(How) Does the Number of Followers Impact the Success of Influencer Marketing? A Construal Level Perspective

KIRSTEN COWAN
The University of Edinburgh
kirsten.cowan@ed.ac.uk

BEN MARDER
The University of Edinburgh
ben.marder@ed.ac.uk

LAURA LAVERTU
University of Strathclyde
laura.lavertu@strath.ac.uk

JIAYUAN LI
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
Jiayuan.Li@xjtlu.edu.cn

Prior research disagrees on how a social media influencer's (SMI's) following affects their persuasiveness, evidencing different moderators and mediators. This research offers a holistic explanation by showing when SMIs with lesser vs. greater followers can be more effective. Specifically, an SMI's followers cues social distance, and, in turn, influence construal level, such that they are perceived as closer (vs. further) from oneself. Moreover, we introduce message diagnosticity (*e.g.*, brand tagging; media channel) as a form of hypothetical distance; matching SMI social distance and diagnosticity influences persuasiveness. Secondary data and three experiments support our proposed matching process. Self-brand connection mediates.

A social media influencer (SMI) generates content for social media platforms, often earning compensation for their role in influencing decisions and expanding engagement beyond their direct social circles (Campbell and Farrell 2020; Campbell and Grimm 2019). As the influencer marketing sector is projected to grow to approximately $56 billion by 2029 (Statista 2024), SMIs have garnered keen interest from both academic and commercial sectors. Studies explore the elements that enhance an SMI's impact (*e.g.*, Broadbridge, Mangió, and Di Domenico 2023; Pourazad, Stocchi, and Narsey 2023). A central debate in this field, "the great social media debate," focuses on whether to collaborate with SMIs with large or small follower bases—a strategic dilemma crucial to crafting

Management Slant

- The perceived proximity/distance consumers feel toward a Social Media Influencer (SMI) significantly influences how they mentally engage with the SMI's posts.
- Influencers with a larger perceived social distance (*e.g.*, mega influencers) enhance persuasion when brands post content on their own branded pages and/or when brand integration in the content is subtle.
- Influencers who are perceived as closer (*e.g.*, macro influencers) achieve greater persuasive impact when they post sponsored content directly on their personal pages and/or when using overt branding (*e.g.*, brand tags).
- Self-brand connection explains why SMIs with larger perceived social distance are more persuasive.

Keywords: Social media influencer; construal level theory; follower size; message diagnosticity; self-brand connection

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effective influencer marketing campaigns (MediaKix 2019a; Nizri 2024).

Research presents mixed views on how the size of an SMI's following affects message persuasiveness. Numerous studies indicate that influencers with large follower counts reach broader audiences (*e.g.*, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Leung et al. 2022; Namkoong, Ro, and Henderson 2019; Zhou et al. 2023), but their higher endorsement fees, which increase with follower numbers, can be prohibitive (Geyser 2024; Tian, Dew, and Iyengar 2024). Conversely, some research suggests that influencers with fewer followers may be more persuasive due to the perceived authenticity of their endorsements (J. Park et al. 2021; Pozharliev, Rossi, and De Angelis 2022). Moreover, the effectiveness of an influencer is not solely determined by follower count but also by factors such as the quality of their arguments and the type of products they endorse (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; J. Park et al. 2021; Pozharliev, Rossi, and De Angelis 2022; Wies, Bleier, and Edeling 2023). To further explore these dynamics, we apply construal-level theory. This approach provides a novel lens for a more intuitive understanding of when and why certain influencer advertising approaches work better in different situations.

Construal-level theory helps explain why people might interpret identical information differently, suggesting that consumers perceive advertising content as either psychologically close or distant (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). In the context of SMIs, a crucial measure of psychological distance is social distance—the perceived emotional and social remoteness between individuals (*e.g.*, Zhao and Xie 2011). This perceived distance impacts how consumers relate to an SMI. For instance, an SMI with a large follower base may appear more socially distant, often having less direct interaction with each follower. Construal-level theory proposes that the effectiveness of an SMI's messaging hinges not only on this social distance but also on how well other message-related factors align (*e.g.*, Tsai and McGill 2010). One such factor is message diagnosticity, related to the informational value of the message.

Message diagnosticity refers to the extent to which the content of a message enables consumers to categorize a message easily—for example, as a high-quality brand, meeting consumer needs, informative, or credible (Alon, Rahimi, and Tahar 2024; Colicev et al. 2018). This research operationalizes diagnosticity through the inclusion of brand tagging in the message and the choice of media channel, whether SMI-owned or brand-owned (Colicev et al. 2018; Ni and Cheng 2024). For example, tagging draws attention to a brand, allowing consumers to identify the post's focus (Destination Digital 2024). Prior research links message diagnosticity with construal level, equating diagnosticity with clear understanding, in line with hypothetical distance, a type of psychological distance (Byun et al. 2021; Tsai and McGill 2010). Arguably, when psychological distances align (*e.g.*, higher social and hypothetical distance), persuasion increases (Tsai and McGill 2010). In this case, when there is a match between the perceived social distance of an SMI (whether perceived as far or near, operationalized by greater vs. lesser followers, respectively) and the message diagnosticity (whether complex or straightforward), the advertising content should become easier to process and feel "right," consistent with construal-level theory. This perceived "rightness" could enhance consumers' affinity towards the brand, reducing perceived distance (Kupfer et al. 2018). Further, given that construal level influences perceived distances relative to the self, we hypothesize that self-brand connection, which reflects the social distance between a consumer and a brand, mediates the relationship between a construal-level match and persuasion. These insights reveal how aligning social and psychological distances with specific message characteristics can significantly influence the success of influencer marketing campaigns.

Secondary data and experimental data provide evidence supporting the proposed process. Importantly, the research reveals how social distance, operationalized through SMI following, can result in more favorable brand perceptions based on the moderation of message diagnosticity. Specifically, when SMIs are perceived as more (less) socially proximal and the content shared is more (less) diagnostic, consumers respond more favorably. We also identify self-brand connection as a mediator, showing that an SMI following and message diagnosticity impact the closeness and connection people feel toward the SMI. The research, thus, contributes to influencer marketing scholarship by providing a more holistic theoretical lens to view SMI's followers. Additionally, the research offers and validates new moderators consistent with the effect of diagnosticity and construal matching. Advertising implications are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of SMIs is popular among advertisers because of their potential to enhance brand responses. Prior research shows that an SMI's number of followers influences various outcomes, including content engagement (Namkoong, Ro, and Henderson 2019), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (S.-A. A. Jin and Phua 2014), and sales (Kupfer et al. 2018), as shown in Table 1.

However, existing literature provides an unclear picture regarding the circumstances under which an SMI's following size effectively influences these outcomes. First, it remains uncertain how the number of followers influences responses towards the brand. While some studies suggest that SMIs with a larger following tend to be more effective in achieving marketing goals (*e.g.*, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Leung et al. 2022;

Namkoong, Ro, and Henderson 2019; Zhou et al. 2023), other studies present contrasting evidence, pointing out instances where fewer followers may lead to better engagement and trust (J. Park et al. 2021; Pozharliev, Rossi, and De Angelis 2022; van Reijmersdal, Aguiar, and van Noort 2024). On top of this, complex patterns such as the U-shaped relationship between follower size and engagement (*e.g.*, Wies, Bleier, and Edeling 2023) complicate straightforward comparisons and might clarify why some studies find no significant effects when comparing SMI follower sizes (cf. Boerman 2020).

Table 1 Literature Review Summary

Citation	Dependent variables	Moderators	Theory	Main effect of SMI follower number	Findings
Boerman 2020	Online Behavioral Intentions; Brand Recall; PSI; Ad Recognition	Disclosure Presence	Persuasion Knowledge Model; Parasocial Interaction	No main effect	Disclosure presence does not interact with the follower numbers.
De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017	Perceived Popularity; Ascribed Opinion Leadership; Likeability; Perceived Brand Uniqueness; Attitude toward the Brand	Number of Followees; Product Design	Naïve Theories; Heuristic Processing	Follower Numbers increase Likeability	When product divergence is high, a moderate number of followers increases perceived brand uniqueness, and thus attitude toward the brand to a greater extent than influencers with more followers.
Han et al. 2021	Purchase Intentions	Disclosure Explicitness	Persuasion Knowledge Model; Social Capital Theory	No main effect	Explicit disposures decrease purchase intentions when exposed to an influencer with a large number of followers, but not a moderate number of followers.
Janssen, Schouten, and Croes 2022	Likeability Product Attitude Purchase Intention Credibility Identification	Product-influencer fit	N/A	Follower Numbers increase Attitude toward the Ad, Likeability, and Credibility	No interaction effect
Jin and Phua 2014	Source Credibility; PSI; Product Involvement; Buying Intentions; eWOM Intentions	Post Valence	Social Capital Theory	Follower Numbers increase Source Credibility and Intention to Build an Online Friendship	For SMIs with more followers, product involvement and buying intentions increased with a positively-valenced post. For SMIs with low followers, eWOM intentions increased with negatively-valenced posts.
Kay et al. 2020	Product knowledge Product attractiveness Purchase intention	Sponsorship disclosure	Persuasion Knowledge Model	Follower Numbers decrease Product Knowledge	Micro-influencers who disclosed sponsorship received greater purchase intentions (vs. macro-influencers with no disclosure) than those who did not disclose.

(*Continued*)

Table 1 Continued.

Citation	Dependent variables	Moderators	Theory	Main effect of SMI follower number	Findings
Kim and Yoon 2024	Product Attitude Post Attitude Trial intention	Number of followees Propensity to trust	Persuasion Knowledge Model	Follower Numbers decrease Attitude toward the Product, Attitude toward the Post, and Trial Intention.	Micro-influencers with a specific area of expertise are more effective in promoting to individuals with lower trust propensity. Expertise domain (specific vs. broad) was not a significant factor for mega-influencers. Interaction effects between influencer follower number and expertise domain were not significant when consumers had a higher propensity to trust.
Leung et al. 2022	Engagement	Influencer marketing spend	Communication Theory	Follower Numbers increase Engagement	Engagement increases with larger influencer marketing spending when the influencers have larger followers.
Li et al. 2024	Word-of-mouth intention	Mindset	Implicit Theory; Tie Strength	No main effect	WOM is increased for micro- (vs. mega-) influencers, however this only occurs when consumers adopt a growth (not fixed) mindset. This is because growth mindset consumers are more reliant on motivational attributions to judge people causing them to perceive micro- (vs. mega-) influencers as more trustworthy.
Marques, Casais, and Camilleri 2021	Following; Page Visits	–	N/A	Follower Numbers increase SMI Following but decrease Page Visits	N/A
Park et al. 2021	Authenticity; Advertising Effectiveness	Consumption Type	N/A	Follower Numbers decrease Attitudes toward the Product, Purchase Intentions, and Authenticity	For hedonic products, micro (vs. mega) influencers were more effective. No differences emerged for utilitarian products. Authenticity mediated these effects.

(*Continued*)

Table 1 Continued.

Citation	Dependent variables	Moderators	Theory	Main effect of SMI follower number	Findings
Pittman and Abell 2022	Trust Product Attitude Purchase intent	Green influencers (vs. not)	N/A	No main effect	Higher (vs. lower) following increases purchase intent for non-green influencers. However, the opposite is true for green influencers, as lower popularity signals greater trust for this specific type of influencer.
Pourazad, Stocchi, and Narsey 2023	Engagement Rate	Social Media Sites	N/A	Follower Numbers increase Engagement for TikTok; No main effect for Instagram; Follower Numbers decrease engagement for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube	N/A
Pozharliev, Rossi, and De Angelis 2022	Source Credibility; eWOM Intentions	Argument Quality	Source Credibility Theory; Elaboration Likelihood Model	Follower Numbers decrease Credibility but increase Cognitive Effort	The meso-influencer's credibility increased in the strong (vs. weak) argument condition. This effect indirectly influenced eWOM intentions.
Wies, Bleier, and Edeling 2023	Engagement	Content customization, Brand Familiarity	Tie Strength; Contextual Cue Diagnosticity Theory	Follower Numbers increase Engagement	The number of followers has a U-shaped effect on engagement. Higher customization and lower familiarity weaken the U-shaped effect.
Zhou et al. 2023	Perceived Influencing Power	Fake Followers; Expertise; Popularity	Social Impact Theory	Follower Numbers increase Tipping, Likes, and Perceived Influencing Power	This effect diminishes when influencers are experts and/or more popular.

Second, while extant research includes an array of variables to moderate the effect between an SMI's number of followers, this diversity highlights a significant methodological and theoretical concern. Despite the seeming richness of moderators, the foundational theories applied across these studies are very limited, primarily drawing upon a narrow set of frameworks (*e.g.*, social ties, persuasion knowledge, etc.), as shown in Table 1, that may not capture the nuanced dynamics at play. Interestingly, some studies, such as Marques, Casais, and Camilleri (2021), have found that while all SMIs may influence consumers, the nature of their impact can vary. For instance, influencers with a large number of followers might inspire people to follow the brand or influencer—achieving a broader impact—whereas those with fewer followers tend to

While some studies suggest that SMIs with a larger following tend to be more effective in achieving marketing goals, other studies present contrasting evidence, pointing out instances where fewer followers may lead to better engagement and trust.

drive more specific actions, like visiting a brand's page. Preliminary findings suggest that some of these different influences might arise from varying cognitive processing styles, which could be explained using construal-level theory.

Construal Level Theory and SMI Following

Drawing on construal-level theory, social distance is defined as the extent to which individuals subjectively perceive themselves in relation to others (Stephan, Liberman, and Trope 2011), influencing how they mentally represent objects and events (Liberman, Trope, and Wakslak 2007). This is quite similar to the theoretical frameworks used to explore SMIs' follower size as shown in Table 1 (*e.g.*, social ties, social capital theory, etc.); unlike these theories, however, construal-level theory offers predictions on how various message-related factors might affect preferences for more intimate versus extensive SMI networks (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). Prior theories used (see Table 1), do not uniformly support these dynamics. According to construal-level theory, perceptions of social distance shape consumer preferences for information that is either psychologically distant or close, wherein a greater perceived social distance leads to a preference for more abstract (versus concrete) message content, encouraging a distant (vs. close) perspective (Kelting, Berry, and van Horen 2019).

Research suggests that consumers are more influenced by a source when there is a significant alignment between the evoked mindset (*i.e.*, social distance) and the type of information (distant vs. close) conveyed by the source (L. Jin, Hu, and He 2014; K. Kim, Lee, and Choi 2019; Roose et al. 2019; Young 2015). Specifically, an SMI's persuasiveness depends on harmonizing the message properties with the construal level associated with the SMI's perceived social distance. For example, an SMI perceived as having lesser (greater) social distance may lead consumers to prefer more psychologically close (vs. distant) content, thus enhancing persuasiveness. Persuasion, in this context, is reflected both in engagement—measured by interactions such as shares, comments, and likes (Campbell and Farrell 2020)—and in purchase intentions, the conscious intentions to buy the brand (Spears and Singh 2004). Construal-level theory also considers psychological distance to encompass several dimensions, including physical (*e.g.*, geographically near vs. distant), temporal (*e.g.*, immediate vs. future), and hypothetical distances (*e.g.*, straightforward vs. complex). This multifaceted approach is crucial for evaluating the clarity and intent behind SMI communications, affecting how consumers perceive and act on message content, making it more or less diagnostic of consumer needs and preferences.

Diagnostic messages simplify the understanding and categorization of a brand or message, aligning it with a desired category for easier decision-making.

Construal Level Theory and Message Diagnosticity

This research examines message diagnosticity as a key property of SMI communications. The concept of message diagnosticity, as developed in prior studies (Feldman and Lynch 1988; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Miniard, Sirdeshmukh, and Innis 1992), refers to the extent to which a message facilitates consumer understanding and differentiation among options (Purohit and Srivastava 2001; Suk et al. 2010), thereby enabling informed decision-making (Aaker 2000). For example, the pixel count of a digital camera is considered diagnostic because it helps consumers assess quality differences and categorize cameras accordingly (Nam, Wang, and Lee 2012).

Message diagnosticity significantly affects how consumers attend to and process information (Liu and Yu 2022). Diagnostic messages simplify the understanding and categorization of a brand or message, aligning it with a desired category for easier decision-making. Conversely, information that lacks diagnosticity requires consumers to exert more cognitive effort to interpret and classify the message, as crucial cues for decision-making are absent (Aaker and Maheswaran 1997; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). Therefore, the diagnostic nature of a message influences the extent of processing effort—more for less diagnostic messages, and less for more diagnostic ones (Tsai and McGill 2010). For example, tagging a brand in a social media post can help consumers quickly recognize it as brand-related, potentially increasing their engagement based on its perceived relevance.

Consistent with construal-level theory, the literature on message diagnosticity also suggests that the persuasiveness of cues is influenced by additional factors, such as mindset, during the decision-making process. For example, preferences for diagnostic information can be affected by variables like prior knowledge (Purohit and Srivastava 2001), specific goals (Suk et al. 2010), and the matching of cues (Ahluwalia and Gürhan-Canli 2000), as highlighted in the literature on construal-level theory. Crucially, a consumer's motivation to process information (Nam, Wang, and Lee 2012) plays a significant role in determining the demand for

diagnostic details. This motivation can also modify how the perceived social distance of an SMI affects brand engagement on social media (Wies, Bleier, and Edeling 2023).

When individuals engage with content from an SMI perceived as more socially close (vs. distant), additional cues within the message can impact its effectiveness. We propose that SMIs perceived as more (less) socially distant may prompt a preference for less (more) diagnostic information. First, this is consistent with construal-level theory, which suggests that higher diagnosticity, facilitating easier understanding and reducing psychological distance, matches the mindset associated with an SMI who seems less socially distant (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). Second, this alignment supports consumer preferences for simpler information processing when experiencing lower psychological distance. Here, consumers with a lower construal level (*i.e.*, closer psychological distance) prioritize choice feasibility, where processing challenges are less welcome (Tsai and McGill 2010). However, for consumers feeling a greater psychological distance (*e.g.*, perceiving an SMI as more socially distant), less clear and more ambiguous content matches their higher construal levels, making such messages appear more persuasive (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). In these cases, individuals with higher construal levels are more willing to invest effort into processing information, valuing the desirability of a choice over its feasibility. This effort is seen as a positive investment towards attaining a desirable outcome (Tsai and McGill 2010). Therefore, the persuasiveness of an SMI's content should align with the diagnostic nature of the message and the social distance felt towards the SMI. In this study, we examine two specific aspects of message diagnosticity: brand tagging and the choice of media channel.

One way to impact diagnosticity on social media is to provide attribute-level information in posts with brand tagging (Massara, Scarpi, and Porcheddu 2020). Indeed, prior research suggests that more detailed information increases diagnosticity and is thus perceived as more credible (Gugerty and Link 2020), helpful (M. Kim, Han, and Jun 2020), and understandable, driving greater purchase intentions (Jiménez and Mendoza 2013). Brand tagging is particularly crucial in SMI posts, as extrinsic cues like brand names are highly diagnostic (Byun et al. 2021). These cues enable consumers to categorize products and evaluate their quality and value, significantly influencing product-related judgments and decisions (Byun et al. 2021; Upadhyay and Tripathi 2023). This is particularly important online where consumers cannot physically inspect products and require more information to assist in their evaluation and decision-making (Filieri 2015). Moreover, Avramova, Dens, and De Pelsmacker (2022) contend that disclosing brand names in messages lends diagnostic clarity by clearly marking the content's promotional nature, while the absence of brand names introduces ambiguity and reduces diagnosticity. As such, brand tagging should allow an SMI message to be more diagnostic by helping consumers categorize and evaluate the product, as well as identify the post as an endorsement. As brand tagging should be consistent (inconsistent) with what is desired by lesser (greater) psychological distance, we hypothesize:

H1: When SMIs evoke greater (lesser) social distance, the absence (presence) of brand tagging will increase the message's persuasiveness.

We also anticipate that the channel itself will act as a marker of message diagnosticity. Previous research has shown that certain channels are perceived to be more diagnostic than others (*e.g.*, Z. Jiang and Benbasat 2004; Uhm et al. 2022). The channel can affect diagnosticity by either providing more information and/or activating persuasion knowledge. Channels that present messages as understandable, informative, unbiased, credible, and useful for decision-making are regarded as more diagnostic (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Alon, Rahimi, and Tahar 2024; G. Jiang et al. 2021). For example, an SMI-owned media channel—typically the SMI's social media page—features personal insights about brands and tends to be perceived as more credible. In contrast, a brand-owned media channel, which represents the brand's social media presence, often displays advertising content that is more prone to triggering persuasion knowledge (Alon, Rahimi, and Tahar 2024; Ni and Cheng 2024). Colicev et al. (2018, p. 42) assert that information on a brand-owned media channel is "less diagnostic because it does not help consumers in ranking the brands" versus an SMI-owned media channel. This lesser diagnosticity stems from the tendency of consumers to receive information from brand-owned channels with more skepticism, anticipating content that promotes the brand rather than providing objective information useful for evaluation (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009). Specifically, brand-owned channels tend to consistently portray positive content, often disregarding the actual quality of the product, thereby reducing the credibility and diagnostic value of the content (Colicev et al. 2018). Conversely, content shared by SMIs is typically viewed as more trustworthy and diagnostic because these endorsements are often seen as recommendations from peers. Additionally, people experiencing lower psychological distance might show a preference for SMI-owned social media channels over brand websites, which supports the construal level matching effect between channel diagnosticity and social distance (Ni and Cheng 2024).

Therefore, an SMI endorsing a product provides another source of positive information about the brand, which should be more diagnostic than information provided by the brand alone. Hence,

an SMI's message should be more diagnostic when communicated via their own channel, which should match with lesser social distance. In contrast, an SMI's message communicated in brand-own channels should be less diagnostic, and better match with greater social distance. Formally:

H2: When SMIs have greater (lesser) social distance, messages communicated in brand-owned (vs. SMI-owned) media channels will increase the message's persuasiveness.

As we built our hypotheses on the tenets of construal-level theory, we also believe that processes central to construal-level theory mediate these proposed interaction patterns. The next paragraphs discuss this potential mediator. In particular, this research emphasizes the roles of consumer self-brand connection as underlying the influence process driven by an SMI, contingent on the perceived social distance of the SMI. More specifically, we propose that when there is a match between social distance and message diagnosticity (high distance/low diagnosticity or low distance/high diagnosticity), message persuasiveness will increase via the underlying mechanisms of self-brand connection. Self-brand connection manifests when consumers integrate a brand into their self-concept (Escalas 2004). Various factors amplify this connection, including brand-related expressions (Shen and Sengupta 2018), positive brand personality traits (McManus, Carvalho, and Trifts 2022), consumer brand engagement (Harrigan et al. 2018) and brand storytelling (Granitz and Forman 2015).

Particularly relevant to this research are findings that suggest congruence—or psychological closeness—acts as a driver for self-brand connection. This connection is strengthened when consumers perceive a brand as a reflection of their identity, aligning their self-concepts with the brand. Previous studies refer to this alignment as "mindset congruency," which has been shown to positively influence message reception (C. W. Park et al. 2010; Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). Furthermore, psychological closeness with a brand has been linked to enhanced self-brand connection in other research (D. H. Kim et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2019). In line with these findings, Kupfer et al. (2018) argue that consumers' self-brand connections often originate from their desire to closely associate with an SMI. Building on this premise, aligning a consumer's construal mindset—activated by the SMI's perceived social distance—with the diagnosticity of messages promotes brand-consumer congruency. This alignment, or construal matching, effectively fosters a psychological distance that characterizes the formation of a self-brand connection within the framework of construal-level theory (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Moreover, self-construal, which is related to construal-level theory (Spassova and Lee 2013), and its alignment with psychological distance, affects self-brand connection (Khalifa and Shukla 2021; Kwon and Mattila 2015; Zhang, Zheng, and Zhang 2020). Given that self-brand connection contributes positively to outcomes like willingness to pay (Sarkar et al. 2021) and brand advocacy (Moliner, Monferrer-Tirado, and Estrada-Guillén 2018), it is likely to enhance persuasiveness and mediate the effect of construal level matching. Therefore, we formally propose:

H3: Self-brand connection will mediate the effect of the interaction of the SMI social distance and message diagnosticity on the message's persuasiveness.

We present Figure 1 below to demonstrate our overall conceptual framework, and provide details about the purpose of each study in testing the model.

STUDY 1: SECONDARY DATA STUDY

The aim of this study is to examine how individuals respond to advertised content posted by SMIs with lesser (vs. greater) social

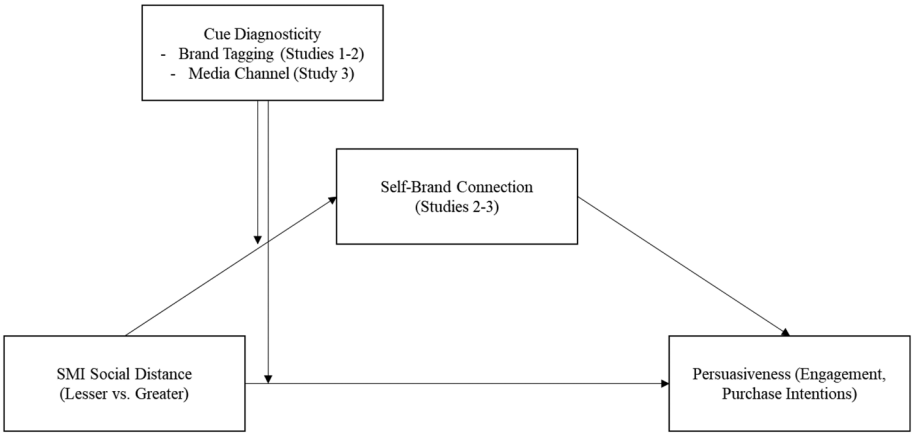

Figure 1 Conceptual Model

distance. We operationalize social distance through SMI follower numbers. In doing so, it provides an initial test of the proposed matching process between the SMI social distance and cue via brand tagging (H1).

Sample and Procedure

Empirical secondary data was utilized that involved an SMI's social distance, operationalized through SMI follower numbers, and brand tagging, a form of diagnosticity. To generate a sample of influencers varying by number of followers, SMIs were identified based on lists differing by network size, integrating influencers across various categories (*e.g.*, entertainment, travel, food, home décor, fashion, etc.; Cascio Rizzo et al. 2023; Janssen, Schouten, and Croes 2022) and locations (*e.g.*, Australia, UK, USA, Brazil, etc.) without considering the duration of the following. Two popular lists were used for identifying SMIs across multiple domains and interests (*i.e.*, MediaKix 2019b; SMI Marketing Hub 2019), following Pourazad, Stocchi, and Narsey (2023), a previously supported approach to SMI selection. The top 25 SMIs were taken from each list. We then collected secondary data from Instagram, noting each influencer's number of followers (in thousands) and number of posts created. The number of followers identified was used to conduct a median split (median = 25.2 million, ranging from 283 thousand to 176 million), and each SMI represented lesser (= 0) or greater (= 1) social distances. Given that our H1 compares SMI types, we thought a median split was more appropriate than a correlation. We, thus, follow the approach of other researchers (*e.g.*, Kunz, Haasova, and Florack 2020; Lu, Park, and Nayakankuppam 2023; McKay-Nesbitt et al. 2011; Peng et al. 2023; Rybak, Johnson, and Burton 2023).

Subsequently, each SMI's 100 most recent posts were examined and coded for brand content and number of likes, creating a database with the following: instances of brand tags (*e.g.*, tagged or mentioned in the post), number of likes (thousands) generated by each brand tagged post, instances of untagged brand posts (*e.g.*, including a Chanel handbag in the post without mentioning or tagging the brand), and number of likes generated by each untagged post (thousands). The count of brands (tagged or untagged) ranged from 7 to 438.[1] For each SMI, we calculated an average number of likes for tagged and untagged posts. Because the SMIs were theorized to differ by social distance based on differences in follower size, a post-efficiency ratio was created for tagged and untagged numbers of likes to more easily compare SMIs, adopting a similar approach to Pourazad, Stocchi, and Narsey (2023) such that metrics are comparable across influencer types. This is consistent with De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) perspective that when an SMI has more followers, their posts should have more likes. The proposed SMI (in)effectiveness ratio was created by dividing the number of followers for an SMI by the average likes of each type of post made by the SMI, such that higher numbers represented SMI ineffectiveness. For instance, 10 indicates that 10 followers were necessary to generate 1 "like" for an SMI's post.

Analysis of Results and Discussion

A correlation was run with the number of followers and each of the like (in)efficiency ratios. For the untagged posts, there was not a significant correlation (r = .136, p > .4); however, for the tagged posts, there was a moderately high, positive correlation (r = .512, p < .001). The correlation reveals that SMIs with greater follower sizes are related more with inefficient ratios. In other words, SMIs with fewer followers garner more likes of their posts that are tagged with a brand. These results provide partial support for H1.

However, given the hypothesis comparing SMI types, we also ran a repeated-measures ANOVA with the SMI (in)effectiveness ratio of the tagged and untagged posts as within-subjects factors and SMI social distance (lesser vs. greater) as a between-subjects factor. Results revealed a significant interaction of brand tagging and SMI social distance on SMI (in)effectiveness (F(1, 49) = 13.06, p = .001, η^2 = .21). Importantly, there was no main effect of brand tagging (p > .4), though the SMI with lesser (vs. greater) social distance was slightly more effective given higher numbers indicate more followers are required to generate a single like (M = 19.29, SD = 14.36 vs. M = 28.41, SD = 14.36; F(1, 49) = 2.92, p = .09, η^2 = .06). Figure 2 displays SMI (in)effectiveness across conditions. Contrasts provided evidence that for the SMI with greater social distance, the tagged (vs. untagged) branded posts were less effective because they required more followers to generate a single like (M = 33.21, SD = 20.66 vs. M = 23.61, SD = 15.66; F(1, 24) = 9.15, p = .006, η^2 = .28).

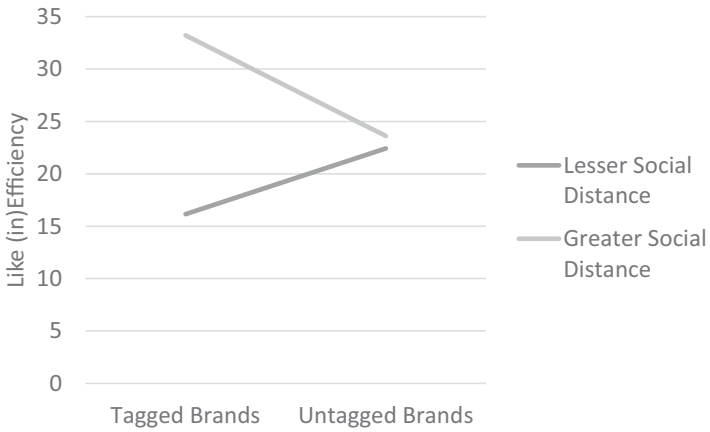

Figure 2 SMI Social Distance, Brand Tagging, and SMI Effectiveness

For SMIs with lesser social distance, the tagged (vs. untagged) branded posts were more effective because they required lesser followers to produce a single like ($M = 16.15$, $SD = 18.21$ vs. $M = 22.42$, $SD = 25.73$; $F(1, 24) = 4.27$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .15$). These results support H1.

The findings support the proposed matching process involving SMI social distance and message diagnosticity (brand tagging). We also analyze the data differently in Web Appendix A, with the split allocated by SMI follower size. This analysis likewise supports H1. While the study provides external validity, internal validity is low because of an inability to randomize subjects and their exposure to messages and tagging. Additionally, as in advertising (*e.g.*, q-score), the SMI's popularity among particular demographics matters (*e.g.*, Farrell, Campbell, and Sands 2022), and our inability to randomize prevented us from controlling for this possibility. As another limitation, the SMIs included a greater number of mega influencers, which could bias the results. As such, we seek to address this in the next studies. To strengthen internal validity in supporting the process, we present findings from an online experiment and delve into the underlying process.

STUDY 2: PROCESS EVIDENCE

Study 2 has three main goals. First, we seek to replicate the results of Study 1 in a controlled experiment. Again, we test how message diagnosticity (*e.g.*, brand tagging) interacts with SMI social distance in determining SMI persuasiveness (H1). Again, social distance was operationalized through follower size. In this case, we control for potential biases associated with the SMI by creating fictitious persons and posts. Third, we seek to demonstrate evidence supporting the theoretical process put forth in the paper (H3).

Sample and Procedure

The between-subjects experiment included two manipulated factors: SMI social distance (lesser vs. greater) and brand tagging in the message (present vs. absent). While the images were taken from Instagram, the follower size and content were altered to create varying impressions of social distance and message diagnosticity. Drawing inspiration from the secondary data, we manipulated the number of followers such that the SMI had 125K (*e.g.*, lesser social distance) or 14 M followers (*e.g.*, greater social distance). A pre-test was also used to assess the manipulation.

A female sample from the United States was collected using Cloud Research (n = 259, $M_{age} = 36.62$, $SD = 19.04$) with the social distance manipulation stimuli. Following viewing one of the two conditions, participants responded to five items assessing social distance (She could have similar tastes to mine; She could have similar values to mine; She is close to me; I could belong to the same group as her; I am a similar person to her; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree; $\alpha = .918$). To check the manipulation, an ANOVA with the SMI social distance (0 = lesser, 1 = greater) as the independent variable and social distance measure as the dependent variable yielded a main effect ($F(1, 258) = 4.22$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Participants felt lesser social distance (*e.g.*, closer) with the SMI with fewer versus greater followers ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.25$ vs. $M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.34$). Thus, the pre-test supports the manipulation of social distance via follower size.

We manipulate diagnosticity with brand tagging with the post either explicitly tagging and referencing the product (*e.g.*, more diagnostic) or only providing an image of the product absent any explicit tagging of the brand (*e.g.*, less diagnostic). Converse was selected because it was one of the few brands that appeared in the post of multiple SMIs in the secondary study and, thus, it enhances the realism of the study. In the case where the brand was untagged, the post said: "I've always been an active girl." With Converse tagged, the post read: "I've always been a Chuck girl. @Converse #ChuckTaylor #ChuckStories." In both cases, the images remained the same, with the fictitious influencer MeghanFashion seated and wearing a pair of Converse shoes. A second image viewable by swiping left showed the Chuck Taylor Converse shoes in the foreground with a street in the background.

190 female responses in the United States ($M_{age} = 30.39$, $SD = 9.78$) were collected from Prolific. Female subjects were chosen because they represent the target market of the post. Gender-specific samples are used to maintain focus on our target customers and audience, while also matching the product (*e.g.*, women's shoes) making our study more accurate in exploring the effects. Respondents were randomly assigned to view one of the four posts. Next, they responded to three 7-point items measuring purchase intentions (extremely unlikely/extremely likely; not at all inclined/very much inclined; and not at all willing/very much willing; $\alpha = .94$). Next, individuals responded to seven 7-point Likert measures of self-brand connection ($\alpha = .96$), borrowed from Escalas and Bettman (2005). The manipulation check followed. Diagnosticity of the post (operationalized through brand tagging) was measured using one 7-point Likert item ("I did not have enough information to make a decision") borrowed from Andrews (2013). Lower scores indicate higher diagnosticity. Finally, participants responded to demographic items before being debriefed and answered an open-ended question asking them to describe their thoughts related to the post in the experiment.

Analysis of Results and Discussion

We used LIWC to analyze the text and focused on measuring the extent to which the text responses used words associated with

affiliation (*e.g.*, friend, ally, etc.) in describing their thoughts related to the post. Affiliation was chosen from the library of terms offered by LIWC because of its closeness to perceptions of social distance. A one-sided t-test of the affiliation scores between subjects who saw the low follower SMI ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 4.31$) and the high follower SMI ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 3.30$) shows a significant difference ($M_{difference} = .86$, $p = .07$) in the expected direction. This finding is suggestive of the research premise relating an SMI's number of followers with perceptions of social distance.

To check the diagnosticity of brand tagging, an ANOVA with the SMI social distance (0 = lesser, 1 = greater) and the brand tagging (0 = tagged, 1 = untagged) as independent variables and diagnosticity as the dependent variable yielded a main effect of brand tagging ($F(1, 186) = 3.91$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Given that lower numbers indicate greater diagnosticity, participants felt that the post with the brand tagged (vs. untagged) was more diagnostic ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.87$ vs. $M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.92$). Manipulations were supported.

An ANOVA with the SMI social distance and brand tagging as independent variables, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable yielded a significant 2-way interaction ($F(1, 186) = 11.59$; $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$), as seen in Figure 3. Planned contrasts revealed that for the SMI with lesser social distance, purchase intentions were higher when the brand was tagged ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.65$) than untagged ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.49$; $F(1, 186) = 8.48$; $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .08$). For the SMI with greater social distance, purchase intentions were higher for the post without brand tagging ($M = 3.89$; $SD = 1.99$) vs. with tagging ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 1.61$); $F(1, 186) = 3.91$; $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$), supporting H1.

The analysis next examined the role of self-brand connection as a mediator using PROCESS (Model 8, 5,000 bootstraps, percentile CI). The model included the SMI social distance (0 = lesser, 1 = greater) as the independent variable, brand tagging (0 = tagged, 1 = untagged) as the moderator, self-brand connection as the mediator, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. Figure 4 displays the results. First, the two-way interaction on self-brand connection was significant ($b = .93$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$). Moreover, self-brand connection predicted purchase intentions ($b = .64$, $t = 10.78$, $p < .001$), though the two-way interaction remained significant ($b = 1.08$, $t = 2.76$, $p = .001$). Still, the indirect index of moderated mediation was significant (Index = .60, 95% CI: [.01, 1.24]), supporting partial mediation. Interestingly, the results suggest that when the post is more diagnostic (*e.g.*, brand tagged), self-brand connection does not mediate the SMI x diagnosticity interaction on purchase intentions ($b = -.05$, 95% CI [-.55, .43]). On the other hand, when the post is less diagnostic (*e.g.*, untagged), purchase intention is higher for SMIs with greater (vs. lesser) social distance because of self-brand connection ($b = .62$, 95% CI [.14, 1.11]).

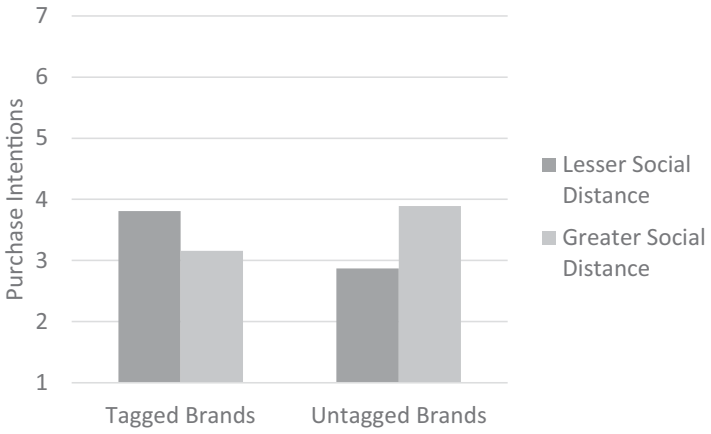

Figure 3 SMI Social Distance, Brand Tagging, and Purchase Intentions

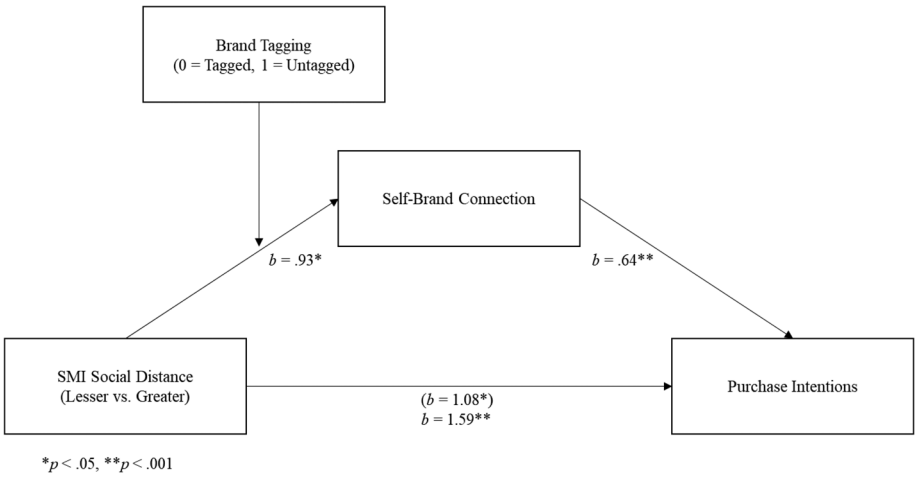

Figure 4 Self-Brand Connection Moderated Mediation and Purchase Intentions

However, in high psychological distance, processing is desirable, and the higher level of processing appears to better support the formation of consumer self-brand connections.

Study 2 provides evidence of our proposed matchup process in alignment with Study 1 but in an internally valid situation. These results support H1 and provide partial support for H3, as the path was only supported for the untagged post (less diagnosticity). The mixed findings could suggest that, in low psychological distance, elaboration may be undesirable and the processing necessary for consumers to form a connection with the brand may not occur. However, in high psychological distance, processing is desirable, and the higher level of processing appears to better support the formation of consumer self-brand connections. This is consistent with research such that when consumers construe information at a higher level, they exhibit greater self-brand connection (Kwon and Mattila 2015).

As yet, the research only explores our theorizing regarding message diagnosticity and construal processing within one context: brand tagging within SMI posts. Another study was run using a different sample (*e.g.*, a European sample representing men and women) and a different context (*e.g.*, fitness industry). The results replicate the current study (please see the Web Appendix B). To expand our conceptualization of brand tagging and robustly consider message diagnosticity, additional diagnosticity tests are needed. Study 3, thus, considers the effect of the message channel on the matching process (H2).

STUDY 3: MEDIA CHANNEL

The first aim of Study 3 is to examine our proposed construal level matching effect with the media channel as the diagnostic message. Study 3 explores whether the channel as the message source as impacting construal level matching and SMI social distance (H2). Again, SMI social distance is operationalized via the SMI follower size. Given trends in the industry, SMIs now make appearances within brand advertising channels (Anderson 2024). As such, the study introduces a first glimpse into the persuasiveness of SMIs expanding their reach. Second, the study goal is to provide further process evidence of the hypothesized construal level theory matching process, via self-brand connection, testing H3.

Sample and Procedure

A between-subjects experiment was devised with two manipulated factors: SMI social distance (lesser vs. greater) and message diagnosticity (SMI-owned vs. brand-owned). The post was identical in both media channels and was similar to the brand tagging post from Study 2 using Converse. To manipulate the media channel, the post was shown on the SMI's social media channel or the brand's social media channel.

A total of 282 responses (M_{age} = 37.19, SD = 11.10, 63.1% female) were collected on Prolific using a United States sample. Respondents were asked to view a post on either the SMI's or the brand's Instagram account and provide their evaluations of the product, responding to the same 7-point scale measure of purchase intention as in Study 2 (α = .94) followed by the same 7-item scale measuring self-brand connection as used in Study 2 (α = .96). Participants were asked to identify the source of the post (SMI or Converse) to check channel recognition. Finally, participants provided demographic items before being debriefed.

Analysis of Results and Discussion

To check the manipulation of the media type, a chi-square test was employed with the channel (0 = brand-owned, 1 = SMI-owned) in the row field and participant choice (0 = SMI-owned, 1 = brand-owned) in the column field. The chi-square test indicates that 58.7% of those viewing the brand-owned media and 89.9% of those viewing the SMI-owned media correctly identified the media channel type ($\chi^2(1, 281) = 73.63$; $p < .001$).

An ANOVA with the SMI and channel as independent variables and purchase intentions as the dependent variable provided a significant 2-way interaction ($F(1, 281) = 9.33$; $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .03$). Planned contrasts (as shown in Figure 5) revealed that for the SMI with a greater number of followers, purchase intentions were higher for

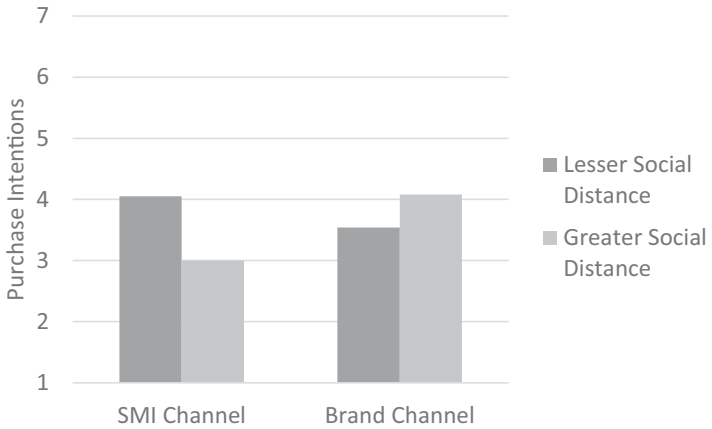

Figure 5 SMI Social Distance, Media Type, and Purchase Intentions

the brand-owned (vs. SMI-owned) channel ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.76$ vs. $M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.59$; $F(1, 281) = 5.49$; $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .04$). For the SMI with lesser followers, purchase intentions were higher for the SMI-owned (vs. brand-owned) media channel ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 1.46$ vs. $M = 3.59$; $SD = 1.53$; $F(1, 281) = 3.89$; $p = .05$; $\eta^2 = .03$), supporting H2.

Using Hayes's (2018) macro (PROCESS Model 8, 5,000 bootstraps, percentile CI), we tested our conceptual model. The model tested the SMI social distance (0 = lesser, 1 = greater) as the independent variable, media channel (0 = brand-owned, 1 = SMI-owned) as the moderator, self-brand connection as the mediator, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. The results support the mediation of self-brand connection on the relationship among SMI social distance, media type, and purchase intentions (indirect effect = .66, 95% CI [.13, 1.20]). Because the direct interaction effect of SMI social distance and media on purchase intentions was no longer significant ($b = .50$, $t = 1.82$, $p > .06$), the results support full mediation. More specifically, the indirect effect of the conceptual model shows that within the more diagnostic media channel (SMI-owned), the mediation path is not significant ($b = -.17$, 95% CI [-.54, .18]). However, when the media channel is less diagnostic (brand-owned), the mediation path is significant ($b = .48$, 95% CI [.10, .87]), indicating that when the SMI has greater (vs. lesser) social distance, purchase intentions are increased through self-brand connection, which replicates the findings of study 2 with a different form of message diagnosticity.

This study provides evidence that when an SMI message is less diagnostic, it is more effective when posted by SMIs with greater social distance because they prompt greater self-brand connection. However, an SMI with greater social distance was not effective when the message was diagnostic. While consistent with prior research and our theorizing, Study 3 supports a theoretical explanation for this effect (*e.g.*, construal matching) with self-brand connection as a novel mediator. In this case, the SMI-owned media condition comparing the SMI with different social distances replicated the matchup between the SMI and diagnosticity from the prior two studies. Moreover, the results extend the matchup to the media channel. Finally, the study builds on research discussing the diagnosticity impact of social media (*i.e.*, Colicev et al. 2018).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The research focused on explicating the impact of an SMI's social distance, through the treatment of SMI follower size, on consumers' brand responses. Secondary data and three experiments supported the novel construal-level theoretical framework proposed in the research. Furthermore, the research supported self-brand connection as an important mediating variable. Further, the results were robust across different SMI types (*e.g.*, mid-tier and macro SMIs). These results make several important theoretical and managerial contributions.

The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of SMI persuasion hinges on a crucial matching process—aligning the consumer's construal level with the diagnosticity of the decision-making context.

Theoretical Contributions

This research serves as a bridge, connecting previously divergent findings about the impact of an SMI's social distance on their persuasiveness. By incorporating construal-level theory, the study simplifies and enhances our understanding of SMI effectiveness. It offers a robust theoretical explanation for the ways in which SMIs, varying in social distance, can leverage message diagnosticity factors to enhance their persuasiveness. In doing so, this research addresses the need for a more comprehensive theoretical approach from which to understand and unify the vast array of moderators and divergence in findings. This approach not only clarifies current methodologies but could also extend to other facets such as time horizon and goal perspective among others. The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of SMI persuasion hinges on a crucial matching process—aligning the consumer's construal level with the diagnosticity of the decision-making context. This insight provides a valuable framework for future research and practical applications in influencer marketing strategies.

Second, the research underscores the importance of diagnostic elements related to the message and how they align with construal activation. Moreover, diagnosticity moderates the impact of the social distance evoked by an SMI (through their follower count) on their persuasiveness. As indicated in Table 1, there has been significant research exploring potential moderators. We suggest that some of these moderators are broadly related to diagnosticity. Additionally, we have identified message channel and post tagging as new moderators within this category. Our findings reveal that SMIs with lesser social distance tend to be more influential on SMI-owned channels, while those with greater social distance have more influence on brand-owned channels. This extends the work of Roose et al. (2019), who focused on message features like

panoramic pictures and copy, by shifting the emphasis to channel ownership. The choice of social media channel, while a communicating the message, plays a crucial role yet has been largely overlooked in SMI research. Consistent with Colicev et al. (2018), our results suggest that consumers use channels as cues to gauge the usefulness of information, and these perceptions significantly affect their behavior independent of message content. This highlights a potential area for marketers to explore further in future research on SMIs, emphasizing the significance of channel and environmental factors in influencer marketing strategies.

Thirdly, the research supports our conceptual framework by explaining how the alignment between the social distance evoked by an SMI (through their follower size) and diagnostic messages influences message persuasiveness. We contribute to literature on psychological distance by incorporating the concept of self-brand connection as another underlying effect of construal matching. Importantly, we identify this process occurring within abstract (*e.g.*, high psychological distance) rather than concrete processing. The research reveals that connecting with distant SMIs might seem challenging, but it primarily happens when the media channel offers less diagnostic information. This situation not only increases the perceived psychological distance between the individual and the influencer but also affects their perception of the brand featured in the post.

Managerial Contributions

The research provides several actionable recommendations for advertising practice. We advise advertising managers to move beyond the mere size of an SMI's following, which is often seen as a primary criterion tied directly to campaign budget restrictions. Instead, social distance through an SMI's follower count should be considered a key determinant of advertising effectiveness alongside other critical elements of the campaign, such as the nature of the advertising message and the choice of distribution channels (social media vs. owned channels). To maximize effectiveness, advertisers have the option to select an influencer based on their follower size but should ensure this choice aligns with the broader campaign strategies. Alternatively, defining the campaign elements first and subsequently choosing an influencer whose follower profile fits these parameters can be equally effective. By adopting this comprehensive approach during the campaign planning phase, advertisers can achieve optimal results, maximizing their return on investment. Our findings illustrate that under the right conditions, SMIs with fewer followers (and thus, a lower financial investment) can perform just as effectively as those with a larger following (and higher financial investment). Below, we offer targeted recommendations for advertising managers (which can also be beneficial for SMIs themselves) to bolster influencer campaigns, regardless of the influencer's follower size. These guidelines are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Managerial Implications

		Diagnosticity tactics	
SMI following	**Strategy**	**Message**	**Distribution**
Lesser (In the thousands)	Concreteness	• Overt brand linkages • Specificity in language	• SMI-owned media
Greater (In the millions)	Abstractness	• Subtle brand linkages • Storytelling	• Brand-owned media

For campaigns featuring SMIs with fewer followers (*e.g.*, macro influencers), it is beneficial to emphasize concreteness across all campaign elements. In terms of messaging, the promoted brand should be clearly linked within the content. This can be implemented through tangible details such as the materials used in the product or specific product features, directly supported by our research findings. Additionally, incorporating more concrete communication strategies—like greater detail, action-oriented language, and vivid sensory descriptions—should also be considered to enhance message effectiveness. Regarding message distribution, these SMIs should primarily use their own channels and social media pages to communicate about the brand, maximizing engagement and impact. For instance, they could engage in more live media interactions, as suggested by Plangger et al. (2021), to further this effect.

For campaigns supported by SMIs with a larger following (*e.g.*, mega influencers), a more abstract approach is advised. These influencers should steer clear of directly tagging the brand or providing concrete product descriptions. It is beneficial for them to adopt a subtler promotional style; for instance, influencers could take photos with branded products without explicitly tagging or describing them. Similarly, they can employ abstract language in their posts to hint at or suggest the brand without naming it directly. Building on our current findings, marketers should urge such mega influencers to embrace abstract, storytelling-like content in their posts, aligning with the ideal level of abstraction (construal). Regarding the choice of distribution channels, our research supports the effectiveness of using brand-owned media channels for promoting content from SMIs with large followings, as this approach tends to enhance persuasiveness compared to using the influencer's own social media channels.

While our studies offer valuable and novel recommendations, we urge advertisers to approach our advice with caution. First, although our theoretical approach is bolstered by moderators commonly used in existing research, our study is an initial foray into the exploration of construal levels and SMIs in enhancing advertising effectiveness. Second, the distinction between what constitutes a larger or smaller follower base is not well-defined. For clarity, in this study, we consider SMIs with followers in the thousands to represent a smaller following, whereas those with followers in the millions represent a larger following. Given these considerations, we recommend that strategic decisions informed by our research be further validated through market research conducted by the advertisers themselves. Table 2 provides a summary of strategies and tactics that advertisers can use to optimize advertising effectiveness based on the follower count of SMIs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research has its limitations. Primarily, it focused on sectors like fashion, and although the Web Appendix B provides insights from the fitness influencer context, these are among the more popular product categories where marketers deploy SMIs. To broaden the scope and enhance the generalizability of our findings, future research should explore additional contexts such as food and travel (Cascio Rizzo et al. 2023; Janssen, Schouten, and Croes 2022). Additionally, the participant distribution in this study was not balanced, with a predominance of US participants, which may introduce a bias towards Western perspectives and potentially limit the applicability of our findings in non-Western contexts. The single European study and additional data in the Web Appendix B might not fully represent the diversity within Europe. Future studies should aim for a more diverse sample that includes broader representation from various European countries and other global regions to validate and enhance the applicability of our findings across different cultural contexts. Exploring non-Western countries would provide further robustness to our results. For instance, in Brazil, SMIs are often treated like celebrities, and this cultural nuance has fueled the rise of social media usage. Conversely, it would also be revealing to study perceptions of SMIs in countries where social media is less dominant to understand their impact on such populations. We further acknowledge a limitation of Study 1. While we present a rationale for the use of a median split in our circumstance, given the general caution that exists with this approach, we encourage future research to replicate our results in the field using a continuous scale for distance.

Finally, the study only examines one aspect of SMI social distance via follower size. However, SMIs might be perceived as varying in social distance based on a host of other cues. For instance, SMIs might be perceived as closer (vs. more distant) if several others that a person follows also follow the SMI (vs. only one known person follows the SMI). Additionally, social distance could also extend to cultural proximity since SMI influence is global nowadays (*e.g.*, visiting restaurants in the neighborhood vs. those in other countries). As such, future research should explore various means to manipulate SMI social distance. JAR

NOTE

1. Less than 1% of brands were composite brands and they were removed from the analysis.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR. KIRSTEN COWAN (Ph.D.) is a Senior Lecturer of Marketing at The University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Her research focuses on the intersection of brands and digital channels. She explores how immersive technologies in particular engage and affect consumer information processing, and how this influences their relationships with brands. Her work has been published in *Journal of Retailing*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*, among others. She is an associate editor for the *Journal of Advertising Research* and for the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

BEN MARDER (Ph.D.) is a Professor of Digital Consumer Behavior in the Marketing group within the University of Edinburgh Business School, UK. His research interests include social media marketing, identity management associated with new technology, and immersive spaces. Ben has published in the *Journal of Retailing*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*, among other journals.

DR. LAURA LAVERTU (Ph.D.) is a Lecturer in marketing at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. Her research focuses on the impact of technology (*e.g.*, social media, augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence) on consumer-brand interactions. She has published in *Psychology & Marketing*, the *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Information Technology and People*, and *Computers in Human Behavior*, among other journals.

DR. JIAYUAN LI (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. She earned her Ph.D. in Marketing from the University of Edinburgh in November 2024. Her research primarily focuses on sensory marketing, digital marketing, and consumer psychology. Her work has been published in leading international journals, including *Psychology & Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, and *Business Horizons*. Additionally, she has presented at top-tier international conferences, such as the American Marketing Association (AMA), Academy of Marketing Science (AMS), and the Association for Consumer Research (ACR).

ORCID

Kirsten Cowan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5586-1823

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