharing social self-disclosures with followers, as long as it is within the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure. The appropriateness of the disclosure is a critical mediator in this relationship, which has not been given attention by prior marketing research concerned with marketers' self-disclosures. With certain boundaries of appropriateness (i.e., having the correct split between the different content types, separation of social self-disclosure from promotional content, appropriateness of delivery and content, and authenticity), social self-disclosure *can* generate positive reactions from consumer. These boundaries constitute the constraints of appropriate self-disclosure, and they explain the negative reactions acquired in the previous studies.

In summary, social media users expect some degree of social self-disclosure from travel influencers, however, their primary interest is in travel content and travel self-disclosure. Travel influencers are advised to maximize on their travel self-disclosure and travel content and minimise their social self-disclosures, restricted by the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure.

Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this thesis is fivefold:

First, this research contributes to digital marketing literature by providing an initial understanding of self-disclosure during an advertising campaign on social media by an influencer and the impact of this social disclosure on the influencer-consumer

relationship. The generally negative impact that social self-disclosure has on consumer outcomes suggests that although influencers try to occupy the persona of a ‘virtual friend’ with their followers using self-disclosure as part of their ‘sell’, during a promotion they are viewed by their followers as marketers and are expected to act professionally. This provides a doorway to new insights on influencer advertising tactics. The framework developed here for influencers’ self-disclosure in the marketing area should serve as a good starting point for mapping this phenomenon further, experimentally or otherwise.

Second, the Influencer Self-Disclosure Model (ISDM) put forward in this research illuminated this causal relationship and identified its precursors and downstream consequences. This adds to marketers’ knowledge and provides a starting point for understanding influencers’ self-disclosures more generally in a business context.

Third, this research is a contribution to the study of social media communicative norms, and specifically the expectations guiding consumer perceptions regarding public self-disclosure by SMIs in a marketing context. The research highlights appropriateness as a key mediator in this process. As mentioned before, the topic of perceived appropriateness of self-disclosure has never been addressed in marketing before. Going forward, marketing scholars investigating self-disclosure should always measure appropriateness and include it as a mediator in their models, as the ISDM model was found not to hold without appropriateness. This thesis also extends the definition of appropriateness, through mapping the boundaries of appropriate disclosure by SMIs. Hence, this knowledge provides an initial understanding on the

appropriateness of marketers' self-disclosures, providing a point of departure for ongoing scientific inquiry into this important marketing topic. Future work by scholars on self-disclosure norms should be informed by these boundaries, and further work empirically validating these boundaries is needed.

Fourth, the usage of a priming experimental method is novel in research around appropriateness of self-disclosure. Previous studies had issues with disentangling and manipulating the intimacy of disclosures and their appropriateness in experiments (Lin & Utz, 2017). However, with the manipulation of primed appropriateness we were able to get around this issue. Future research should use a similar approach to disentangle the effects coming from the two concepts (i.e., appropriateness and depth) to ensure which variable is the source of impact on downstream variables. Future research investigating self-disclosure in sales should also use priming.

Fifth, the thesis contributes to the travel marketing literature by showing what types of content are most desired from travel influencers by their followers. Specifically, travel information and travel self-disclosure has been found the most appealing content, as opposed to social disclosure. The term travel self-disclosure has been first coined in the literature by this thesis, as an equivalent to 'exchange-specific self-disclosure' known in the marketing literature. Such terms should be used by scholars when referring to self-disclosure in the travel literature. Also, the impact of these types of content can be tested empirically and compared to social self-disclosure using the same conceptual model.

Practical Contribution

In terms of practical contributions, this thesis provides important implications for different stakeholders these are: influencers, marketing firms, and salespeople.

First, the findings offer valuable practical implications for SMIs. The current research's findings suggest that SMIs should avoid social self-disclosure when trying to advertise goods and services, because this will be resented by followers, who are likely to feel that the social self-disclosure was used to manipulate them into buying the advertised goods or service—with the result that consumers' outcomes will be negatively impacted. Also, SMIs must carefully manage the content they share, or at least take more caution with what they share with followers and not share information that is overly intimate, or disclose information on topics considered inappropriate (Muscanell et al., 2016).

However, this research is not suggesting that SMIs should avoid social self-disclosure altogether. In fact, travel influencers can benefit from sharing social self-disclosures with followers, as long as it is within the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure. In particular, travel influencers must make sure that the majority of their content is at least approximately 80% about travel, while the other 20% can include personal disclosure, which can function to engage and hook followers by creating feelings of similarity, closeness, relatability, and connection. For social disclosures to create such positive feelings, the influencer must not use personal stories (social disclosures) to promote products or services, as this has been found to provoke negative reactions from followers towards the influencer and the brand being advertised. Instead, promotions

and social self-disclosures must be separated and not included in the same post. Also, influencers are advised to disclose affiliations for promotional posts, as this mitigates the negative reaction that followers have towards promotions in general.

When disclosing something personal an influencer must make sure the topic is considered appropriate. Our qualitative results found that followers deem most topics as appropriate for public disclosure by a travel influencer, with certain exceptions: politics, sex, self-harm, and disclosures about others. The appropriateness of the delivery of the disclosure must also be ensured, especially when disclosing personal vulnerabilities. An influencer must make sure that the disclosure is not given in an overtly emotional manner—rather, a subtle delivery is recommended. Followers also demand authenticity in influencers' disclosures, understood as the combination of being genuine (i.e., sincere) and real (i.e., showing the positive and negative sides) in disclosures. In fact, being real was not only important in social disclosures but also in travel self-disclosure and promotions. Followers appreciate influencers who offer a realistic view of life, travel, and the products/service they are promoting, by showing both the positive and the negative.

Secondly, at the managerial level, this study represents an essential resource for marketing firms and travel agencies aiming to collaborate with travel influencers, as a basis for the planning and execution of their influencer marketing strategies. In particular, this research offers managers several practical considerations in choosing SMIs. The goal of an influencer marketing strategy is to select a person who will have a high impact on followers, attract the target audience, and influence their purchasing

intent. Firms need to pay attention to the influence of SMIs' self-disclosure habits and their appropriateness, which is a key factor for building trust and improving product attitudes.

In addition, firms are advised to sign agreements with influencers with conditions indicating that the influencer must avoid too much social self-disclosure beyond the business's marketing needs, in order to prevent clashes of context (personal vs. commercial) from generating perceptions of inappropriateness, which can negatively impact behavioural intentions. Influencers should instead be encouraged to emphasise travel information providing non-tourist perspectives on destinations and include pictures that convey unique aspects of the culture, activities, etc. They should be encouraged to include self-reflection and depth of thought in relation to their travel experiences, such as the lessons they learned during these experiences. They should also require that influencers disclose their commercial affiliations even if the regulations they are legally subject to do not ask for it, as it has been proven to be beneficial. Firms should not restrict their affiliated influencers from reporting the negative aspects of the products and services advertised, or at least talking about which people the product (service, destination, etc) may be unsuitable for, to ensure a realistic representation of the promotion, as this has been found to increase the perceived credibility of the influencer, and raising trust in their recommendations, which leads to desirable behavioural intentions. Also, even in promotions, influencers must be advised to ensure appropriateness of delivery, by avoiding the appearance of overtly promoting products, but rather giving genuine recommendations, as this has been found to impact consumer outcomes better. In addition, influencers should be

advised to provide genuine travel disclosures, by showing their own preferences, choices, and tastes, rather than just featuring tourist attractions.

The firms are also advised to have discussions with influencers about what constitutes appropriate disclosure. Specifically, firms need to conduct their own research into what the boundaries of appropriateness are for their audience. This will allow firms and influencers to better understand their audience.

Furthermore, it appears that marketing firms that manage SMIs may obtain an appreciable return from efforts to train SMIs to self-disclose in the right amount at the right time, with the right content in the right setting. Such firms might benefit from conducting content analyses on followers' reactions towards previous self-disclosure posts on Instagram by the influencers they manage. Analyzing these interactions by looking at likes, mentions, and comments will enable them to better understand followers' reactions and train influencers accordingly.

Third, social media marketing, which aims to create long-term relationships by engaging consumers, is not entirely different from traditional marketing in that it must be part of a defined strategy within the company (Parsons, 2013). Thus, salespeople working for travel agencies must understand the effects of social and travel self-disclosure on consumers' intentional behavior because they represent and build the brand of a company. This research shows that the training of salespeople in the travel

industry should include recognition of which types of self-disclosure are appropriate when advertising for companies.

This research is not offering exact guidelines or strict rules, but rather recommendations based on our results. However, the different stakeholders are encouraged to engage in discussion about these issues, referring to the authenticity, realness, and appropriateness of influencers' disclosures and promotional content, and their impacts on followers and brands. Thus, these issues should be widely discussed in academic circles concerned with the growing phenomenon of social media influencers, but also by marketing experts working to improve brand development strategies, using influencers as channels of communication.

Limitations and Future Research

This research benefited from a mixed methods research design, which enabled the validation of experimental results, while a full picture of the phenomenon was acquired through qualitative enquiry. This work has thereby helped clarify aspects of the phenomenon that do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis. However, as with any research this work is not without limitations. These are acknowledged below, and recommendations are offered as to how future research should address them.

First, while the general purposeful sampling requirements were the same across the three studies (i.e., followers of Instagram travel influencers), the sources of the samples were different. The participants in the two experimental studies were relatively homogenous as they included online participants who follow Instagram travel

influencers recruited through Mturk, while the sample in study three consisted of UK based university students who follow Instagram travel influencers. These differences between samples limited the coherent integration of the analysis of the three studies.

Another issue with study one and two is the differences in cultural diversity within these samples limited their generalizability and prevented comparisons within the different participants' countries. Due to small samples from countries such as the UK and Italy, cultural differences could not be robustly assessed and compared to each other, or to the US sample, which was the largest. Hence, future research might benefit from a more even cultural distribution between countries in the sample. Future research should examine comparisons between cultures regarding the impact of social self-disclosure by SMIs on consumer behaviour. While study three provided a more even spread of cultures between the participants, yet no cultural differences appeared within the results. The prior the literature also doesn't report on variation between cultures (Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973).

The results of this study are generalizable to travel influencers, but only to a limited extent to other types of influencers; for example, in the case of lifestyle influencers, their followers are likely to be more interested in their lifestyle, implying more interest in their social self-disclosures; more than would be desirable from a travel influencer. Hence, future research might benefit from replicating these studies with other types of influencers.

Also, because the participants were not in a natural SM setting, they may have reacted differently to self-disclosure if it was presented by an influencer they had been following. Our measurements assessed intentions rather than actual behaviors, which might put limitations on this research. Thus, future research should examine more natural behavioral reactions, and to what extent these align with behavioural intent. However, previous research has indicated that behavioural intentions are effective in forecasting behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975).

In addition, scenarios were used to manipulate the independent variable, which limits its generalizability. Although the scenario method conveys an effective method of studying subtle and inaccessible behaviors such as self-disclosure, the controlled settings may have produced responses that may not necessarily be replicable in a real setting. Unfortunately, there are numerous practical and ethical difficulties involved in direct investigations of ongoing interaction between influencers and followers. For example, real influencers are not inclined to allow investigations to be carried out with their real followers if the manipulations are liable to affect their followers negatively. In such circumstances, using scenarios gives the opportunity to manipulate variables and contexts that are not easily manipulated in real-life settings (Andersson et al., 2016; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008). Furthermore, Bateson and Hui (1992) demonstrated the ecological validity of the scenario method in service research. Regardless, a ‘real life’ setting is always preferable for this type of research, in order to examine more natural behavioural reactions.

While the experimental approach employed in this research is close to natural interactions in social media platforms and offers increased internal validity, it nevertheless has limited ecological and external validity. Specifically, the influencers presented in the experiments were fictional, rather than actual, thus the artificial nature of the experiments may constrain generalizability of the findings to more naturalistic settings—though the realism check in study one suggests otherwise, as the stimuli were made to be similar to real Instagram posts in every way possible. It's also worth noting, the participants may simply not have any interest in traveling, or in traveling to the specific location in the stimulus. Therefore, a more naturalistic setting examining naturally occurring self-disclosures in the context of real SMIs and their followers is recommended for future replication. Future research might benefit from conducting content analysis on real influencers-followers interactions in relation to influencers' self-disclosures and the role played by social media policing—the effects of perceived responses by audiences' comments on what is posted. Future research might gather ethnographic in-field data by spending time with actual influencers, perform net-ethnography, or scrap data and code it based on the themes of self-disclosure found in this research.

Furthermore, the results may vary maybe depending on the stage of the SMI-follower relationship. The length of the relationship (i.e., how long has a person been following the influencer) might play a role in the effects of self-disclosure. A one-time encounter was employed in this research, in which an participants had no previous interactions with the target, using a so-called 'zero-acquaintance paradigm'—in which perceivers make judgments about strangers without the opportunity to interact (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988). Thus, future research should include repeated encounters and

explore the link between self-disclosure and consumer behavior in the context of an ongoing relationship: previous studies in CMC (R. Lin & Utz, 2017) found that frequency of disclosure resulted in feelings of familiarity and closeness. Also, future research might benefit from exploring the extent of emotional and personal investments that followers put in the accounts/influencers they follow.

In study one, the levels of depth might have been mis-calibrated for the context, being perhaps too personal for a marketing context, where the threshold for what is considered intimate disclosure may be lower than that in interpersonal relationships. Thus, future research might benefit from examining depth of disclosure in a more fine-grained manner (e.g., using more levels: high, medium, and low) and seeing how these correlate to consumers' reactions. However, the general finding of the negative effect of social self-disclosure was supported by study three qualitatively.

Lastly, a general limitation that applies to all studies on SNS is that these environments change so quickly – new features are introduced on a regular basis, and users adapt to new features as well as changes in usage norms (Utz, 2015), which might change people's perceptions of what is appropriate accordingly. The present study can therefore only provide a snapshot of the effects of self-disclosure by SMI's on consumer behaviour at this point in time. Future, research might benefit from addressing this in a longitudinal study.

Future research is recommended to further investigate genuineness as a potential mediator in this relationship. Also, the impact on consumer outcomes of travel vs.

social self-disclosure should be experimentally tested. Furthermore, independent experiments manipulating the appropriateness of delivery of both promotions and disclosures of personal vulnerabilities is recommended, by having a subtle condition vs. a more overt condition. Moreover, followers' perceptions regarding the influencers' credibility and trustworthiness should be tested, comparing a condition where promotional posts are presented unaccompanied by social disclosures, and a condition that integrates them in one post.

Future research might benefit from comparing followers on the bases of their age, especially millennials and generation Z. This research can also be replicated in other SNS platforms such as YouTube and Snapchat, and in relation to different types of influencers, such makeup and fashion influencers, tech influencers, etc. Future research should compare disclosures on posts and disclosures on 'stories'—that is, ad hoc imagery and videos that auto-delete after twenty-four hours, as opposed to posts, which are generally considered permanent unless the influencer deletes them. McCorquodale (2019) found that influencers' content on the posts remain curated and filtered, while their stories are often grittier and used to discuss personal crises, topical issues, and show a more 'real' side of their lives. Hence, a comparison between the effects of influencers' disclosures on these different features is recommended for future work.

Furthermore, future research might benefit from identifying other relevant variables to manipulate, such as the valence of the disclosure. A meta-analysis by (Collins & Miller, 1994) indicated that the valence (positive vs. negative) of the disclosure might play an important role in the relationship between disclosure and liking. Also, in this research

we focused on positive recommendations instead of negative experiences and complaints. Future research should investigate influencers that criticise products, and how this influences consumer behavior. Also, future research might benefit from studying different dependent variables in response to different forms of disclosure, such as follower numbers, likes, mentions, and comments. Such variables might enable a clearer comparison between marketing and a non-marketing contexts. Also, future research might wish to explore the impact of including likes and comments on a self-disclosure post and whether it makes a difference on how participants respond to the post. Also, future research might wish to explore in more details whether tagging the service on top of the post or the placement of the mention – at the beginning or at the end of the post- makes a difference.

Overall Conclusion

This thesis was motivated by the observation of increasing intimate self-disclosure by SMIs on public outlets and its impact on followers/consumers, in light of the existing marketing knowledge discouraging marketer's social self-disclosure. The thesis poses interesting questions on whether followers regard SMIs as friends or as salespeople, and whether they expect them to act professionally or casually, and most importantly, on how influencers' self-disclosure impacts consumers' trust, product attitude, purchase and WOM intentions. It also investigates the perceived appropriateness of such disclosures from the point of view of their followers.

This research resulted in exciting findings and interesting future ideas. Specifically, it was found that travel influencers' followers favour travel content and travel self-

disclosure more than social self-disclosure. In particular, social self-disclosure by influencers when promoting a brand should be avoided to prevent negative consumer outcomes. When SMIs are engaging in paid promotions, they are expected to act professionally like a salesperson, and avoid irrelevant personal disclosures.

However, outside this promotional context, social self-disclosure by SMIs can be beneficial to the influencer-follower relationship, as long as it is within the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure. Within these boundaries of appropriateness (i.e., having the correct split between the different content types, separation of social self-disclosure from promotional content, appropriateness of delivery and content, and authenticity), social self-disclosure *can* generate positive reactions from consumer. In conclusion, while social media users expect some degree of social self-disclosure from travel influencers, their primary interest is in travel content and travel self-disclosure. Thus, travel influencers are advised to focus primarily on travel self-disclosure and travel content while limiting social self-disclosures, within the boundaries of appropriate self-disclosure.

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Appendices

Appendix One:

1.1 Interview Questions

1- Can you tell me about some Instagram travel influencer you follow?

2- Can you show me their profile on Instagram and tell me what's your favourite post?

3- Why do you follow them through Instagram and not another platform?

4- Why do you follow these influencers specifically? What makes you attracted to this influencer and not others? Give examples?

5-While watching an influencer coverage of a travel experience , at what point while you're watching you say to yourself I want to try this or go there?

6-How well do you think you know this influencer, why? Examples?

7-Do you trust these influencers? Why?

8-Can you tell me things about their personal life? Do they overshare? Do these influencers disclose personal private information? Examples?

9-What does knowing such information about them give you a feeling of? how does it effect your perceptions about them?

10-Do you think this disclosure of personal information is appropriate? Why?

11-How does their disclosure effect your trust and your tendency to follow their advice?

12-Do you remember them disclosing a negative past or current personal experience? Tell me about it.

13-Do you think that disclosing this makes them strong or weak? Why?

14-When looking at their current success as influencers and having in mind the struggles that they disclosed, what do you thin and feel about them?

15- Would you like to be friends with this influencer? Why?

16-I want you to look at the following posts and tell me what you think about them?

epic.travels

epic.travels Last week I and Jackie, my wife, went on a trip to Bali, an Indonesian island on the Indian Ocean. We decided to put behind us our normal married life and my health issues and forget everything to enjoy this trip. This vacation was definitely needed to get away from everything back at home and get together. It reminded us of how big the world is and full of experiences and made us think of how we should spend more time with family. Also, I was so happy to get away from general day-to-day routine back at home. On this trip we had plenty of time to explore the beaches and villages around the Bali coast, which were very beautiful. We also visited some beautiful temples that I believe are worth visiting. I love travelling so I can see new interesting places, environments, and cultures. Experiencing places and scenery like this give me a lot of joy and happiness.

The St Regents Resort & Spa was amazing from the beginning till we left, I can't recommend it enough!!!

an_obsessed_traveler
an_obsessed_traveler On this trip to Maldives I took my whole family with me, mom, dad, and my bro. It was a nice reunion. Although I was dreading it, we actually had fun! I was so worried at the beginning that this trip would be a disaster because we haven't spent time as a family since my parents got divorced when I was 10, with the last 15 years trying to keep peace between them as they shouted at each other. Staying at the Maldivian Experience Resort altogether has however been wonderful for everyone. The resorts' beach was sooo beautiful and full of activities such as parasailing, scuba diving, jet skies, boat sailing, we could do together – my parents were even smiling and joking with each other. The resort had organised activities everyday so I didn't have to worry about keeping everyone busy. Each day we tried a new thing and I felt like after all these years we finally bonded as a family. Can truly say I think I could have stayed forever. Thank you Maldivian Experience Resort for organising this 😊

travelsfever

This was in Phuket, Thailand where I stayed at G.W Thai Resort. This was not an ordinary trip, it was changing point for me! I am from Sri Lanka and in my culture, travel isn't something that you just do. I come from a poor background. I have hidden this reality for a long time and pretended it never existed. But on this trip, I reached a place of honesty and authenticity. This started on the way from the airport to the resort passing through poor districts which reminded me of my childhood and made me face my past that I have been strongly pushing away but it kept following me in my mind while on activities arranged by the hotel such as yoga, meditation, breathing classes, and cycling trips to temples. In these experiences I was given time to reflect on my life. Staying at that hotel felt like a journey for self-discovery and self-awareness. Also, the beach was amazing and had a therapeutic effect on me. I am sharing this because I want people to see themselves in my travel experiences so that they can see that they too can travel the world no matter what their backgrounds are!

Appendix 1.2 Ethical Forms

Ethical Form for Study One

University of Edinburgh Business School

Level 1 and 2[2] Research Ethics Applications

Name of Student (Research Postgraduate): Sara AlRabiah

Title of Proposal: The Impact of Self-disclosure by Social Media Influencers on Consumer behaviour

Please provide a brief outline of the research aims and the proposed methodology, highlighting any anticipated ethical issues (on separate sheet if necessary):

The methodology involves an online experiment on Qualtrics that will be administered through Amazon Truk. Participant will be paid for their participation. Only above 18 participants will be included after reading a consent form informing them that their participation is completely voluntarily and they can drop out anytime they want. The survey will show them a stimuli of a social media influencer profile posting a picture in his/her profile and writing a post under it. There will be four posts that are manipulated/randmoized so that each participant receives a different post. The posts vary in levels of disclosure while everything else is held constant such as the picture.

I have read the *Business School Research Ethics Policy* and agree to abide by it.

In the case of human participants.

Participants will be told about the objectives of the study.	Yes/No
Any hazards will be explained to them.	Yes/No
Participants will be informed they are participating of their own free will and consent.	Yes/No

[2] Level one: applies to 'straightforward' non-intervention, observational research (data, observation, questionnaires)
Level two: 'straightforward' engagement with participants or participant groups (interviews, focus groups etc.)

They will be informed that they are free to withdraw at any point should they wish to.	Yes/No
Information will be held in confidence and any information used will be used anonymously unless consent has been given otherwise[3]	Yes/No
I confirm that this study does NOT involve children (under 18), institutionalised people; or other individuals who are vulnerable or unable to give consent.	Yes/No
I have considered the risks of physical or psychological harm to research participants (including the researchers) and how to address these	Yes/No
I confirm that this research does NOT concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist	Yes/No[4]

Please provide explanations in the case of a negative response to any of the above questions.

Student signature: ……Sara AlRabiah……. Date: 17/04/2018

Supervisor signature: ……. Date:

[3] *The University's recommended method of storing, accessing and sharing data in a research project is via* ***DataStore****. If the data is to be stored or archived for Open Access after project completion – to comply with incoming Research Data Management requirements, storage needs to be for a minimum of 10 years, using UEBS approved data management/storage (****DataShare*** *is recommended) that is password protected on a secure computer. See http://datashare.is.ed.ac.uk/ for more details. If not, then another secure repository should be identified. The University is currently developing DataVault (to be operational by mid-2016).*

[4] If your research does concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist, please also complete and submit the supplementary form available here as an appendix.

APPENDIX

The Terrorism Act (2006) outlaws the dissemination of records, statements and other documents that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts.

1. Does your research involve the storage on a computer of any such records, statements or other documents?

Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Might your research involve the electronic transmission (eg as an email attachment) of such records or statements?

Yes ☐ No ☐

3. If you answered 'Yes' to questions 1 or 2, you are advised to store the relevant records or statements electronically on a secure university file store. The same applies to paper documents with the same sort of content. These should be scanned and uploaded. Access to this file store will be protected by a password unique to you and your School Research Ethics Officer. Please indicate below that you agree to store all documents relevant to questions 1 and 2 on that file store:

Yes ☐

3a. Please indicate below that you agree not to transmit electronically to any third party documents in the file store:

Yes ☐

4. Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with extreme, or terrorist, organisations?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5. If you answer ‘Yes’ to question 4, you are advised that such sites may be subject to surveillance by the police. Accessing those sites from university IP addresses might lead to police enquiries. Please acknowledge that you understand this risk by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

6. By submitting to the ethics process, you accept that your School Research Ethics Officer and the convenor of the University’s Compliance Group will have access to a list of titles of documents (but not the contents of documents) in your document store. Please acknowledge that you accept this by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

Student signature: ……Sara AlRabiah……. Date: 17/04/2018

Supervisor signature: ……Ben Marder……. Date: 17/04/2018

Ethical Form for Study Two

University of Edinburgh Business School

Level 1 and 2[5] Research Ethics Applications

Name of Student (Research Postgraduate): Sara AlRabiah

Title of Proposal: The Impact of Self-disclosure by social media influencers on consumer behaviour

Please provide a brief outline of the research aims and the proposed methodology, highlighting any anticipated ethical issues (on separate sheet if necessary):

A survey will be posted through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Users will be over 18 years old and have an Instagram account. A consent will show up for participants before they start the survey informing them about the purpose of the study and that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time. Answers will be anonymous. First participants will be randomly allocated to three different conditions that prime appropriateness of self-disclosure on social media into high, medium, low. Then they will be shown high self-disclosure statement by a travel influencer on the influencer's social media account. Afterwards, participants will be asked to fill in a short survey about the consumption behaviour intention. Participants will be paid 20 cents for participating.

I have read the *Business School Research Ethics Policy* and agree to abide by it.

In the case of human participants and/or research related to terrorism: (delete as necessary)

Participants will be told about the objectives of the study.	Yes/No
Any hazards will be explained to them.	Yes/No
Participants will be informed they are participating of their own free will and consent.	Yes/No

[5] Level one: applies to 'straightforward' non-intervention, observational research (data, observation, questionnaires)
Level two: 'straightforward' engagement with participants or participant groups (interviews, focus groups etc.)

They will be informed that they are free to withdraw at any point should they wish to.	Yes/No
Information will be held in confidence and any information used will be used anonymously unless consent has been given otherwise[6]	Yes/No
I confirm that this study does NOT involve children (under 18), institutionalised people; or other individuals who are vulnerable or unable to give consent.	Yes/No
I have considered the risks of physical or psychological harm to research participants (including the researchers) and how to address these	Yes/No
I confirm that this research does NOT concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist	Yes/No[7]

Please provide explanations in the case of a negative response to any of the above questions.

Student signature: Sara AlRabiah…… Date: 26 October,2018

Supervisor signature: ……. Date:

[6] *The University's recommended method of storing, accessing and sharing data in a research project is via* ***DataStore****. If the data is to be stored or archived for Open Access after project completion – to comply with incoming Research Data Management requirements, storage needs to be for a minimum of 10 years, using UEBS approved data management/storage (****DataShare*** *is recommended) that is password protected on a secure computer. See http://datashare.is.ed.ac.uk/ for more details. If not, then another secure repository should be identified. The University is currently developing DataVault (to be operational by mid-2016).*

[7] If your research does concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist, please also complete and submit the supplementary form available here as an appendix.

APPENDIX

The Terrorism Act (2006) outlaws the dissemination of records, statements and other documents that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts.

1. Does your research involve the storage on a computer of any such records, statements or other documents?

Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Might your research involve the electronic transmission (eg as an email attachment) of such records or statements?

Yes ☐ No ☐

3. If you answered 'Yes' to questions 1 or 2, you are advised to store the relevant records or statements electronically on a secure university file store. The same applies to paper documents with the same sort of content. These should be scanned and uploaded. Access to this file store will be protected by a password unique to you and your School Research Ethics Officer. Please indicate below that you agree to store all documents relevant to questions 1 and 2 on that file store:

Yes ☐

3a. Please indicate below that you agree not to transmit electronically to any third party documents in the file store:

Yes ☐

4. Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with extreme, or terrorist, organisations?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5. If you answer ‘Yes’ to question 4, you are advised that such sites may be subject to surveillance by the police. Accessing those sites from university IP addresses might lead to police enquiries. Please acknowledge that you understand this risk by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

6. By submitting to the ethics process, you accept that your School Research Ethics Officer and the convenor of the University’s Compliance Group will have access to a list of titles of documents (but not the contents of documents) in your document store. Please acknowledge that you accept this by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

Student signature: Sara AlRabiah……. Date: 26, oct,2018

Supervisor signature: Ben Marder……. Date: 26/oct/2018

Ethical Form for Study Three

University of Edinburgh Business School

Level 1 and 2[8] Research Ethics Applications

Name of Student (Research Postgraduate): Sara AlRabiah

Title of Proposal: The Impact of Self-disclosure by social media influencers on consumer behaviour

Please provide a brief outline of the research aims and the proposed methodology, highlighting any anticipated ethical issues (on separate sheet if necessary):

This study is aimed to understand the perceptions of the followers of Instagram travel influencers regarding deep self-disclosure made on their account. The methodology will be interviews of 20 university students that follow Instagram travel influencers. There is no ethical issues anticipated.

I have read the *Business School Research Ethics Policy* and agree to abide by it.

In the case of human participants and/or research related to terrorism: (delete as necessary)

Participants will be told about the objectives of the study.	Yes/No
Any hazards will be explained to them.	Yes/No
Participants will be informed they are participating of their own free will and consent.	Yes/No
They will be informed that they are free to withdraw at any point should they wish to.	Yes/No
Information will be held in confidence and any information used will be used anonymously unless consent has been given otherwise[9]	Yes/No

[8] Level one: applies to 'straightforward' non-intervention, observational research (data, observation, questionnaires)
Level two: 'straightforward' engagement with participants or participant groups (interviews, focus groups etc.)

[9] *The University's recommended method of storing, accessing and sharing data in a research project is via* ***DataStore****. If the data is to be stored or archived for Open Access after project completion – to comply with*

I confirm that this study does NOT involve children (under 18), institutionalised people; or other individuals who are vulnerable or unable to give consent.	Yes/No
I have considered the risks of physical or psychological harm to research participants (including the researchers) and how to address these	Yes/No
I confirm that this research does NOT concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist	Yes/No[10]

Please provide explanations in the case of a negative response to any of the above questions.

Student signature: Sara AlRabiah……. Date: 04/04/2019

Supervisor signature: Ben Marder…… Date: 04/04/2019

*incoming Research Data Management requirements, storage needs to be for a minimum of 10 years, using UEBS approved data management/storage (**DataShare** is recommended) that is password protected on a secure computer. See http://datashare.is.ed.ac.uk/ for more details. If not, then another secure repository should be identified. The University is currently developing DataVault (to be operational by mid-2016).*

[10] If your research does concern groups which may be construed as terrorist or extremist, please also complete and submit the supplementary form available here as an appendix.

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Yes ☐

3a. Please indicate below that you agree not to transmit electronically to any third party documents in the file store:

Yes ☐

4. Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with extreme, or terrorist, organisations?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5. If you answer ‘Yes’ to question 4, you are advised that such sites may be subject to surveillance by the police. Accessing those sites from university IP addresses might lead to police enquiries. Please acknowledge that you understand this risk by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

6. By submitting to the ethics process, you accept that your School Research Ethics Officer and the convenor of the University’s Compliance Group will have access to a list of titles of documents (but not the contents of documents) in your document store. Please acknowledge that you accept this by putting an ‘X’ in the ‘Yes’ box.

Yes ☐

Student signature: Sara AlRabiah……. Date: 26, oct,2018

Supervisor signature: ……. Date:

Appendix 1.3 Consent Form

'PERCEPTIONS+ OF FOLLOWERS REGARDING INFLUENCERS' POSTS' CONSENT FORM

What is the study about?

We are interested in knowing how followers of Instagram travel influencers react to different personal information disclosed in influencers' posts and how this impacts followers' behavior and attitude.

What will I be asked to do?

A short questionnaire will be used to gather background information about the interviewee. The interview will be of two parts. First you will be asked questions about the influencers you follow on Instagram and you will be asked to show the interviewer some influencer accounts that you follow on Instagram. Then, you will be asked to have a look at some posts by Travel influencers and discuss your reaction towards them. Audio recording will be used during the interview.

[ ] I understand that I am participating voluntarily in a study as part of the 'Perception of followers regarding Instagram influencers' posts' project.

[ ] I am willing for the interview to be audio recorded.

[ ] The researcher may use quotes from the interview in publications provided that they will be anonymized and cannot be connected back to me.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Researchers: Sara AlRabiah Date: _____

Appendix 1.4 Templates

Initial Templet

1. Perceptions about the profession of Social Media Influencers
    1.1 Negativism towards social media influencers
        1.1.1 Harms society
            1.1.1.1 promoting materialism
            1.1.1.2 negatively impacting followers
                1.1.1.2.1 envy
                1.1.1.2.2 mental health issues
        1.1.2 Negative perceptions on perfect influencers
            1.1.2.1 Distant
            1.1.2.2 Unrelatable
            1.1.2.3 superficial
            1.1.2.4 fake fairy-tale
            1.1.2.5 untrue ingenuine
            1.1.2.6 inauthentic
        1.1.3 Claims of not being negatively impacted
            1.1.3.1 Awareness
            1.1.3.2 Age
    1.2 Positive towards the profession
        1.2.1 Fun
        1.2.2 Inspirational
        1.2.3 Perceptions on imperfect influencers
            1.2.3.1 Normal
            1.2.3.2 Relatable
            1.2.3.3 Genuine
2. Travel Influencers
    2.1 Reasons to follow travel influencers
        2.1.1 Interest in Photography
            2.1.1.1 Photos with animals
                2.1.1.1.1 With
                2.1.1.1.2 Against
            2.1.1.2 what they like in a photo
        2.1.2 Useful Information
            2.1.2.1 Budget information
            2.1.2.2 Local vs. touristy experience
            2.1.2.3 Travel vs. personal information
        2.1.3 Exposure to experiences
            2.1.3.1 Inspirational
            2.1.3.2 Fun
            2.1.3.3 Solo travellers
3. Self-disclosure
    3.1 Social self-disclosure
        3.1.1 Examples of influencers disclosure
            3.1.1.1 Examples of positive disclosure
                3.1.1.1.1 Own reactions to disclosure

- 3.1.1.1.2 Followers reactions to disclosure
- 3.1.1.2 Example of negative disclosure
- 3.1.1.2.1 Reactions to negative disclosure
- 3.1.2 Accepted Self-disclosure
- 3.1.2.1 Desired self-disclosure
- 3.1.2.1.1 Engaging and interesting
- 3.1.2.2 Appreciated Self-disclosure
- 3.1.2.2.1 Disclosure of adverse life experiences
- 3.1.2.2.1.1 Compassion towards the influencer
- 3.1.2.2.1.2 Relatable
- 3.1.2.2.1.3 Inspiring
- 3.1.2.2.1.4 Appreciated vulnerability
- 3.1.2.2.1.4.1 Authenticity
- 3.1.2.2.1.4.2 Strength
- 3.1.2.2.1.4.2.1 Courage
- 3.1.2.2.1.4.2.2 Not hiding and owning one's weakness
- 3.1.2.2.1.4.3 What they consider vulnerability
- 3.1.2.3 Emotions and perceptions about influencer in reactions to their self-disclosure
- 3.1.2.3.1 Trust
- 3.1.2.3.1.1 Other reasons for trust
- 3.1.2.3.1.1.1 Passion
- 3.1.2.3.1.1.2 Unedited photos
- 3.1.2.3.2 liking
- 3.1.2.3.3 feelings of Closeness
- 3.1.2.3.3.1 Connected
- 3.1.2.3.3.2 Invested in them
- 3.1.2.3.3.3 Friend-like
- 3.1.2.3.3.4 Met them in person
- 3.1.2.3.3.5 Seen them grown
- 3.1.2.3.3.6 No closeness to influencer
- 3.1.2.3.4 Humanization
- 3.1.2.3.4.1 Real
- 3.1.2.3.5 Open
- 3.1.2.3.6 honesty
- 3.1.3 Unaccepted Self-disclosure
- 3.1.3.1 Over sharing (too much information)
- 3.1.3.1.1 Feeling like a stalker
- 3.1.3.1.2 Having boundaries
- 3.1.3.1.3 The photo should talk
- 3.1.3.1.4 Too much text
- 3.1.3.2 Dramatic (not subtle)
- 3.1.3.2.1 Attention seeking
- 3.1.3.2.1.1 Out of control emotionally
- 3.1.3.2.1.2 Unappreciated vulnerability
- 3.1.3.3 Inappropriate
- 3.1.3.3.1 Political
- 3.1.3.3.2 Sexual
- 3.1.3.3.3 Suicidal
- 3.1.3.3.4 About others

3.1.3.3.4.1 Don’t care, don’t relate
3.1.3.3.4.2 Uncomfortable
3.1.3.3.4.3 Privacy concerns
3.1.3.3.4.3.1 Loose of respect
3.1.3.4 Combining Social disclosure with promotion
3.2 Exchange-specific self-disclosure
3.2.1 Disclosure of negative experiences with brands
3.2.1.1 With
3.2.1.2 against
3.2.2 Disclosure of affiliation
3.2.2.1 Accepted sponsorship
3.2.2.1.1 Credible
3.2.2.1.2 Reasons to influence consumption behaviour
3.2.2.1.2.1 Similarity
3.2.2.1.2.2 Relevance
3.2.2.1.2.3 Influencer is a local
3.2.2.1.2.4 Accessible
3.2.2.1.2.5 Affordable
3.2.2.1.2.6 Good photo
3.2.2.1.2.7 Good recommendation vs. trying to sell
3.2.2.1.2.8 Straight forward
3.2.2.1.2.9 To look cool
3.2.2.2 Unaccepted sponsorship
3.2.2.2.1 Sceptical
3.2.2.2.2 Research first
3.2.2.2.3 Location of mention
3.2.3 Self-reflection and depth of thought

Second Template

Theme one: Transactional Vs. Personal disclosure

- Subtheme 1.1: Personal disclosure
  - Subtheme 1.1.1 Examples of influencers disclosure
  - Subtheme 1.1.2 Reaction to personal self-disclosure
  - Subtheme 1.1.3 Is all personal disclosure undesirable?
    - Subtheme 1.1c1 Acceptable amount of self-disclosure
- Subtheme 1.2: Transactional disclosure
  - Subtheme 1.2.1 Pictures Vs. Text
    - Subtheme 1.2.1.a The picture should do the talking
    - Subtheme 1.2.1.b The connection between the picture and the disclosure
  - Subtheme 1.2.2 Negativism towards promotional content
    - Subtheme 1.2.2.1 Research as a self-protection mechanism
    - Subtheme 1.2.2.2 Disclosure of affiliation
      - Subtheme 1.2.2.2.1 Transparency and Trust
- Subtheme 1.3: Mutual exclusivity
- Subtheme 1.4: The intersection
  - Subtheme 1.4.1 Self-reflection and depth of thought
  - Subtheme 1.4.2 Travel experience

Theme Two: Appropriateness

- Subtheme 2.2 Content
- Subtheme 2.3 Delivery
  - Subtheme 2.1.1 Genuineness
    - Subtheme 2.1.1.a Genuineness in a Photo
    - Subtheme 2.1.1.b Genuineness in Personal disclosure
    - Subtheme 2.1.1.c Genuineness in transactional disclosure
  - Subtheme 2.1.2 Intensity
    - Subtheme 2.1.2.a Subtleness in transactional disclosure

Theme Three: Realism

- Subtheme 3.1 Balancing in personal disclosure - trust
- Subtheme 3.2 Realism vs. Perfection
- Subtheme 3.3 realism in transactional disclosure

Theme four: Trust – an integrated theme.

- Subtheme 4.1 Transparency
- Subtheme- 4.2 Similarity and Relating

Third Template

Theme one: Travel Content
- Subtheme 1.1 Context About Destinations
- Subtheme 1.2 Pictures
  - Subtheme 1.2.1 The picture should do the talking
- Subtheme 1.3 Promotional Content

Theme Two: Travel Self-disclosure
- Subtheme 2.1 Personal Context Around a Travel experience
- Subtheme 2.2 Self-Reflection and Depth of Thought
- Subtheme 2.3 Disclosure of affiliation

Theme Three: Personal Self-disclosure
- Subtheme 3.1 Travel Influencers Between Personal Self-disclosure and Travel Content
  - Subtheme 3.1.1 Mutual Exclusivity Between Personal Self-disclosure and Promotional Content
- Subtheme 3.2 Influencer's Personal Self-disclosure
- Subtheme 3.3 Balancing Personal Self-disclosure and Travel Content

Theme Four: Factors Playing a role in Shifting Followers' Reactions Towards Self-disclosure
- Subtheme 4.1 Appropriateness of Self-disclosure
  - Subtheme 4.1.1 Appropriateness of Content
  - Subtheme 4.1.2 Appropriateness of Delivery
    - Subtheme 4.1.2.1 Overtness
    - Subtheme 4.1.2.1 a) Subtle Disclosure of Personal Vulnerabilities
    - Subtheme 4.1.2.1 b) Overtness in Promotions
- Subtheme 4.2 Authenticity
  - Subtheme 4.2.1 Genuineness
    - Subtheme 4.2.1 a) Genuineness in Personal disclosure
    - Subtheme 4.2.1 b) Genuineness in Travel disclosure
  - Subtheme 4.2.2 Realism
    - Subtheme 4.2.2.1 Realism in Personal Self-disclosure
      - Subtheme 4.2.2.1. a) Perfection Vs. Being Real
    - Subtheme 4.2.2.2 Realism in Travel disclosure
    - Subtheme 4.2.2.3 Realism in Promotions

Theme Five: Trust in an Influencer- an Integrated Theme.
- Subtheme 5.1 Trust and Pictures
- Subtheme 5.2 Trust and Promotional content
  - Subtheme 5.2.1 Research as a Self-protection Mechanism
  - Subtheme 5.2.2 Trust and Transparency in disclosure of Affiliation
- Subtheme 5.3 Trust and Personal Self-disclosure
  - 5.3.1 Similarity and Relating
- Subtheme 5.4 Authenticity and Trust
  - Subtheme5.4.1 Realism and Trust
  - Subtheme 5.4.2 Mutual Exclusivity, Genuineness, and Trust

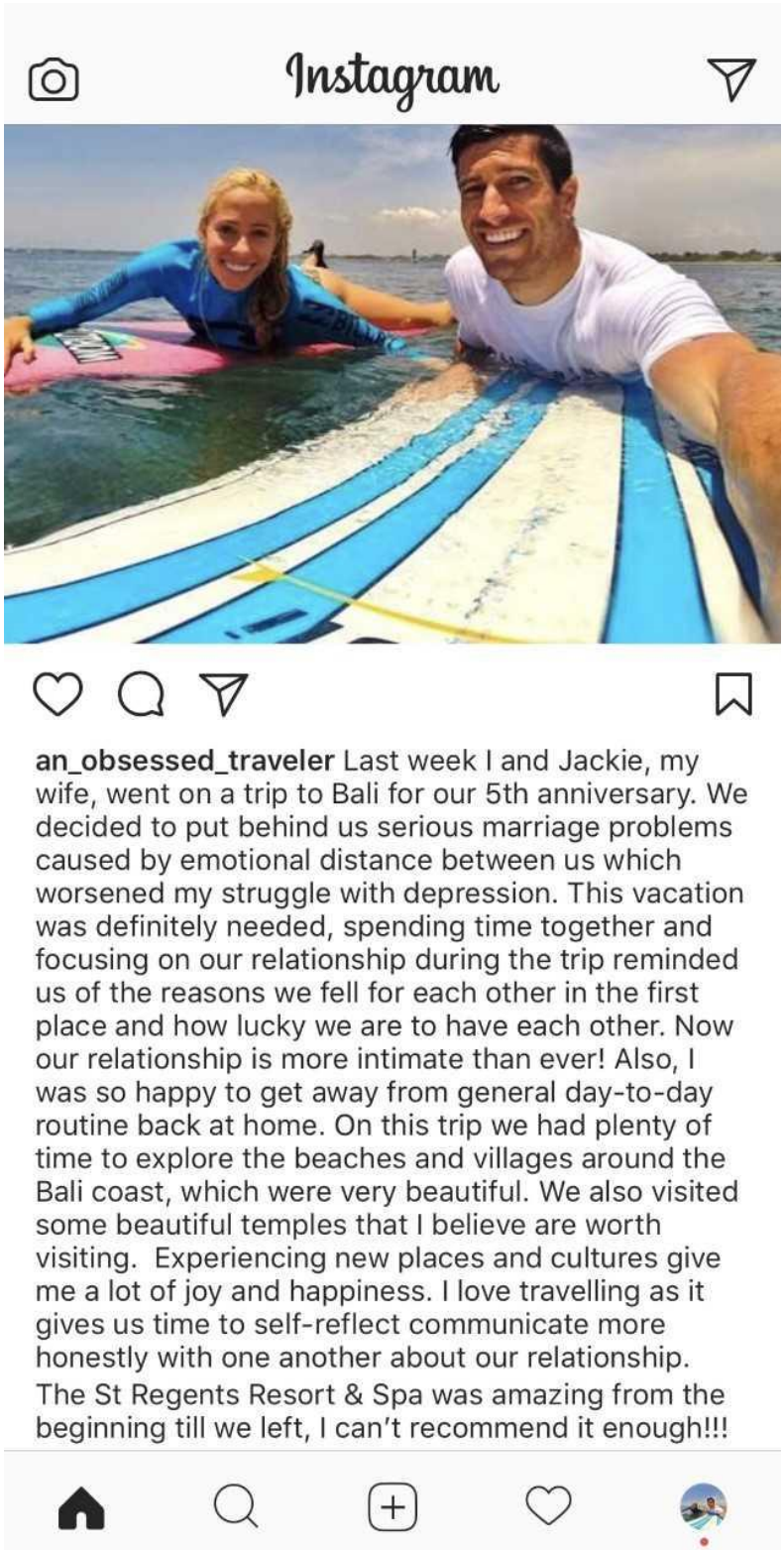
Appendix Two:

Appendix 2.1 Stimuli- for study one

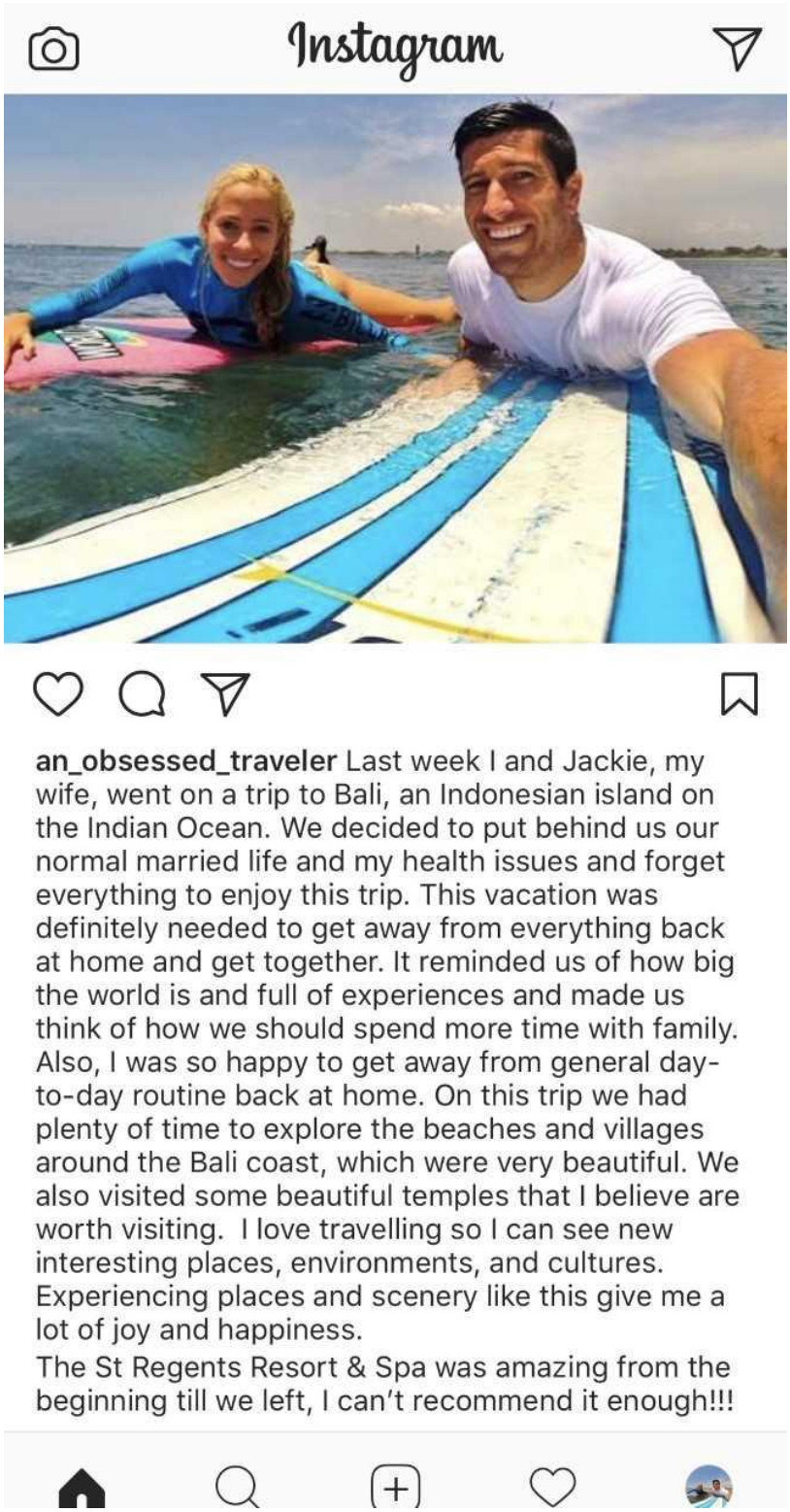
Condition 1 Female influencer, high depth, and high breadth of self-disclosure. The same stimulus have been replicated with the change of the influencer's gender.

Condition 2 Male influencer, high breadth, and low depth of self-disclosure. Same condition was replicated with a change in the influencer's gender.

Condition 3 Male influencer, low breadth, and high depth of self-disclosure. The same condition was replicated with a change in the influencer's gender.



Condition 4 Male influencer, low breadth, and low depth of self-disclosure. The same condition was replicated with a change in the influencer's gender.



Appendix 2.3 – pictures for attractiveness pre-test

Surf Couple

Island couple

Boat couple

Appendix 2.4

Trust Items	Component 1	Component 2
Freely share your ideas, hopes, and feelings with this person.	.823	-.407
Talk freely to this person about difficulties you are having in life knowing that he would want to listen.	.785	-.527
If I shared my problems with this person, I know he would respond constructively and caringly.	.799	-.448
This person display warmth and caring attitude towards the followers.	.827	-.239
I think this influencer's suggestion of the resort is good.	.740	.349
I think this influencer provides unbiased opinions.	.742	.145
The suggestion provided by this influencer is reliable.	.823	.279
I would take this influencer's advice about travel.	.840	.327
I would rely on this influencer's tourism reviews.	.840	.315
This influencer approaches his work as an influencer with dedication.	.774	.218

Table1: Trust items loading

Appendix 2.5

Gender		**Country**	
Male	53.2%	USA	71.5%
Female	46.8%	India	19.4%
Age		UK	1.5%
18-24	13.9%	Italy	1.1%
25-34	49.2%	Others	6.5%
35-44	22.%		
45-54	8.7%		
55-64	4.4%		
65-74	1.3%		
75%	.4%		

- Table 2 Sample's Demographics: Countries that are less than 1% where companied together in 'others' category. Full countries are: (Venezuela, Canada, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Kenya, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Romania, Singapore, Spain, and St. Luica)

Appendix Three:

Appendix 3.1 Priming Conditions

THE DAILY NEWS

www.dailynews.com - since 1879 -

It's Good to Get Personal in Your Social Media Posts

Experts on self-disclosure based at Ivy League Schools state that sharing intimate and private details about ourselves and our personal lives publicly on social media is considered very appropriate, as deep public disclosure has now became the norm on social media. In fact, a series of empirical studies proved that people perceive deep public disclosure on social media as being authentic and real which in turn will benefit the image portrayed to connections online. For example, a person that shares their emotions, feelings, and issues concerning their relationships is now considered very appropriate when posting on social media.

Appropriate priming condition

THE DAILY NEWS

www.dailynews.com - since 1879 -

Getting Personal in Your Social Media Posts

Experts on self-disclosure based at Ivy League Schools state that sharing intimate and private details about ourselves and our personal lives publicly on social media might be appropriate in some cases but not such much in others, as public disclosure on social media are distinct to norms of appropriateness in each situation. In fact, a series of empirical studies proved that people consider deep public disclosure on social media somewhat appropriate depending on the context which in turn can either benefit or damage the image portrayed to connections online. For example, a person that shares their emotions, feelings, and issues concerning their relationships is now considered as moderately appropriate when posting on social media.

Moderately appropriate priming condition

THE DAILY NEWS

www.dailynews.com - since 1879 -

It's Bad to Get Personal in Your Social Media Posts

Experts on self-disclosure based at Ivy League Schools state that sharing intimate and private details about ourselves and our personal lives publicly on social media is considered very inappropriate, as deep public disclosure has now become a violation of the norm on social media. In fact, a series of empirical studies proved that people perceive deep public disclosure on social media as being very inappropriate which in turn will damage the image portrayed to connections online. For example, a person that shares their emotions, feelings, and issues concerning their relationships is now considered very inappropriate when posting on social media.

Inappropriate priming condition

Appendix 3.3 Influencer Self-disclosure post

Appendix 3.4

Demographics Table

Gender		**Country**	
Male	43.6%	USA	77.8%
Female	65.4%	India	14.7%
Age		UK	1.5%
25-34	43.7%	Others	6%
35-44	23.4%	**Education**	
45-54	13.7%	Less than high school	.8%
55-64	6.2%	High school degree	9.8%
65-74	.8%	Some college	16.2%
		Associate degree	10.5%
		Bachelor's degree	47.4%
		Masters degree	12.8%
		Doctoral degree	1.5%
		Professional degree	1.1%

- Countries that are less than 1.2% were combined together. Full countries are: (Brazil, Canada, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Spain, The Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia)

Appendix 3.4

Trust Factor Loadings

Similar to study one the constructs of trust have been combined into a higher trust construct due to reliability as all items across trust measures loaded strongly loaded with one factor than another

Variable	Component 1	Component 2
Freely share your ideas, hopes, and feelings with this person.	.705	.580
Talk freely to this person about difficulties you are having in life knowing that he would want to listen.	.716	.583
If I shared my problems with this person, I know he would respond constructively and caringly.	.765	.368
This person display warmth and caring attitude towards the followers.	.783	.138
I think this influencer's suggestion of the resort is good.	.710	-.277
I think this influencer provides unbiased opinions.	.715	-.239
The suggestion provided by this influencer is reliable.	.822	-.331
I would take this influencer's advice about travel.	.862	-.278
I would rely on this influencer's tourism reviews.	.864	-.210
This influencer approaches his work as an influencer with dedication.	.719	-.216

Table1: Trust items Loading