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Influence for Change: Consumer Perceptions
of Social Media Influencer Engagement
in Social Responsibility

Lauren Elizabeth Silva

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Scott Church, Chair
Kevin John
Brian Smith

School of Communications
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Influence for Change: Consumer Perceptions of Social Media Influencer Engagement in Social Responsibility

Lauren Elizabeth Silva
School of Communications, BYU
Master of Arts

Social Media has become a place for Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and brands to interact with users. For decades, brands and companies have been engaging in Corporate Social Responsibility, which has recently become highly visible through social media. While not brands, SMIs have also started engaging in and creating social responsibility content on social media platforms, such as Instagram. An experimental design study of 421 participants was conducted to examine and compare consumer perceptions. Using self-presentation theory as a framework and experimental design, this study analyzes consumer perceptions of brand and SMI credibility and authenticity when engaging in social responsibility content on social media.

Keywords: social media, influencers, brands, social responsibility, self-presentation, belief congruity, authenticity, credibility, Instagram

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**Influence for Change: Consumer Perceptions
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Introduction

Social media started out to connect with close friends and family but has shifted into a world of curated personas and profiles (Brown, 2019). With the vast interconnectivity of social media, connections can be formed with users all over the world. Social media allows users to become friends with people they have never met in person, and likely would have not met due to geographical, age, and sex differences (Baym, 2015). With social media users engaging in self-disclosure (Baym, 2015) and constantly sharing the intimate details of their lives not just with one person, but with anyone who views their profile, it is hard to not feel connected with other online users. All these online connections create a sphere of influence where online recommendations or help from other social media users can be found on a wide variety of interests including food, clothing, parenting, and social issues (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018). Consumers often place trust and assign value to Social Media Influencers (SMI) because they are perceived to be more credible and accessible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Currently, Social Media Influencers are trusted at a similar level to that of consumers friends (Swant, 2016).

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have gained traction over the last decade as social media platforms have become increasingly mainstream and user-friendly (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018). SMIs cover a wide range of social territory (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018) and on social media platforms, follower count and likes can signify a SMI's credibility and effectiveness within a given social territory (Westerman et al., 2012). The likes-to-follower ratios of an account signals to followers, brands, and companies how the SMI's opinion should be

valued by the community the SMI has cultivated (Westerman et al., 2012; De Vries, 2019). This recognition leads to brands and companies seeking out SMIs to endorse products, collaborate, and advocate for the brand or company (Khamis et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). In this way, SMIs are brands. Just like brands, SMIs create a personal brand with values that are recognizable (Khamis et al., 2017). As the actions of brands and SMIs reinforce the values held and credibility is built with consumers.

Advocating for social issues through social media has become increasingly popular over the last several years with the rise of hashtag activism and social media providing a platform for users to share and consume political and social issues (Anderson et al., 2018; Suciu, 2019), making social media platforms an important tool for those advocating for social change.

Attitudes are mixed from consumers when brands or celebrities take stances on social issues (Manning et al., 2017). It was not commonplace with celebrities feeling inaccessible and consumers did not feel it was a celebrity's place to advise them on social issues because they seemed less informed and some consumers do not care for the opinions of celebrities (Manning et al., 2017). However, as social media platforms have grown, it has become an expectation for celebrities, brands, and now influencers, to advocate for relevant social issues (Tenbarge, 2020). This was seen in 2020 when influencers and celebrities were expected to speak out against racism with Black Lives Matter, and were harassed if they did not do so, being labeled as insensitive to the current issues (Tenbarge, 2020). Taking a stance and advocating for social issues, also known as corporate social responsibility (CSR; Carol, 1991, 1999; Ihlen, 2009; Lerbinger, 2006; May et al., 2007), when done in an authentic way, engages consumers and helps retain loyalty (Park et al., 2017; Servera-Francés & Piqueras-Tomás, 2019).

Corporate Social Responsibility is one of the ways companies interact with and advocate for social issues. CSR is defined as companies having a responsibility to address social issues that are important to the company's community (Carol, 1991, 1999; Ihlen, 2009). This is one of the strategies used by companies and influencers to gain trust and credibility. CSR has created a space where brands are expected to support and advocate for social issues and this expectation has translated over onto SMIs. The current influencer literature focuses on authenticity and credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Glucksman, 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019) and CSR has not been explicitly applied to SMIs, even though SMIs consistently engage in CSR on social media platforms. While Influencer credibility is traditionally measured in engagement, such as number of followers, comments, and likes, (Westerman et al, 2012; De Vries, 2019) the aim of this study is to focus on consumer perceptions. The consumer perceptions of SMIs authenticity and credibility were looked at in direct relation to the SMI engagement in CSR or influencer social responsibility (ISR), looking at self-presentation, belief congruity, and how perceptions of SMIs compare to brands.

Review of Literature

Social Media Influencers

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have been on the rise as social media platforms continually grow (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018). SMIs can be simply defined as online personalities with large followings who have a sphere of influence that impacts the decisions of users in their community (Agrawal, 2016; Varsamis, 2018). SMIs create a sense of accessibility for the audience, making followers feel as though they are part of an intimate community the SMI has cultivated (Khamis et al., 2017). With the lives of SMIs under scrutiny as they share online content, self-branding, authenticity, and credibility become key factors into the success of

SIMs and follower retention (Audrezet et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019). Based off follower counts, there are different levels of SIMs. Campbell and Farrell (2020) outline five different types of influencers based off follower count ranges. There are Nano-Influencers (0-10k followers), Micro-Influencers (10k-100k followers), Macro-Influencers (100k-1m followers), Mega-Influencers (1m+ followers), and Celebrity influencers (1m+) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

SIMs have specialized, niche, areas of influence, and the opinions of SIMs are valued by followers as SIMs exist in a similar realm to celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017). SIMs exist on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Twitter, but are most successful on Instagram and Facebook (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). On each platform SIMs need to connect and interact with followers in a way that feels individualized for followers to create a sense of belonging for users and to build their community's brand.

Authenticity and Credibility. Authenticity is a key element needed by SIMs to be successful on social media platforms and is part of the foundation SIMs first build when creating their online identity and community that goes beyond the SIM's self-presentation. Followers of SIMs value when SIMs have intrinsic motivations that are not commercially oriented (Audrezet et al., 2020). Audrezet et al. (2020) identified several different authenticity paths specifically for SIMs, with a range of negative and positive implications for the SIM. This study looked at authenticity in relation to sponsored content SIMs share and there are two key elements found that make up the four paths of authenticity: passionate authenticity, and transparent authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Passionate authenticity "revolves around expressing one's passions" (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 562). It entails that SIMs choose to partner with brands who align with their image, want to build real relationships with them, allow them to express creative freedom, and have

products that align with their passions (Audrezet et al., 2020). When engaging in transparent authenticity, SMIs want to avoid “any risk of confusing followers,” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 563). Under transparent authenticity, SMIs practice disclosing the extent to which content is sponsored, providing objective reviews of products or services, and partnering with brands who allow them to post true to life content without being excessively edited (Audrezet et al., 2020). From these two elements, there are four paths of authenticity. Fake authenticity is low passion with low transparency, fairytale authenticity is high passion with low transparency, and disembodied authenticity is high transparency and low passion (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, the best path of authenticity for influencers is termed as *absolute authenticity*, which is high passion, high transparency (Audrezet et al., 2020). Absolute authenticity is the combination of transparent and passionate authenticity, which allows for SMIs to stay true to their intrinsic values, making their account worth following for social media users, because consumers feel that they can connect to the SMI (Audrezet et al., 2020; Xu Rinka & Pratt, 2018). Studies show that the influence a SMI has is greater when consumers perceive that their interests match up with the interests and personality of the SMI (Xu Rinka & Pratt, 2018). As SMIs are more accessible than celebrities and are seen as more credible due to the relatable level for consumers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019). SMIs are considered a trusted source by followers, so when recommending unknown brands, products, or sites, if a user trusts the SMI, they are more likely to trust and see the unknown brand as credible without any other knowledge (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019). Credibility of the SMIs, or the source credibility, is based off the perceptions consumers have about the source based on how believable, reliable, trustworthy, attractive, and knowledgeable the SMI, or source, is perceived to be by consumers in their specific area of influence (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001; Ohanian,

1990). There are many perceptions that factor into credibility and for this study, Newell and Goldsmith's (2001) model for measuring credibility was used, which looks at two factors, expertise and trustworthiness. These SMIs with high follower counts are perceived as more attractive and trustworthy, adding to the credibility of the source (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). However, other research indicates that influencers with low follower counts (micro-influencers) are seen as more authentic than other SMIs by consumers (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2020). This trust SMIs have built up through credibility and authenticity within the SMIs community must be carefully managed to not be abused. Influencers lose credibility and authenticity when using the status for personal benefits in the wrong way (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, with the monetization of content creation for SMIs and endorsements of products, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to differentiate between content that is paid or sponsored, which can create a lack of trust and SMIs being perceived as inauthentic (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). While authenticity and credibility have been studied looking at SMIs and brand or product partnerships/endorsements, there is further research to be done in SMI credibility and authenticity in relation to advocating for social issues.

Part of the intrinsic values (Audrezet et al., 2020) an SMI has are the core beliefs that an SMI expresses online, and it is part of the personal brand an SMI is known for. These individually set beliefs for each SMI impacts perceived authenticity and credibility. While not specifically named in previous literature, this study will look at belief congruity. *Belief Congruity* is how an SMIs (or brand's) content aligns with the beliefs and values of the SMI (brand). This idea of belief congruity aligns with the different types of authenticity an SMI (Audrezet et al., 2020) or brand can engage in and how that impacts consumer perceptions.

Instagram and SMIs. Authenticity and credibility are important elements for SMIs as they interact with followers, and one of the best platforms for SMIs to engage with followers and create connections in an authentic way is Instagram (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Instagram specifically was focused on in this study, as it has many affordances that are advantageous for SMIs. Instagram has roughly 1 billion active users each month and 500 million active Instagram story users daily (Tankovska, 2021). Instagram is a photo based social media platform with nearly 140 million users in the United States alone (Tankovska, 2021). This user traffic on Instagram makes it an extremely effective tool for SMIs. With the Instagram platform being highly visual, it is optimal for content creation that engages followers. Instagram's main visual content affordances are pictures and videos of various lengths with corresponding captions, and a story function which allows for photo and video content that expires after 24 hours (Instagram Features, n.d.). SMI success depends on the engagement and connection developed with followers online, and Instagram has affordances that allow for this connection through comments, direct messages, and video content, allowing SMIs to respond to followers. The purpose of SMI interactions is for followers to feel a sense of belonging in the SMI community, which Instagram affords. Instagram is one of the most heavily used platforms for SMIs and is the most used platform for opinion leaders in the fashion industry (Casaló et al., 2020).

Personal Branding/Self-branding. Much like large corporations developing their brand to have distinguishable characteristics, self-branding needs to have the same dedication. In self-branding the person becomes synonymous with the brand, which is usually an extension of themselves (Khamis et al., 2017). With the rise of social media platforms, anyone can engage which makes social media the ideal place to create a personal platform. Social media is consumer centered and there is a need to self-brand online to make one's personal brand recognizable and stand out from

others (Khamis et al., 2017). In this way, self-branding is a device used to draw attention on social media as it affords users to create well-crafted personal images. Social media influencers (SMIs) capitalize on self-branding strategies as they grow the niche area the personal brand occupies. SMIs use self-branding to benefit the message of their platform, using the personal brand to target a certain population.

As SMIs have grown in number and recognition, these different self-branding strategies are successful and inspiring to others because this success is seen as replicable. SMI success with self-branding is inspirational to others seeking to achieve SMI status, because self-branding in the influencer world can lead to fame for the average user and other rewards, such as opportunities to collaborate with larger, recognizable brands (Khamis et al., 2017).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Consumers are cautious when choosing companies to interact with and how to navigate interaction. Corporations are aware of this and respond accordingly, working to engage the most consumers possible. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is one of the ways companies entice consumers to interact with them. CSR is essential for corporations and how they function (Lerbinger, 2006). CSR can be defined as the idea of companies having a responsibility to address social issues that are important to the company's community (Carol, 1991, 1999; Ihlen, 2009; Lerbinger, 2006; May et al., 2007). CSR helps organizations to solve social problems, minimize social costs imposed on society due to operations, support public policies, and make investments meant to strengthen society (Lerbinger, 2006). This helps to increase a corporation's image, engagement, credibility, and profits through communication to consumers (Bronn, 2010). Companies alert consumers on the socially responsible actions taken by the corporation demonstrating good will (Bronn, 2010). Consumers view social responsibility as an important

value, causing corporations to carefully, and deliberately, act (Sellnow & Brand, 2001). These CSR actions help to ensure the longevity and success of the company long-term (Sellnow & Brand, 2001).

However, as social issues can become polarizing, companies who engage in CSR need to carefully consider what and who to engage in social responsibility content with, and how it is done (Bronn, 2010). Organizations often take an approach of partnering with a cause to publicly tie itself with the social issue. In these ways, SMIs can and do participate in CSR and are careful of partnerships accepted. Organizations and companies must be careful when going to SMIs for partnerships because the engagement and interaction reflects on both parties (Lin et al., 2018). The main element focused on in these CSR relationships is alignment: how well the SMI's values and area of influence lines up with an organization's values, products, and services (Lin et al., 2018).

CSR can be implemented and distributed to consumers in a variety of ways. Organizations often take an approach of partnering with a cause to tie itself with the social issue (Bronn, 2010). CSR initiatives can be seen through being displayed on packaging, co-branded products, and asking for donations to the cause at point of purchase (Bronn, 2010). Partnership with charity or social events for a social cause to tie the brand and products together is also known as Cause Related Marketing, a form of CSR (Ptacek & Salazar, 1997). This is one way to use marketing money along with different strategies and techniques to build the brand and support social causes at the same time (Bronn, 2010). CSM/CSR is also a way to foster change within the company's community—bettering society while building the corporation's brand market (Kolter & Lee, 2004). While partnering with a cause, organizations have been seen to partner with brand ambassadors or SMIs. Brand ambassadors, while similar to SMIs, are

different because they are affiliated with a specific brand (Smith et al., 2018). Brand ambassadors gain social stake/value as affiliation with a company's CSR is established, while still staying separate from the brand. Through CSR, brand ambassadors felt genuine, authentic, and true to the personal brand the brand ambassador had created (Smith et al., 2018).

A well-done CSR campaign will require consumers to change their individual actions to help facilitate a larger change (Bronn, 2010). If an influencer is engaging in CSR content, the same outcome should apply. However, as SMIs engage and interact differently with their following than brands would, engaging in CSR is not only a call for followers to change their actions for good, but it puts SMIs under scrutiny from followers as the followers determine whether the actions and words of an influencer match up to the CSR messages.

Self-presentation

Part of the trust and credibility SMIs have comes from their self-presentation. Self-presentation online is determined by the platform (Baym, 2015). Each platform has its own set of norms and cues that dictate how one's online self should be constructed (Baym, 2015). Online self-presentation has parallels with chatrooms and online gaming, where consumers create personalities or avatars of themselves, imagined into the persona they wanted to portray (Baym, 2015). Gamers can mold the avatar to their liking, so others see the hair, clothes, weapons, etc., that the user wants to portray to seem a certain way, whether that be credible, knowledgeable, or tough. While gaming is an extremely creative outlet for self-presentation online, all online platforms offer the ability for users to create an online version of themselves, sharing the aspects of themselves they want others to see.

The name a user chooses for themselves is one of the first key elements of self-presentation and was seen as early as the start of online chatrooms with screennames (Baym,

2015). Names signify how users want others to know and refer to them, it is a crucial part of online identity. For example, on social media platforms like Instagram or Twitter, your name is your handle (ex: @coolgrl), and it is unique to the user. No two users can have the same handle, giving them a unique identifying factor. Online, names are who users are and other users even will refer to them as their handle, not their “real” name which can be found on their profile. Self-presentation on social media platforms is guided in some ways. For SMIs this is important because it is how their community identifies them and often is something catchy or clever because it is one of the first impressions users have of them. When building an online persona, there are certain identifying demographics for self-presentation one must enter, such as gender, age, and other identifying factors and interests (Baym, 2015). These general identifying factors help build a framework for one’s online self. Some of the most important identifying factors on an online profile for a user is the interests and beliefs they share for others to see (Baym, 2015). These interests and beliefs allow for users to find other users with common interests they can form relationships with online. This aspect of self-presentation is extremely important for SMIs when building online personas because the interests they present themselves as having directly draws followers into their community. The SMI community is based on these common interests and is how trust is built when SMIs are true to these interests.

Another important element of self-presentation is the images users use to identify themselves (Baym, 2015). Online, the only way users put a name to a face is through the photos or images they present themselves with. The photos users share on profiles not only indicate how to identify them but indicates life changes and success. Users want to present themselves in the best light, and sharing accomplishments is one way to do so. Profile pictures and other images shared online also draw other users in (Baym, 2015). It is now commonplace for connections,

romantic, platonic, and professional, to be formed online, simply because one user was drawn to the images of the other. Another part of self-presentation is the textual media users share online (Baym, 2015). While images may initially draw users in, textual media is another important layer to the online persona because it conveys a significant amount of the online persona's personality. Some users focus on humor in their textual media while others use it to eloquently share experiences or advocate for change. Once establishing this textual element of the online persona, it becomes crucial to the self-presentation because sequential textual posts need to follow that same format for the congruity of the online persona.

Part of self-presentation needs the ability to manipulate the constraints of different online platforms in building an online presence (Baym, 2015). Each platform lends itself to a different type of self-presentation--to successfully create an online identity, one must be able to manipulate the technology to the benefit of the online persona. The design elements specifically demonstrate technological savvy and creativity. With Instagram, the design elements are important for the platform. In recent years, the Instagram grid has become increasingly important, especially for brands and SMIs. Users aim for a cohesive grid, ranging from using the same filters or presets on every photo, to planning out each post to create a pattern or certain look to a user's grid to help further create their online identity. An important part of self-presentation is a level of authenticity. User self-presentation whether online and offline, is generally authentic and users often are more honest through their online self-presentation (Baym, 2015). However, ultimately self-presentation and an online profile "may represent a promise more than an accurate description" (Baym, 2015, p. 129). This promise is the potential people see in themselves, what they hope to become, and self-presentation online gives users the opportunity to create this version of themselves users aspire to (Ellison et al., 2012). Users often

create their online self-presentation as what they want and hope to see in themselves, but it is not always how others see them. Ultimately though, the generally accepted idea of self-presentation is that while users choose different parts of themselves to share, the key is that what is shared should be authentic. SMIs may only share certain parts of their lives that are part of their sphere of influence, but they are expected to be authentic with the elements SMIs do choose to share. With SMI self-presentation, for authenticity and credibility to be perceived, the content shared by SMIs needs to align with the values the SMI has cultivated and shared online. How well the beliefs and values align with the content leads to content being either congruent or incongruent with the SMIs online presence. When those previously set beliefs are validated by content posted, that is belief congruity. Inversely, when content invalidates beliefs previously established, that creates belief incongruity for followers. These elements are a crucial part of self-presentation established by SMIs online.

This study aims to look at perception's users have of the authenticity and credibility of SMIs who engage in CSR, in relation to how users view these same attributes in brands that engage in CSR. The research questions and hypotheses are as follows:

RQ1: How does belief congruity within self-presentation impact followers' views of SMIs sharing social responsibility content?

H1: SMIs in the congruent belief, low follower condition will be perceived by consumers to be more authentic than all other conditions.

H2: Brands and SMIs with high followers will be perceived by consumers to be more credible than brands with lower followers.

H3: Incongruent beliefs with social responsibility content will negatively impact perceived credibility and authenticity of both brands and SMIs.

Method

An experimental design was used in this study to test consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and authenticity when influencers engage in social responsibility content. A three factor, two level (Post: brand vs. influencer) x (Followers: high vs. low) x (Beliefs: congruent vs. incongruent), between-subjects experimental design was used.

The first set of conditions in the first factor for this study addressed who is posting, whether it is a brand or an influencer. Corporate social responsibility has been studied in relation to brands almost exclusively (Carol, 1991, 1999; Ihlen, 2009; Lerbinger, 2006; May Cheney & Roper, 2007). However, studies focusing on brands partnering with influencers are sparse. With the rise of SMIs (Khamis et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018), this study aims to look at how SMIs engage in social responsibility when they themselves are in the brands position and not connected to any other company.

The second factor decided the follower count of the influencer or brand, high or low followers. Two different subcategories of influencers were chosen for the follower counts: Micro-Influencers and Macro-Influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The low follower condition had 14.7k followers, whereas the high follower condition had 247k followers. Follower counts can signal a certain level of credibility and influence, as well as subconsciously trigger ideas for the consumer of how they believe an influencer should act, and how trustworthy they find the influencer (Westerman et al., 2012). Part of this study is to determine whether follower count does signal credibility and authenticity to a consumer when in relation to social responsibility.

The last factor determined the beliefs of the brand or influencer. When consumers follow influencers and brands online, consumers come to understand the beliefs the organization holds.

Congruity between the beliefs and content shared by brands and SMIs leads to intrinsic authenticity while incongruity signals the opposite (Audrezet et al., 2020). Manipulating the beliefs of the influencer/brand in this study is to see how the preexisting beliefs impact consumer's perceptions when evaluating the authenticity and credibility of an influencer/brand's engagement in social responsibility.

Procedure

Respondents were gathered through Prolific Academic, a survey recruiting website used for survey study research. Participants acknowledged consent at the beginning of the survey and participants were paid \$0.75 for participating in the survey. The sample consisted of adults, ages 18 and older. With 8 different conditions, a sample size of 400 participants was aimed for to achieve statistical significance for each condition (Cohen, 1977). This study ultimately had 421 responses collected. Participants were asked to imagine they are looking through their Instagram feed and they come across an SMIs or brand's posts. Diesel vs. electric engine cars were chosen for the product in this study for participants to relate to the influencer or brand and the product. Depending on the condition participants were assigned to, they saw the fictitious influencer (brand), with follower counts (high or low) and a car post aligning with the beliefs (congruent or incongruent) of the assigned conditions. The influencer (brand) post was set up as an Instagram post given the affordances of the platform for influencers (brands) with visual content (Tankovska, 2021; Tenborge, 2020). The first post highlighted the belief, which was either congruent or incongruent with the environmental awareness social responsibility post and was randomly assigned to participants. These posts highlighted the engine as being diesel or electric, signaling the manipulation to participants on the congruity of the beliefs for environmental

activism. After seeing the initial post, participants then saw two additional posts from the influencer (brand) (See Appendix A for stimuli).

After the first post for the assigned condition, participants across all conditions then saw the same social responsibility post to eliminate the possibility of different posts creating stronger emotional reactions in participants over other social issues. This was to help preserve the integrity of the study and eliminate possible confounding variables. The social responsibility post consisted of an image and caption in the Instagram format. The study did not display post likes so that possible results related to follower count differences would not be confounded by fluctuating likes. The post was about a current social issue, environmental activism. Climate change was chosen for this study because it is a well-known issue with six-in-ten Americans concerned that climate change will impact them on a personal level (Poushter et al., 2021). The study used similar captions between posts of the same image and minimal words were changed based on the condition participants were assigned to. This was to keep the captions of the stimuli as realistic to the influencer (brand) format. After this second post, participants then saw the influencer (brand) advertising a climate change friendly product they claim to regularly use, reusable straws.

After seeing the post, participants were asked several questions examining credibility and authenticity. Directly following the straw post, participants were also asked how likely they would be to purchase the straws and how much they were willing to pay for them, as a manipulation check for the influencer (brand). Then, two different scales looking at credibility and authenticity were used. The authenticity scale comes from 2019 study, “Consumer evaluations of CSR authenticity: Development and validation of a multidimensional CSR authenticity scale,” and were adapted and modified for influencer’s using CSR (Joo et al., 2019).

The scale identifies 7 different dimensions of authenticity, though not all dimensions were used. Dimensions such as congruence, benevolence, commitment, and transparency were used (See Appendix B). The scale adapted to measure credibility that comes from a 2017 study, “Measuring Credibility Perceptions in CSR communication: A Scale Development to Test Readers’ Perceived Credibility of CSR Reports” (Lock & Seele, 2017). This scale measures credibility based on a series of questions measuring several dimensions. For this study sincerity, appropriateness, and understandability were used (See Appendix C). These combined elements give the total perceived credibility score.

After answering these questions on credibility and authenticity of the influencer (brand) participants were asked to respond to several statements about how important influencers, brands, and social responsibility were to them. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreeance on a 5-point likert scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. These questions were to help gauge where participants fell on how important social issues are to them. At the end of the survey, participants were asked demographic questions and thanked for their participation.

Results

421 online responses were collected and after filtering out responses for failing attention checks, the final sample contained 396 participants (64.5% female). The following analyses were run using SPSS version 26. To first check if the manipulation of the study was successful, a winsorized (90th percent) independent sample t-test was run looking at the willingness of participants to pay for the straws in the study, separated by low and high followers. Willingness to pay was the only question in the data set winsorized to take out outliers that skewed the results. There were no statistical differences in willingness to pay between the two groups ($M_{\text{Low Followers}} = 8.33$, $SD_{\text{low followers}} = 3.80$; $M_{\text{High Followers}} = 8.28$, $SD_{\text{high followers}} = 4.10$), demonstrating the

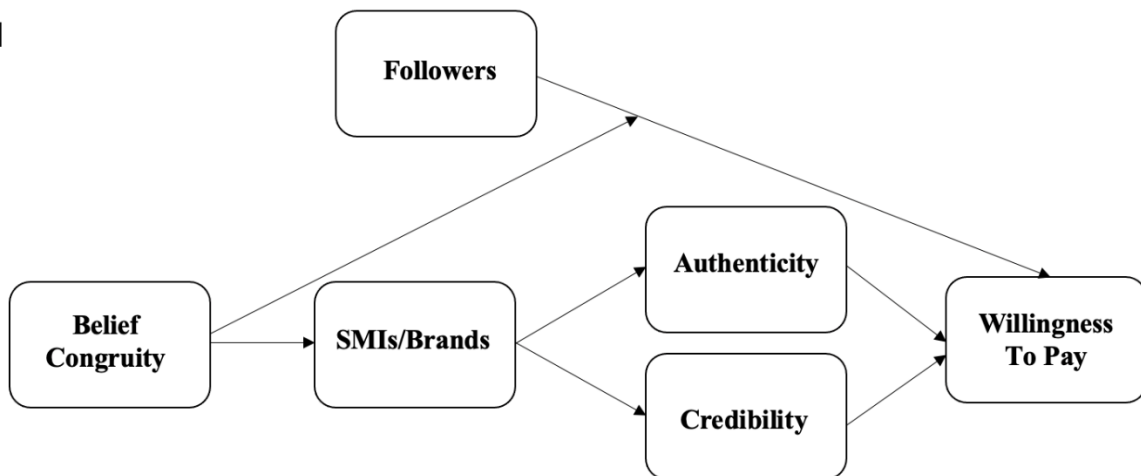
effectiveness of the manipulation. Willingness to pay was winsorized to take out outliers that skewed results.

After the two scales were tested for reliability for authenticity and credibility, they did not have anything statistically significant on their own but, when analyzed with congruity, statistical significance with two-way interactions were seen. A one-way ANOVA was run looking at the authenticity scale by congruity and SMIs, brands in the congruity condition were more authentic than influencers in the congruity condition ($M_{\text{brand congruent}} = 3.89, p < .001$; $M_{\text{influencer congruent}} = 3.73, p < .001$). However, influencers in the incongruent condition were seen as more authentic than brands in the incongruent condition ($M_{\text{influencer incongruent}} = 3.11, p < .001$; $M_{\text{brand incongruent}} = 2.97, p < .001$) While follower counts did not have an impact on authenticity, these results partially disprove H1, with brands in the congruent belief condition being perceived as more authentic than the influencers, along with the influencers in the incongruent belief condition being perceived as more authentic than the brands in the incongruent condition. Then looking at credibility in this same way through a one-way ANOVA test, brands were seen as more credible than influencers in both conditions ($M_{\text{brand congruent}} = 3.98, p < .001$; $M_{\text{influencer congruent}} = 3.85, p < .001$; $M_{\text{brand incongruent}} = 3.41, p < .001$; $M_{\text{influencer incongruent}} = 3.37, p < .001$). This analysis confirms H3, that incongruent beliefs with social responsibility content will negatively impact perceived credibility and authenticity of both brands and SMIs. Both SMIs and brands in the incongruent belief condition had significantly lower scores for authenticity and credibility.

The following one-way ANOVA tests that were run had some statistical significance, but none had two-way interactions the way authenticity and credibility did when analyzed by belief congruity and SMI/brand. Those who were in the high follower, congruent condition was also

significantly more likely to purchase the reusable straws than any other condition ($M_{\text{congruent high followers}} = 3.48, p < .001$; $M_{\text{congruent low followers}} = 3.02, p = .523$, $M_{\text{incongruent high followers}} = 2.84, p < .001$, $M_{\text{incongruent low followers}} = 2.91, p = .523$). This confirms H2, that brands and SMIs with high followers will be perceived by consumers to be more credible than brands with lower followers. Participants being willing to purchase a recommended product from a brand/SMI with high followers signaling the credibility of the credibility of the recommendation. However, other than this analysis, the follower count conditions did not have an impact, so the one-way ANOVA tests were further done as a 2 (Post: brand vs. influencer) x 2 (Beliefs: congruent vs. incongruent). Then looking at willingness to pay, those in the congruent influencer condition were significantly more willing to pay more for the reusable straws ($M_{\text{influencer congruent}} = 9.23, p = .002$; $M_{\text{brand congruent}} = 7.82, p = .215$), whereas those in the brands incongruent condition were more willing to pay than the incongruent influencer condition ($M_{\text{brand incongruent}} = 8.5, p = .215$; $M_{\text{influencer incongruent}} = 7.60, p = .002$).

Figure 1: *Variable Model*



Discussion

Overall, belief congruity was the most impactful variable on consumer perceptions of SMIs and brands in this study. When authenticity and credibility was analyzed with belief congruity and the influencer/brand condition, there was statistical significance with two-way interactions. While SMIs and brands in the belief congruent condition were both significantly more authentic and credible, it was interesting to see that the brand in the belief congruent condition was seen as more authentic and credible than the SMI. Often brands seek out SMI partnerships with SMIs whose values and image aligns with theirs for different CSR campaigns (Bronn, 2010). However, with brands being perceived as more credible and authentic than SMIs when their beliefs are congruent with the CSR content, it would be beneficial for brands to establish certain parameters for their company decide when to focus more on their own CSR efforts and forego SMI partnerships and when to utilize those SMI partnerships. Also, this finding of brands being more authentic than SMIs in the congruent and incongruent condition was interesting and demonstrates consumers favoring brands over SMIs. This could possibly be explained by significance that comes from something being branded or tied to a brand in current culture and could mean that brands will continually have higher success in consumer perceptions, in part for the sole reason that a brand, is a brand. Follower counts ended up having no difference between most conditions, but belief congruity had the main impact on authenticity. Part of this could be due to the general trust that consumers have for brands or the anonymity a brand has, not having to rely on one person to represent and uphold the brand's authenticity.

Belief congruity is a large factor that impacts the perceptions of credibility and authenticity when cultivating of an online self and presence. In part it is because of how content posted aligns with the online personal image that has been crafted (Baym, 2015), which is why

belief congruity was measured in this study along with authenticity and credibility. The belief congruity that was established through the series of posts highlighting intrinsic values that the brand or SMI was supposed to have aligned with several of the authenticity paths established by Audrezet et al. (2020). The belief congruent condition and results confirmed the absolute authenticity path, having perceived high passion and high authenticity for the issue portrayed (Audrezet et al., 2020). Values and beliefs are important to consumers, so having those intrinsic beliefs visible for an SMI or brand is impactful for perceived authenticity. Then looking at the incongruent belief condition for SMIs and brands, there are two different authenticity paths it could follow with the diesel car and the environment social issue. The incongruent beliefs could be seen as fake authenticity, with low passion and low authenticity, or fairytale authenticity, with high passion and low transparency (Audrezet et al., 2020). The fake authenticity path in this scenario comes across as the classic idea of participating online for the monetary benefit and not caring about the social issue it's associated with, whereas the fairytale authenticity can come across as being uninformed about a social issue an SMI or brand might be passionate about, but not being transparent about still trying to learn more and stop behavior that is contrary to advocating for the social issue. So, when followers may find that when an SMI's content is not congruent with the stated beliefs, it can feel more deceitful because of the cultivated online presence a consumer thought they knew, and then followers see the face of who is lying to them. And because SMIs engage in such visual content, it may feel very blatant to followers when they receive mixed messages from SMIs, breaking down the authenticity and credibility that may have been associated with the SMI. Additionally, brands and SMIs being perceived as less credible and less authentic in the incongruent condition highlights a topic often focused on in the communications field, media literacy. Having a significant difference between the incongruent

and congruent belief condition demonstrates that even with nuanced captions, participants are media literate and notice differences and are taking time to understand what is being consumed, not just blindly making assumptions based off images.

The other two important measures in this study were *purchase likelihood* and the *willingness to pay*. Part of the purpose of SMIs and brands is to influence followers, often to purchase products SMIs and brands believe will impact consumers lives positively. In the high follower congruent condition, participants were significantly more likely to purchase straws than any of the three other conditions. This was interesting to note because the brand or SMI itself didn't matter, the follower count did. This confirms H2 in part, with high followers being perceived as more credible based on consumers being significantly more likely to purchase a recommended product. Elements such as trustworthiness, expertise, believability, reliability, attractiveness, and knowledge (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001; Ohanian, 1990), impact perceived credibility, but the scale for credibility did not work in this study. However, another element of credibility is high follower count (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014; De Vries, 2019; Westerman et al., 2012). The high follower count signifying credibility in this way could speak to the idea that social media is shifting consumer views and these other elements that make up credibility might not be as consciously thought about by consumers. A high follower count could be the main sign of credibility a consumer needs to see. The results for willingness to pay were somewhat confusing because after those in the congruent influencer condition being willing to pay the most for reusable straws, the next condition willing to pay more was the incongruent brand condition. Since SMIs are trusted by consumers in a similar way to friends (Swant, 2016), it could be possible that is why consumers willing to pay more when coming from the belief congruent influencer. Since word of mouth is a

valuable tool for brands when advertising and marketing products, it would be interesting to further look at SMIs and word of mouth from a consumer's friend, to see if it has the same impact. However, it is unclear from previous literature as to why a consumer would be willing to pay more in the incongruent brand condition.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study was the use of a current social issue for the social responsibility post. Participants may have had strong feelings about the issue presented. This limitation was hopefully kept to a minimum with the experiment focusing on the influencer/brand's beliefs and congruity with the social issue, not the participant's personal feelings about the given issue. Another limitation of the study is the three posts shown to all participants were in the same order and were not from a real influencer. The study was done this way to limit possible error if participants had been familiar with a real influencer and to minimize confusion concerning the defined beliefs of the influencer/brand among participants and maximize the effect when participants viewed the three social media posts used in the study. Another limitation of faking the influencer and brand for this study is the ease of fabricating an influencer compared to fabricating a brand, which can be more difficult to believe, possibly impacting findings.

Future Research

Future research done in this area has several potential avenues to explore. With the limitation of not using a real influencer, one step would possibly be to run a field study, using real influencers that participants are previously familiar with to further explore these ideas. Further, while in this study micro and macro influencers were the only types of influencers used, the use of mega influencers should be tested in future research to see if it impacts the results and

makes the follower counts significant in additional analysis. While belief congruity did not matter for brands the same way it did for influencers, further testing with brand spokespeople or brand characters, such as Jake from State Farm, against influencers to see if having a face to a brand impacts the need for belief congruity. Additionally, qualitative research studies diving into the consumer perceptions of influencers that were found in this study would also prove beneficial for furthering the influencer literature and consumer interactions and help inform where research on this topic should go.

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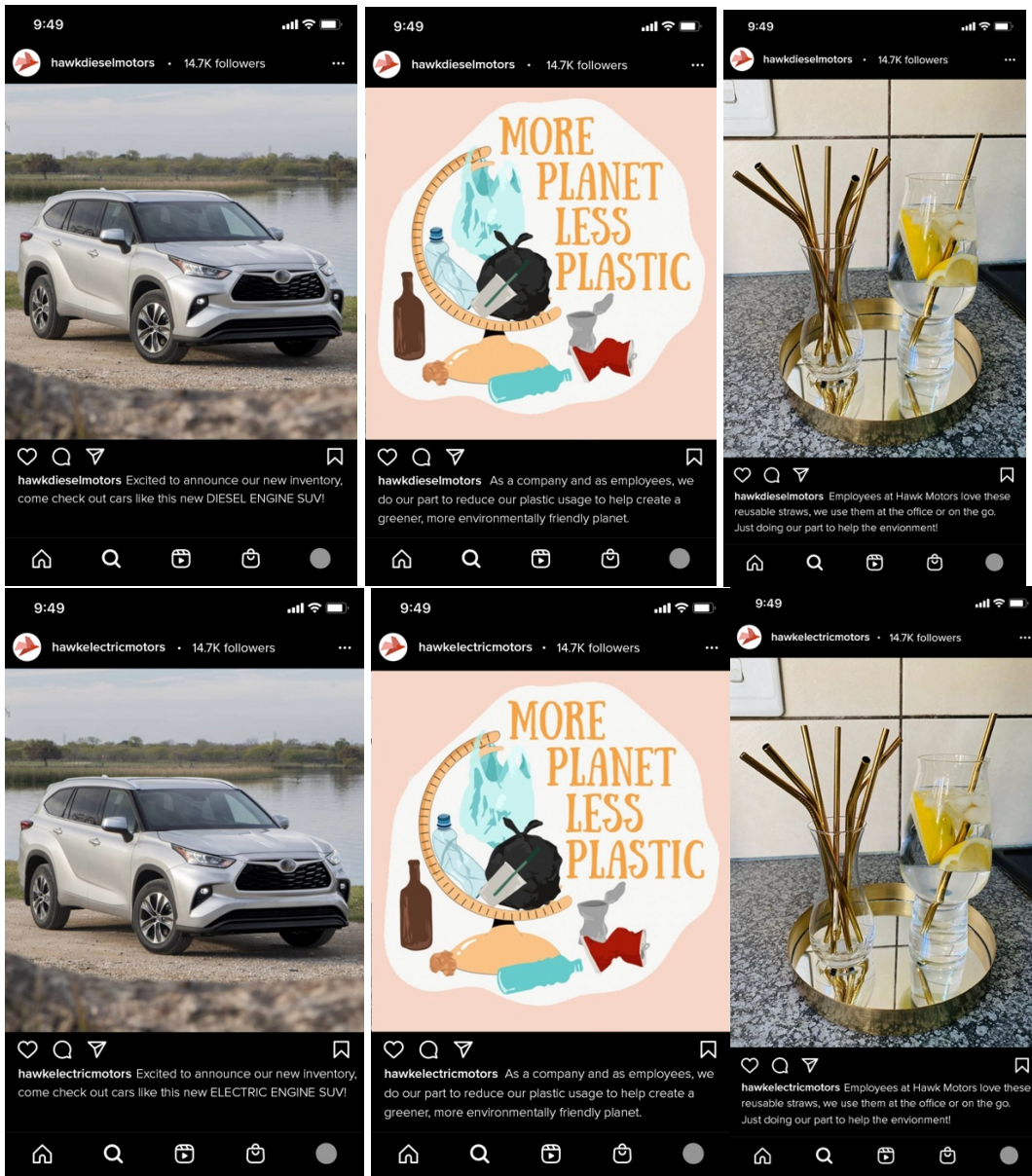
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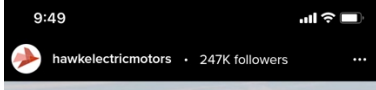
Appendix 1

The following images are stimuli that were used in the study.





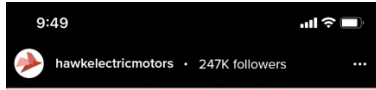
hawkdieselmotors Excited to announce our new inventory, come check out cars like this new DIESEL ENGINE SUV!



hawkelectricmotors Excited to announce our new inventory, come check out cars like this new ELECTRIC ENGINE SUV!



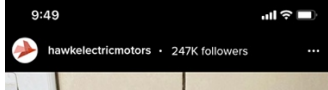
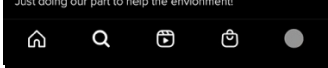
hawkdieselmotors As a company and as employees, we do our part to reduce our plastic usage to help create a greener, more environmentally friendly planet.



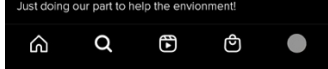
hawkelectricmotors As a company and as employees, we do our part to reduce our plastic usage to help create a greener, more environmentally friendly planet.



hawkdieselmotors Employees at Hawk Motors love these reusable straws, we use them at the office or on the go. Just doing our part to help the environment!



hawkelectricmotors Employees at Hawk Motors love these reusable straws, we use them at the office or on the go. Just doing our part to help the environment!







Appendix 2

The following scaled questions measuring authenticity were modified from Joo et al., 2019. All questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale, strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Congruence

1. (Brand/Influencer) and their support for protecting the environment fits well together.
2. There is a logical connection between (Brand/Influencer) and environmental consciousness.
3. Environmental consciousness seems to align well with (Brand/Influencer).

Benevolence

1. The support by (Brand/Influencer) for being environmentally conscious seems altruistic to me.
2. (Brand/Influencer) is acting benevolently in their support for protecting the environment.
3. (Brand/Influencer) is being philanthropic in their support for protecting the environment.

Commitment

1. (Brand/Influencer) provides a great deal of support for environmental awareness.
2. (Brand/Influencer) seems to be highly committed to protecting the environment.
3. (Brand/Influencer) seems to be highly involved in protecting the environment.

Transparency

1. (Brand/Influencer)'s awareness support seems very transparent.
2. It is easy to evaluate aspects of (Brand/Influencer)'s support for environmental consciousness.
3. (Brand/Influencer)'s environmental awareness posts exhibit a lot of transparency.

Appendix 3

The following scaled questions measuring credibility were modified from Locke & Seele, 2017.

All questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale, strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Sincerity

1. The comments reflect the genuine intentions of (Brand/Influencer).
2. I think that (Brand/Influencer)'s intentions correspond with their comments.
3. The comments are misleading.

Appropriateness

1. The environmental awareness support fits into the context of the (influencer/industry) and its social and environmental challenges.
2. As a reader of these posts, I feel the comments address environmental awareness well.
3. I think the comments rightfully represent (Brand/Influencer).

Understandability

1. I understand the comments.
2. The comments are clearly written.
3. The comments are written in an understandable way.
4. I understand the meaning of the comments.
5. The comments are easy to read.