

Understanding global social media influencer (SMI) marketing through credibility: a review, integrative framework and research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose – This research examines a globally relevant phenomenon of social media influencer (SMI) credibility through a systematic literature review (SLR) and develops a future research agenda.

Design/methodology/approach – The SLR of 155 articles on SMI credibility is conducted following the SPAR-4-SLR protocol and further organized using TCCM and ACM frameworks. Moreover, an integrative framework is conceptualized for a holistic view of influencer marketing.

Findings – The research reports findings per theories, characteristics (antecedents, consequences and moderators), contexts (countries, social media platforms and domains) and methods used in the literature. Moreover, the integrative framework depicts critical research themes: relationships, content, SMI characteristics and follower characteristics. A future research agenda is developed under each theme based on the gaps in the literature.

Originality/value – The article is the first to comprehensively define SMI credibility based on perceived believability and parasocial relationships. An integrative framework for a holistic view of SMI marketing is conceptualized, and a clear research agenda is developed under identified research themes.

Keywords Social media influencer, SMI credibility, Influencer marketing, Social media content, Parasocial relationship

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Social Media Influencers, or SMIs (as referred to henceforth), are real or virtual beings on social media who influence consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and brand decisions (Joshi *et al.*, 2025). According to Jacobson and Harrison (2022), SMIs are influential content creators on social media (like Instagram, YouTube) who create and post content to express their passion for domains such as fashion, health, and travel. Thus, SMIs are vital in engaging and educating followers worldwide about different domains through their content. Their ability to influence grows as their content gains popularity (Lee and Watkins, 2016). SMIs promote products or services to consumers, thus becoming relevant for national or international brands. For instance, American influencer *Marques Brownlee* has 16 million subscribers, impacting tech-buying decisions across continents (Brown, 2025). Dutch-origin fashion and beauty influencer *Negin Mirsalehi*, with 6.7 million Instagram followers, has established her heritage hair-care brand "Gisou" internationally (Shacknai, 2020). SMIs, through their content, allow brands to develop trust, credibility, and connection with consumers, unlike one-way advertising or brand communications (Ujjwal, 2024).

Credibility in SMIs is necessary for persuasion (e.g. Breves *et al.*, 2019). Researchers consider SMI credibility as the degree to which SMIs are perceived as reliable experts for a particular product or service (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). We conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of SMI credibility for several reasons. First, among SMI characteristics, credibility is one of the most important predictors of purchase intention (Spörl-Wang *et al.*, 2025). Joshi *et al.* (2025) found, through a bibliometric-content analysis of influencer marketing, that among SMI-related antecedents, credibility was among the top three SMI characteristics that followers look for, with attractiveness and expertise being the other two (Joshi *et al.*, 2025). According to Wang and Weng (2024), influencer expertise refers to the



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domain knowledge perceived by followers, while attractiveness encompasses perceived physical attractiveness, sympathy, and familiarity. Literature has conceptualized and operationalized SMI credibility as comprising both attractiveness and expertise, among other characteristics (e.g. Wang and Weng, 2024; Xie and Feng, 2023). Thus, SMI credibility is a broader concept; hence, we focused on credibility.

Second, while several reviews have addressed related topics such as SMI effectiveness, engagement, and SMI marketing in general, none have directly studied SMI credibility, as highlighted in the next section. Third, the construct of SMI credibility *per se* is essential for researchers, given the increasing presence of misinformation in social media (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021) and the rise of deepfakes (Campbell *et al.*, 2022a, b). Since SMIs play a critical role in communicating on social media and substantially influence their followers, future research should investigate the factors that drive the credibility of SMIs. Finally, researchers need systematic answers to pertinent questions, such as how SMI credibility arises, its components, and its consequences. Questions like these can be addressed through a systematic review of the relevant literature.

As the first SLR on SMI credibility, this research makes significant contributions. Firstly, a clear conceptual definition of SMI credibility is provided for the first time. Additionally, the differentiation between SMIs and traditional celebrities is detailed, suggesting that SMIs are distinct and require separate study. Furthermore, an integrative framework is conceptualized to provide a holistic view of SMI marketing, encompassing critical processes and key actors, which will be beneficial for future researchers in the domain. Based on the framework, four research themes are identified, and ten main questions are developed in the SMI credibility domain.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: First, we contrast our review with existing reviews related to SMIs. Second, we describe the methodology adopted for our SLR using an established protocol, which resulted in 155 articles. Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methods (TCCM) Framework (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019) and a sub-framework of Antecedents, Consequences, and Moderators (ACM) (Hong *et al.*, 2013) have been used in this SLR. Then, the theoretical background of SMI credibility is discussed, and a conceptual definition of SMI credibility is formulated. Subsequently, the results of our SLR are reported. Finally, an integrative framework is conceptualized to provide a holistic view of SMI marketing, from which we derive four research themes and a future research agenda for SMI credibility.

2. Existing reviews related to SMIs

In terms of scope, prior reviews either focused on the SMI marketing domain as a whole (e.g. Fowler and Thomas, 2023; Joshi *et al.*, 2025; Pushparaj and Kushwaha, 2024; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021) or particular aspects of SMI marketing including engagement (Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Aldlimi *et al.*, 2025), impact (Han and Balabanis, 2024), virtual SMI (Laszkiewicz and Kalinska-Kula, 2023), effectiveness (Barari *et al.*, 2025; Pan *et al.*, 2025), and purchase intention (Sardar and Vijay, 2025). Thus, unlike prior reviews, the scope of this review is well-defined as focusing on SMI credibility.

While Fowler and Thomas (2023) provide a scoping review on SMI Marketing and Pan *et al.* (2025) offer a meta-analysis on SMI effectiveness, their work differs from this SLR-based research. Our review is comparable to Vrontis *et al.* (2021), as both reviews propose an integrative framework based on the reviewed literature. Their framework outlines underlying mechanisms, antecedents, consequences, moderators, mediators, and contextual variables, showcasing the multi-dimensional nature of SMI marketing. Unlike this, our framework illustrates critical processes and key actors involved in SMI marketing (content, SMIs, brands, followers). Table 1 presents a conceptual and methodological comparison of reviews related to SMI credibility.

We also compare the keywords and outcomes of prior reviews (e.g. Aldlimi *et al.*, 2025; Barari *et al.*, 2025; Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021) with those of our review, again

Table 1. Conceptual and methodological comparison of reviews related to SMI credibility

No.	Authors	Scope	Number of articles/Studies	Period	Methods/ Frameworks/ Protocols	Database
1	Aldlimi et al. (2025)	Engagement in SMI Marketing	43	2019–2024	SLR -Antecedents, Decisions, Outcomes (ADO) framework -PRISMA Protocol	Web of Science
2	Barari et al. (2025)	Effectiveness of SMI	71	2019–2024	Meta-analysis	Business Source Complete, Scopus, SpringerLink, Emerald, JSTOR, Sage, ProQuest Digital Dissertations, SSRN, and Google Scholar
3	Beuckels and De Wolf (2025)	Parent SMI	96	2008–2023	SLR -Ktehan Process	Scopus and Web of Science
4	Ekinci et al. (2025)	Dark side of SMI	12	2014–2024	Review and Thematic analysis	Google Scholar
5	Fowler and Thomas (2023)	SMI Marketing	150	2004–2020	Scoping review	Business Source Complete, Communication and Mass Media Complete, SocioIndex, Academic Source Complete
6	Han and Balabanis (2024)	SMI Impact	53	2013–2023	Meta-analysis -Cochrane's handbook -PRISMA protocol	Google Scholar, ProQuest, Social Science Citation Index, the Social Science Research Network websites, and the Electronic List for Marketing Academics and Researchers
7	Joshi et al. (2025)	SMI Marketing	214	2008–2021	SLR -SPAR-4-SLR	Web of Science
8	Kaňková et al. (2025)	Health SMI	116	2018–2023	SLR -PRISMA	Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science (WoS), and Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL)
9	Laszkiewicz and Kalinska-Kula (2023)	Virtual SMI	35	2012–2023	SLR -PRISMA	Scopus

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

No.	Authors	Scope	Number of articles/Studies	Period	Methods/ Frameworks/ Protocols	Database
10	Pan et al. (2025)	SMI Effectiveness	251	2010–2023	Meta-analysis	EBSCO, ProQuest, CNKI, and Scopus
11	Pradhan et al. (2023)	SMI and consumer engagement	50	2012–2021	SLR -Antecedents, Decisions, Outcomes (ADO)	EBSCO host, Emerald Insights, Web of Science, ProQuest, Wiley Online Library, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis Online
12	Pushparaj and Kushwaha (2024)	SMI Marketing	106	2012–2023	SLR -ADO -TCM -PRISMA	Scopus and Web of Science
13	Salunke et al. (2025)	Effectiveness of SMI endorsement	354	2000–2024	SLR -PRISMA protocol	Web Of Science, Scopus
14	Sardar and Vijay (2025)	SMIs and purchase intention	76	2011–2023	SLR -SPAR-4-SLR -TCCM	Scopus, EBSCO Business Source Ultimate, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Group Publishing
15	Spörl-Wang et al. (2025)	SMI effectiveness	93 for review, 32 for meta-analysis	2012–2022	SLR, meta-analysis	Scopus
16	Vrontis et al. (2021)	SMI Marketing	68	2007–2020	SLR -Thematic analysis	EBSCO Business Source Ultimate, Science Direct, and Emerald
17	Zhang et al. (2025)	Live-stream SMI Marketing	93	2012–2024	SLR Plan-Conduct-Report Framework	Web Of Science, Scopus
18	<i>This research</i>	<i>SMI Credibility</i>	155	2017–2025	SLR SPAR-4-SLR -TCCM -ACM	<i>Web of Science</i>
Source(s): Authors' own work						

highlighting the uniqueness of the latter. Prior reviews utilized keywords such as “engagement”, “interaction”, “influencer outcome” and “follower response” ([Aldlimi et al., 2025](#)), “online influencer marketing”, “influencer endorsement”, and “instafamous” ([Barari et al., 2025](#)), “social media influencers and consumer engagement”, “influencers and followers”, and “consumer engagement on social media” ([Pradhan et al., 2023](#)), and “social media influencer marketing”, “digital influencer”, “online influencer”, “online opinion leader”, “instafamous”, “vlogger” and “blogger” ([Vrontis et al., 2021](#)). The primary keywords in our review include “influencer credibility”, “credible influencer”, “source credibility”, and “social media influencer”. Thus, our choice of keywords also indicates the uniqueness of the topic that our review focuses on. Similarly, concerning outcomes, different reviews provide a

future research agenda (e.g. Aldlimi *et al.*, 2025; Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021), various types of integrative models (e.g. Barari *et al.*, 2025; Pradhan *et al.*, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021), and a structured set of managerial implications (e.g. Barari *et al.*, 2025). Our review offers an integrative framework and a future research agenda. Moreover, our review defines the focal construct “SMI Credibility”.

3. Methodology

We chose SLR over other methodologies such as meta-analyses, bibliometric analyses, and scoping reviews for the following reasons. First, meta-analyses are conducted on a topic that is homogeneous in scope and has a large amount of literature (Paul and Barari, 2022) to assess the overall strength and direction of effects (Donthu *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, the literature on SMI credibility is limited and heterogeneous, and we did not focus on studying any effects. Further, we aimed to review the literature on SMI credibility using systematic procedures. SLR helps develop rigorous, transparent literature reviews (Paul *et al.*, 2021). Second, bibliometric analysis is used when the scope is broad, and the dataset is too large for manual review (Donthu *et al.*, 2021), which is not the case with our dataset. Third, scoping reviews serve as a precursor to systematic reviews, clarifying key questions in the field (Munn *et al.*, 2018). Through the SLR, we build upon the existing definition of SMI credibility, thereby clarifying the construct. Additionally, we develop an integrative framework, identify relevant research themes, and develop research questions, enabling theory development. Also, the practical relevance of SMI credibility makes SLR more appropriate than scoping reviews (Munn *et al.*, 2018).

We followed the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol (Paul *et al.*, 2021). The protocol consists of three stages, each with two sub-stages: 1) assembling (identification and acquisition), 2) arranging (organization and purification), and 3) assessing (evaluation and reporting) (See Figure 1).

3.1 Assembling

We read numerous articles on SMI credibility, and many used terms like “credibility” or “credible” for SMIs or sources on social media. Hence, a systematic search was undertaken using multiple search strings as follows: Search 1- ALL=(“influencer credibility”) OR ALL=(“influencers credibility”) OR ALL=(“influencer’s credibility”) OR ALL=(“influencers’ credibility”) OR ALL=(“credible Influencer”) OR ALL=(“credible influencers”) OR ALL=(“credibility of influencer”) OR ALL=(“credibility of influencers”); Search 2a- ALL=(“source credibility”) AND ALL=(“social media”) AND (ALL=(“influencer”) OR ALL=(“influencers”)); Search 2b- ALL=(“credibility”) AND (ALL=(“social media influencer”) OR ALL=(“social media influencers”)); Search 3- ALL=(“source credibility”) AND (ALL=(“influencer”) OR ALL=(“influencers”)).

Other terms (e.g. “trustworthiness” and “authenticity”) were excluded in the keyword search because they are conceptually distinct. SMI attractiveness is unique to SMI credibility (Zniva *et al.*, 2023), which is the focus of this research. Furthermore, warmth, which we later introduce as one of the components of SMI credibility, and SMI attractiveness do not contribute to SMI authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise (see Table 2). Inclusion of such constructs in the search strings would have diluted the focus of our research by displaying irrelevant articles. Thus, we maintained our search focused on SMI credibility to identify relevant and coherent themes related to credibility. Further, despite a thorough search, we were unable to find articles that explicitly used terms such as ‘reliability’. Therefore, reliability was excluded from our search queries. Moreover, to our knowledge, believability and reliability are not established constructs in SMI marketing literature.

Due to its extensive coverage, the academic database Web of Science (WOS) was selected to retrieve articles. WOS is a reliable search database for academic articles, as it is connected to multiple publishers, including Emerald, Sage, and Taylor & Francis (Paul *et al.*, 2021). WOS is

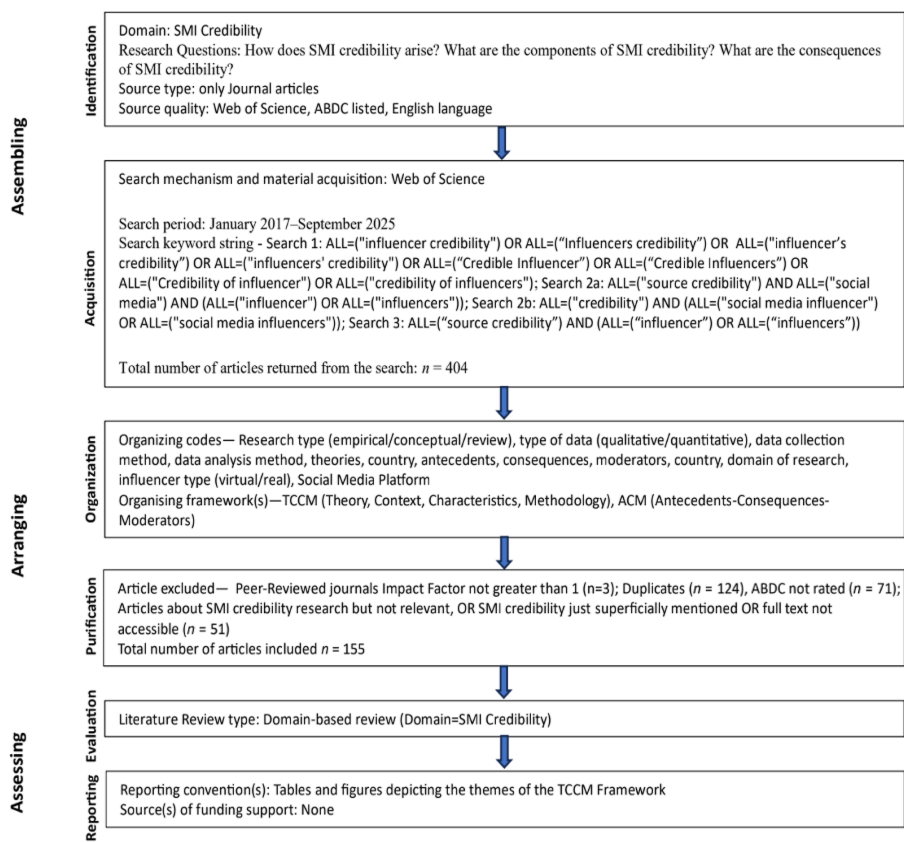


Figure 1. SPAR-4-SLR protocol. Source: Authors' own work

Table 2. Conceptual distinction between SMI credibility and adjacent constructs

Constructs	Description
SMI authenticity	This refers to the SMI being genuine and true (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), which includes their uniqueness and consistency (Zniva et al., 2023). SMI authenticity is demonstrated through behavior that is natural, intrinsically motivated, reveals personal information, and shows passion for their brands (e.g. Lee and Eastin, 2021)
SMI trustworthiness	This is one of the components of SMI credibility, which includes sincerity, truthfulness, honesty, goodwill, and unbiasedness (Ohanian, 1990; Munnukka et al., 2016)
SMI expertise	This is one of the components of SMI credibility, which includes competence, experience, convincing, knowledge, qualification, and resourcefulness (Munnukka et al., 2016; Ooi et al., 2023)
SMI credibility (this research)	This comprises expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and warmth
Source(s): Authors' own work	

among the most authoritative and comprehensive academic research databases, providing citation linkages and metadata (Birkle *et al.*, 2020). Recent systematic literature reviews have relied solely upon WOS to collect the articles (e.g. Joshi *et al.*, 2025). The time frame (January 2017–September 2025) was chosen for the literature review because the first article on SMI credibility appeared in 2017. During the first step, 404 journal articles were identified.

3.2 Arranging

In the purification sub-stage, we selected high-quality articles suitable for our review. We chose two journal-based criteria: the impact factor and ABDC (Australian Business Deans Council) rating. First, a journal impact factor of at least 1 is a standard and well-accepted criterion for exclusion in SLR (e.g. D'Alessandro *et al.*, 2023; Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019). Second, the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) journal quality list is widely recognized, with journals rated in descending order of quality as A*, A, B, and C (D'Alessandro *et al.*, 2023). A commonly used criterion is only to include articles that are at least a B category in the ABDC list, as used in prior reviews (e.g. Meng *et al.*, 2025).

Applying the impact factor criterion resulted in the elimination of three articles, leaving 401 articles. Then, we scanned the article titles and removed all duplicate articles, eliminating 124 articles to arrive at a total of 277. Next, we removed 71 non-ABDC-rated journal articles, resulting in 206 articles from journals rated ABDC B and above. We then checked the articles for relevance, i.e. whether the articles studied SMI credibility directly, and removed 51 articles that were either irrelevant or for which the full text was unavailable. Our final dataset consisted of 155 relevant articles; the full list is available as supplementary material.

3.3 Assessing

The evaluation sub-stage involves selecting the type of review to be conducted. Our review is domain-based (Christofi *et al.*, 2017), the domain being SMI credibility. The reporting sub-stage presents the current status of the literature in the domain, utilizing tables and figures to illustrate key findings.

To summarize the methodology, our final dataset consisted of articles from 2019 to 2025 (September) on SMI credibility retrieved from WOS. During the purification sub-stage, many articles were eliminated, including those from non-ABDC-listed journals, those published in journals with an impact factor of less than 1, and those irrelevant to our research. Table 3 shows that our review consisted of articles from over 50 journals. Most articles were published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Studies* (17 articles), followed by the *International Journal of Advertising* (12 articles) and the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (10 articles).

4. Theoretical background and definition

This section discusses aspects of SMIs, such as their distinction from traditional celebrities and the conceptualization and operationalization of SMI credibility.

4.1 Traditional celebrity vs. SMI

Before discussing SMI credibility, it is essential to understand how SMIs differ from traditional celebrities. Table 4 presents the critical parameters on which the two differ, as derived from Brooks *et al.* (2021).

Table 4 reveals that SMIs (unlike traditional celebrities) are self-made, attracting followers, brands, or advertisers primarily through their content. SMI credibility (mainly driven by internal factors) is likely to differ from the credibility of traditional celebrities (driven more by external factors). Therefore, SMIs need to be studied exclusively and separately from traditional celebrities.

Table 3. Journal profile of articles included in the review

Journal	No. of articles	ABDC category
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Studies	17	A
International Journal of Advertising	12	A
Journal of Consumer Behavior	10	A
Psychology and Marketing	8	A
Journal of Business Research	7	A
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	7	B
Computers in Human Behavior	6	A
Marketing Intelligence and Planning	4	A
Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	4	A
European Journal of Marketing	3	A*
Journal of Marketing Management	3	A
Information Systems Frontiers	3	A
Journal of Vacation Marketing	3	A
International Journal of Consumer Studies	3	A
Internet Research	3	A
British Food Journal	3	B
Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	3	B
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	2	A*
Appetite	2	A
Journal of Interactive Marketing	2	A
Journal of Product and Brand Management	2	A
Technological Forecasting and Social Change	2	A
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	2	A
Journal of Services Marketing	2	A
Acta Psychologica	2	A
Electronic Commerce Research	2	A
Electronic Markets	2	A
Information Technology and People	2	A
International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction	2	B
Tobacco Control	2	B
Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	2	B
Journal of Electronic Commerce Research	2	B
International Journal of Information Management	1	A*
International Journal of Research in Marketing	1	A*
Journal of Marketing	1	A*
Information and Management	1	A*
Tourism Management	1	A*
Current Issues in Tourism	1	A
International Journal of Tourism Research	1	A
International Marketing Review	1	A
Journal of Brand Management	1	A
Journal of Advertising Research	1	A
Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	1	A
Journal of Sport Management	1	A
Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	1	A
Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	1	A
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	1	A
International Journal of Bank Marketing	1	A
Information, Communication and Society	1	A
American Behavioral Scientist	1	B
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	1	B
Journal of Organisation Change Management	1	B
Online Information Review	1	B
Health Communication	1	B

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Journal	No. of articles	ABDC category
International Journal of Arts Management	1	B
California Management Review	1	A
International Journal of Emerging Markets	1	B
Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	1	A
TOTAL ARTICLES	155	
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 4. Parameters differentiating traditional celebrity and SMI

Parameter	Traditional celebrity	Social media influencer (SMI)
Presence of institutional intermediaries (like sports, television, movies)	Yes	No
Discovered through Fame attribution	Institutions Personal achievements (like sports, entertainment)	Followers The content they create (like videos, pictures)
Environment in which they operate	Highly controlled (like television, cinema)	Fluid (social media)
Entrepreneurial nature of work	Negligible	Significant
Stardom source	Multiple factors	SMI themselves
Creativity manifestation	In a vacuum (e.g. music studio, movie set)	In collaboration with followers
Power dynamics	Brands/advertisers exercise control	Lack of control over SMIs by brands/advertisers
Source(s): Authors' own work		

4.2 SMI credibility in the literature

Most researchers have understood SMI credibility in relation to source credibility literature (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Literature has conceptualized SMI credibility based on the following dimensions: (1) perceived expertise (i.e. perceived knowledge in the domain), (2) perceived trustworthiness (i.e. perception of honesty and concern for the welfare of their audience), and (3) perceived attractiveness (i.e. physical attractiveness, sympathy, familiarity) (e.g. Wang and Weng, 2024). However, literature does not provide a universal conceptual definition of SMI credibility. For instance, according to Zhang *et al.* (2024), SMI credibility is “the perceived impression that viewers construct on the expertise and trustworthiness of an influencer”, while Yan *et al.* (2023) consider SMI credibility as “. . . the degree to which a consumer perceives the influencer in the ads to be truthful and honest”. Nevertheless, another view of SMI credibility is “. . . the extent to which consumers view the influencer as a reliable expert with regards to a product or service” (Janssen *et al.*, 2022). Thus, there is a pressing need for a universally acceptable definition of SMI credibility.

According to Wang and Weng (2024), credibility is the perceived believability of the SMI. Since SMI marketing is based on believable content posted by SMIs (Schouten *et al.*, 2021), this aspect of “perceived believability” is necessary for the definition. Perceived believability is strengthened by the personal connection between SMIs and followers through Para Social Relationships (PSR) (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Hence, we define SMI credibility as follows:

SMI credibility is characterized by perceived believability (i.e. the extent to which the audience/receiver believes in the SMI content) and the perceived para-social relationship (i.e. the extent to which the audience/receiver feels a direct personal connection with the SMI).

On the other hand, with respect to the operational definition of SMI credibility, literature has much to offer. We visualize the construct by analyzing its operationalization in extant research (see [Figure 2](#)).

Five major components of SMI credibility are identified based on the literature: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and warmth. Four components - expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity have been widely used to operationalize SMI credibility (e.g. [Xie and Feng, 2023](#)). While the first four components have been widely used in

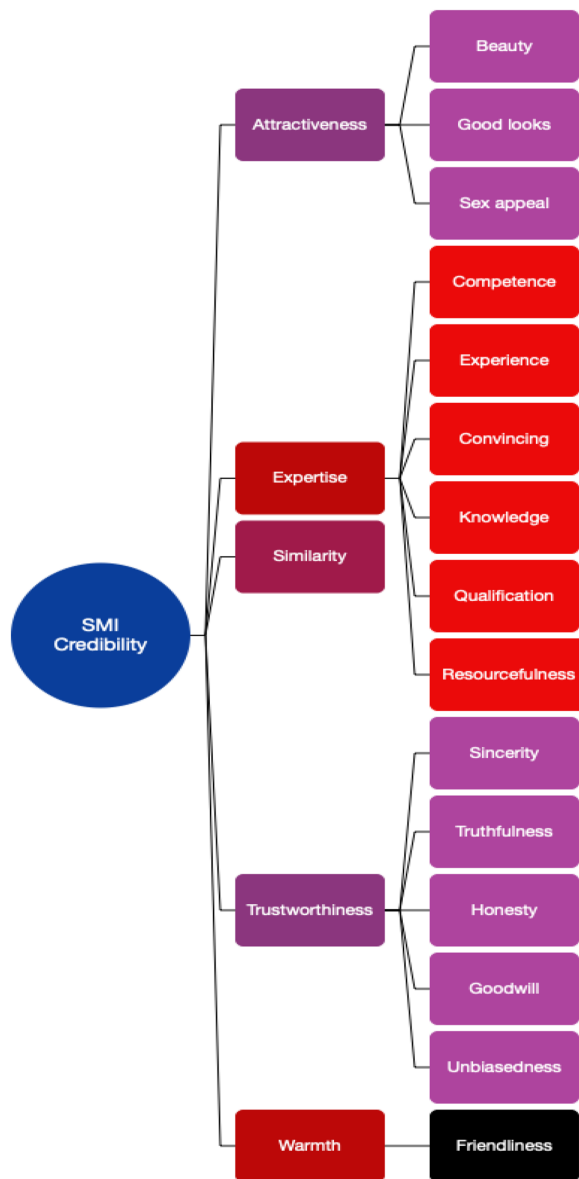


Figure 2. Visualization of the construct in the literature. Source: Authors' own work

SMI credibility literature, warmth was found in only two articles (Fernandes *et al.*, 2022; Wan *et al.*, 2025).

In line with the importance of PSR theory in SMI marketing and since warmth is a prime component of relationships (Fernandes *et al.*, 2022), we included warmth as the fifth component of SMI credibility. Fernandes *et al.* (2022) grouped warmth and trustworthiness and operationalized perceived SMI warmth in terms of friendliness and good nature. Furthermore, Wan *et al.* (2025) conceptualized SMI warmth as “conversational styles and emotional expressions” that are “friendly and engaging” (p. 3). Followers experience warmth directly or vicariously in SMI marketing, i.e. through direct interactions with the SMI or indirectly through other followers. For example, anthropomorphism increases perceived warmth of virtual SMIs (El Hedhli *et al.*, 2023).

SMIs are evaluated based on good and cooperative intentions, which translate into warmth, as well as their ability to act upon these intentions, which refers to competence (De Keyser and Kunz, 2022). This evaluation is based on the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008), which posits that warmth and competence constitute two fundamental dimensions of social perception. Warmth refers to being friendly, sincere, and good-natured, whereas competence refers to being capable, intelligent, and confident (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2007). Warmth is more effective than competence in fostering positive relationships (Roccapriore and Pollock, 2023), particularly due to the “Primacy-of-Warmth Effect” hypothesis (El Hedhli *et al.*, 2023) whereby SMI’s perceived warmth is more strongly associated with influencing consumers than perceived competence.

Thus, SMI credibility is a multi-dimensional construct that comprises expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity to followers. We propose warmth as the fifth dimension.

5. Results (using TCCM framework)

5.1 Theory (T)

The most common theories that researchers have relied on are the Source Credibility Model (Breves *et al.*, 2019; Wan *et al.*, 2025), PSR, and PSI (Breves *et al.*, 2021). Other common theories include the Stimulus-organism-response theory (Belanche *et al.*, 2021), the Similarity Attraction Model (Argyris *et al.*, 2021), the Match-Up Hypothesis (Breves *et al.*, 2019), the Social Capital theory (Rynarzewska *et al.*, 2025), the Self-presentation theory (van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2024), and the Computers-Are-Social-Actors Paradigm (Wan *et al.*, 2025). Table 5 presents examples of articles that utilize the aforementioned theories.

5.2 Characteristics (C)

A sub-framework of ACM has been used to organize the “characteristics” under TCCM.

5.2.1 Antecedents. **5.2.1.1 SMI-related.** Most research discusses the components of credibility (previously discussed) as antecedents, including expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (e.g. Ooi *et al.*, 2023). Ashraf *et al.* (2023) suggested that similarity, similar to homophily, is one of the components. SMI type (human vs. virtual; Ozdemir *et al.*, 2023) and authenticity (Kim and Kim, 2021) were also suggested as predictors. Wilkie *et al.* (2022) discussed physical attractiveness and popularity as heuristic cues in predicting SMI credibility.

5.2.1.2 Content-related. Content-related antecedents include origin disclosure (Lim and Lee, 2023), sponsorship/brand partnership (Ghosh and Islam, 2023), and self-disclosure (Lee and Johnson, 2022). Also, whether the content is emotional (Lim and Lee, 2023), message-sidedness (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), and review valence (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021) predict SMI credibility.

5.2.1.3 Follower-related. Past researchers emphasized the role of SMI-follower PSR (e.g. Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020), audience skepticism towards the ad (e.g. De Veirman and Hudders,

Table 5. Major theories used in literature

Theoretical lenses	Sample articles
Stimulus-organism-response theory (S–O–R)	Belanche et al. (2021) , Low et al. (2025) , Wu et al. (2025)
Spillover effect	Belanche et al. (2021)
Halo effect	Wang and Huang (2025)
Para Social Relationship (PSR) ~ PSI	Breves et al. (2021) , Rynarzewska et al. (2025) , Koay and Satyadi (2025)
Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects (CARE) model; Relationship Stage Model	Breves et al. (2021) , Rynarzewska et al. (2025)
Source Credibility Model (SCM)	Argyris et al. (2021) , Breves et al. (2019) , Wan et al. (2025)
The Match-Up Hypothesis; Social Adaptation Theory	Breves et al. (2019)
Similarity Attraction Model (SAM)	Argyris et al. (2021)
Attribution Theory	Breves et al. (2019) , De Veirman and Hudders (2020)
Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM); Reactance theory	De Veirman and Hudders (2020)
Social Media Influencer Value (SMIV) model	Lou and Yuan (2019)
Uses-and-Gratification Theory	Yuan and Lou (2020)
Uncertainty Reduction Theory	Yuan and Lou (2020) , Koay and Satyadi (2025)
Technology Acceptance Model, Social Learning Theory	Qiu et al. (2024)
Signaling Theory	Soomro et al. (2025) , Wang et al. (2025)
Self-Presentation Theory	van Reijmersdal et al. (2024) , Bahar and Hasan (2025)
Social Capital Theory	Rynarzewska et al. (2025)
Big Five Personality Model	Wang and Huang (2025)
Dual-Process Theory	Ballester et al. (2025)
Psychological Contract Violation (PCV) Theory	Saternus et al. (2024)
Service-Dominant Logic	Hasan et al. (2025)
Cognitive Response Theory	Wu et al. (2025)
Computers-Are-Social-Actors Paradigm	Wan et al. (2025)
Source(s): Authors' own work	

2020), and the number of positive comments and follower count in predicting SMI credibility ([Pozharliev et al., 2022](#)).

5.2.1.4 Brand-related. Antecedents related to the brand or product being endorsed include product-SMI congruence. The greater the congruence, the higher the SMI credibility ([Janssen et al., 2022](#)).

5.2.2 Consequences. 5.2.2.1 SMI-related. Consequences of SMI credibility include attitude towards the SMI, intention to follow, imitate, or recommend the SMI ([Belanche et al., 2021](#)), WOM and betrayal ([Gerrath and Usrey, 2021](#)), loyalty to the SMI ([Kim and Kim, 2021](#)), followers' stickiness ([Lu and Chen, 2023](#)), influencer likeability ([Janssen et al., 2022](#)), and trust in AI influencers ([Alboqami, 2023](#)).

5.2.2.2 Content-related. Content-related consequences include WOM ([Gerrath and Usrey, 2021](#)), post engagement ([Beuckels and De Jans, 2022](#)), followers' attitudes toward endorsed posts ([Wilkie et al., 2022](#)), and participation in value co-creation ([Hasan et al., 2025](#)).

5.2.2.3 Brand-related. Consequences related to the endorsed brand include purchase-related attitudes and behaviors such as purchase intention ([Bi and Zhang, 2023](#)), impulsive ([Yan et al., 2023](#)) and compulsive ([Soomro et al., 2025](#)) buying, and willingness to pay a premium ([Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim, 2021](#)); product-, ad-, and brand-related outcomes such as product attitude ([Ooi et al., 2023](#)), product attractiveness ([Volkmer and Meißner, 2025](#)), ad attitude, ad trust, brand attitude ([Lee and Johnson, 2022](#)), brand trust ([Reinikainen et al., 2020](#)), brand engagement ([Wilkie et al., 2022](#)), and outcomes after interaction with the post or brand such as WOM intention and likelihood to recommend ([Belanche et al., 2021](#)).

5.2.2.4 Platform-related. This includes social media platform engagement (Hughes *et al.*, 2019), website visit intention (Sundermann and Munnukka, 2022), platform revisit intention, and bounce rate (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021).

5.2.2.5 Miscellaneous. This section includes other consequences such as travel intention (Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz, 2024), child appropriateness perceptions (Beuckels and De Jans, 2022), and hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Lu and Chen, 2023).

5.2.3 Moderators. 5.2.3.1 SMI-related. Moderators related to the SMI include familiarity and gender of the SMI (Lim and Lee, 2023) and language used by the SMI (Ozdemir *et al.*, 2023).

5.2.3.2 Content-related. These moderators include incentivization acceptance motives and incentivization commonness (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021), message-sidedness (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), argument quality (Pozharliev *et al.*, 2022), and appropriateness of self-disclosure (Lee and Johnson, 2022).

5.2.3.3 Follower-related. These moderators include self-esteem (Bi and Zhang, 2023), consumer skepticism (Sundermann and Munnukka, 2022), perceived altruistic motives (Wilkie *et al.*, 2022), follower count (Janssen *et al.*, 2022), and follower participation (Soomro *et al.*, 2025).

5.2.3.4 Brand-related. These moderators include variables related to the endorsed brand, including product category involvement (Wilkie *et al.*, 2022) and product-influencer congruency (Janssen *et al.*, 2022).

5.2.3.5 SMI-follower relationship. These moderators include SMI-follower congruence (Venciute *et al.*, 2023), relationship strength (authenticity and loyalty; Kim and Kim, 2021), PSR (Breves *et al.*, 2019), and extroversion-congruence (Argyris *et al.*, 2021).

5.2.3.6 Platform-related. Only one moderator has been identified, i.e. the type of social media platform (Hughes *et al.*, 2019).

5.3 Context (C) (domains, social media platforms, countries, and types of SMIs)

Some articles used a mix of domains, such as fashion, health, and travel, to study SMI credibility. Table 6 shows that most studies on SMI credibility are in the domain of fashion (31 articles) and beauty (23 articles). Similarly, some articles utilized a combination of social media platforms, including Instagram and Twitter, with the majority of studies conducted on Instagram (77 articles). Likewise, some articles studied a mix of countries, with the U.S.A. as the country studied the most (36 articles).

SMI credibility has been studied in various contexts, including fashion, beauty, travel, and health (see Table 6). The key components of SMI credibility, as studied in domains such as fashion, beauty, and travel, are trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, and are used in that order of frequency. Trustworthiness appears to be the most crucial factor in fashion, whereas in beauty and travel, it is expertise. Instagram is the most commonly used platform in literature (see Table 6), and multiple scales or measures have been adopted for studies on this platform. Overall, there appears to be no noticeable difference in how SMI credibility components are studied across platforms.

Research on virtual SMI credibility is relatively recent, starting in 2023, with 24 out of 155 articles studying the topic. A virtual influencer, or AI influencer, is “a digitally created artificial human associated with Internet fame and uses software and algorithms to perform tasks like humans” (Thomas and Fowler, 2021). The credibility of virtual SMIs is impacted by several factors, including the language used for endorsement (emotional vs. rational; Ozdemir *et al.*, 2023), perceived social distance (Sands *et al.*, 2022), and source credibility factors such as authenticity or expertise (Alboqami, 2023). Furthermore, the perceived authenticity of virtual influencers can be greater than that of human influencers, especially among followers who strongly adhere to the machine heuristic (Lee *et al.*, 2025).

5.4 Methods (M)

Various data collection methods have been employed, including surveys, experiments, and interviews (see Table 6). Most articles used surveys (87 in number), followed by experiments

Table 6. Contextual aspects and methods used in literature (domain, social media platforms, countries, data collection methods)

Literature	Number of articles
<i>Domains</i>	
Fashion	31
Beauty	23
Health and Fitness	21
Travel and Tourism	19
Food	15
Lifestyle	10
Technology	8
Miscellaneous (Automobiles, pet products, luxury products, sports, e-commerce, motherhood, finance, sustainability)	26
Not specified	9
<i>Social Media Platforms</i>	
Instagram	77
YouTube	22
Facebook	20
Twitter	9
TikTok	9
E-commerce Live Streaming	6
Whatsapp	5
WeChat	4
Blogs	4
Snapchat	2
LinkedIn	2
Others (Weibo, Douyin, Redbook, Vine, Xiaohongshu)	7
Not specified	16
<i>Countries</i>	
USA	36
UK	7
<i>Mainland Europe</i>	
Western Northern Europe	19
Southern Europe	8
Eastern Central Europe	7
China	25
India	9
Other Asian countries (Taiwan, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Vietnam, South Korea, etc.)	25
South America	1
Africa	4
Australia	3
Not specified	15
<i>Data Collection Methods</i>	
Survey	87
Experiment	49
Interviews	15
Netnography	2
Projective technique	1
Case study	1
Others (Secondary data, Google Analytics, Quantitative modeling, Sentiment analysis, Cluster analysis, Panel data regression modeling)	6
Source(s): Authors' own work	

(49), and interviews (15). [Appendix Table A1](#) presents key measures/scales used in the literature to assess SMI credibility in terms of expertise, trustworthiness, and other relevant components, with examples of studies that used those scales. International Marketing Review

Based on the relevant literature presented in previous sections and after identifying the variables critical to SMI marketing in general, we conceptualize an integrative framework for a holistic view of SMI marketing ([Figure 3](#)). This framework helps us identify key research themes.

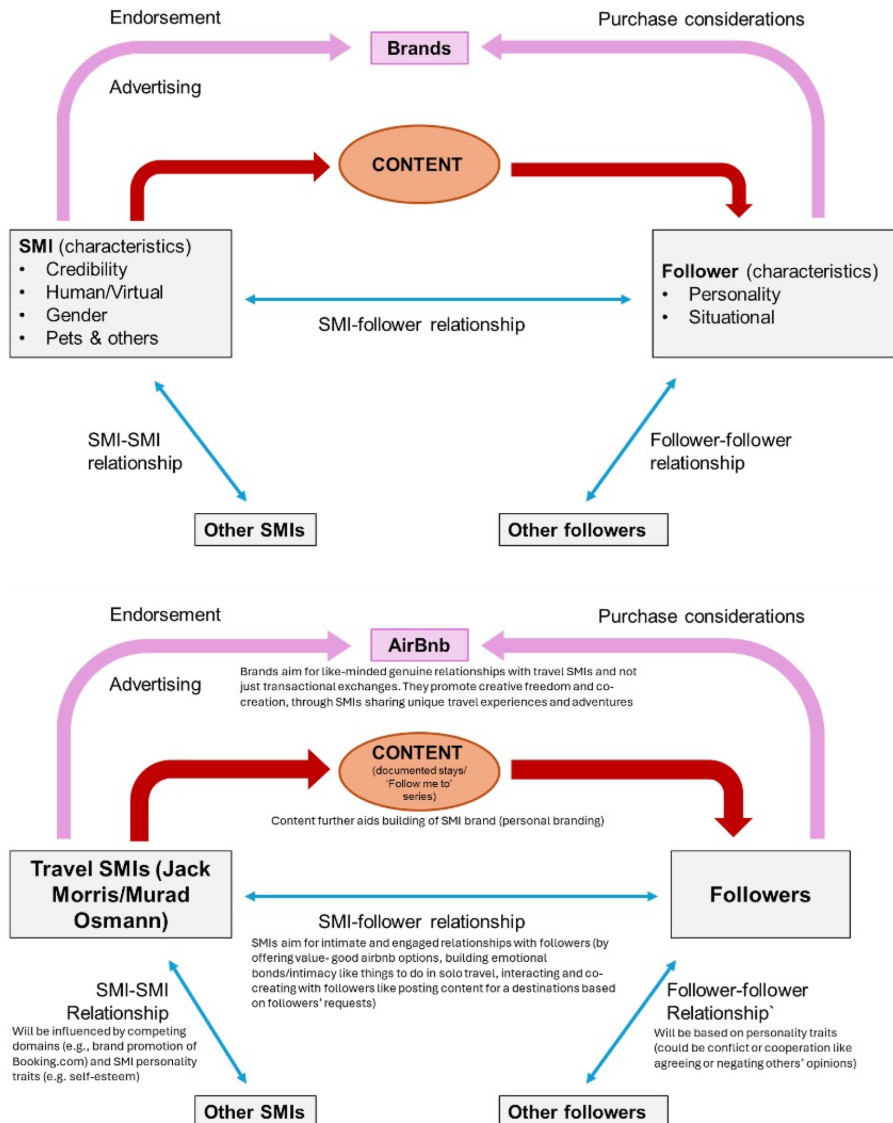


Figure 3. Integrative framework for SMI marketing (above); example of Airbnb illustrating the framework (below). Source: Authors' own work

6. Unresolved conflicts and debates in the literature

First, the literature has noted conflict regarding the SMI content strategy. SMIs must maintain consistency in their content style even when integrating the endorsed brands (Brooks *et al.*, 2021). This is done to meet the expectations of their followers. At the same time, the live streamers must diversify their content topics to sustain viewers' interest (Choi *et al.*, 2025). This could be a source of conflict. Second, expertise is regarded as having a significant impact on SMI credibility; however, there is limited explanation for this impact, particularly with age as a moderator. Expertise matters more for the older population than the younger ones (Tsen and Cheng, 2021). Third, virtual SMIs are regarded as having more expertise (being driven by algorithms) but lacking the human touch of human SMIs. Attractiveness can also be achieved in the case of virtual SMIs. Hence, overall, in terms of credibility, additional factors may determine virtual SMI credibility. Moreover, these factors may differ from those of human SMIs.

Fourth, according to source credibility and signaling theory (Leung *et al.*, 2022a), the higher the follower count, the greater the audience engagement. Hence, engagement would be higher for Mega/Macro SMIs. However, Park *et al.* (2021) found micro SMIs more effective than mega SMIs. We can reconcile these inconsistencies as per Steils *et al.* (2022), who suggested an inverted U-shaped relationship between follower count and engagement, moderated by sponsorship disclosure. Therefore, if SMIs (macro) follow sponsorship disclosure, the engagement and thus the credibility could be improved. Finally, the literature has considered PSI as a type of "relationship" (e.g. Sundermann and Munnukka, 2022), thus blurring the boundaries between PSI and PSR. This gap was recognized by Sheng *et al.* (2025), who conducted a detailed review of PSI and PSR.

Since we are focusing on SMIs, it is essential to understand the differences between PSI and PSR in the online context. For instance, PSI is media-dependent and confined to specific platforms, while PSR is not media-dependent and therefore not restricted to any platform. PSI is limited to media exposure episodes, while PSR lasts beyond the episode. PSI is characterized by frequent and repetitive interactions, while PSR develops over time through involvement (Sheng *et al.*, 2025). When studying the influencer-follower relationship, it is important to consider these differences between PSI and PSR.

7. Integrative framework depicting research themes

As discussed, various aspects of SMI content contribute to SMI credibility, e.g. disclosure about sponsorship or brand partnership (Ghosh and Islam, 2023; Xie and Feng, 2023), emotionally laden content (Lim and Lee, 2023), and message-sidedness (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). Positive perceptions of SMI content enhance word-of-mouth (WOM) (Gerrath and Usrey, 2021), engagement (Beuckels and De Jans, 2022), and followers' attitudes toward endorsed posts (Wilkie *et al.*, 2022). Content-related aspects, such as argument quality (Pozharliev *et al.*, 2022) and self-disclosure appropriateness (Lee and Johnson, 2022), can determine whether the content helps achieve SMI credibility. These insights suggest that content forms the center of the SMI universe.

SMIs exist solely because of their content, which enables them to grow as influencers over time (Brooks *et al.*, 2021). Global brands seek popular content creators (SMIs) who can effectively integrate their content with the brands' offerings, and brands then reach out to these SMIs for endorsements. Such SMIs have a follower base who may, over time, develop purchase considerations for endorsed brands. SMIs continually develop their content to integrate endorsed brands while maintaining consistency with their existing content style, thereby meeting followers' expectations. Live streamers must diversify content topics to sustain viewers' interest (Choi *et al.*, 2025). SMIs also increasingly use AI-generated content to stay relevant (Brüns and Meißner, 2024). SMIs develop their niche content using images or videos that can be extended across platforms ("platform agnosticism") due to porous social media boundaries (Brooks *et al.*, 2021). Identifying with their content helps SMIs avoid being

categorized based on specific platforms, such as “Instagram influencer” or “YouTube influencer”. Thus, “content” is the primary SMI marketing driver and the first significant research theme.

Content creation by SMIs is a creative, collaborative (with followers), and iterative process that grabs the audience’s attention in the SMIs’ competitive space (Brooks *et al.*, 2021). In this process, relationships develop between SMIs and followers. Less apparent relationships develop among followers while they comment and communicate with each other. Even less noticeable relationships exist between SMIs who compete on social media with their content to develop a more substantial fan base. Further, SMI relationships include brand relationships (Brooks *et al.*, 2021). Thus, “relationships” would be the second critical research theme.

Certain SMIs possess unique characteristics that make them more popular than others, and likewise, followers possess unique characteristics because they follow these SMIs and are influenced by them. Thus, two important themes would be “SMI characteristics” and “follower characteristics.” Figure 3 represents the critical processes and key actors involved in SMI marketing.

In sum, we identify four research themes in SMI marketing:

- (1) Content
- (2) Relationships
- (3) SMI characteristics
- (4) Follower characteristics

To illustrate our integrative framework, we use Airbnb as an example (see Figure 3). Content creators like Jack Morris or Murad Osmann, with their popular content, grew as travel SMIs with a rich follower base (Webmaster, 2024). Global brands like Airbnb reached out to these SMIs, who integrated their content with Airbnb’s offerings, such as documented Airbnb stays or the “Follow me to” series. These travel SMIs help Airbnb with endorsements or advertising. They engage their followers by suggesting Airbnb options or posting content based on followers’ requests for a particular destination, thus developing SMI-follower relationships. SMI-SMI relationship in this case will be influenced by competing endorsements (e.g. SMI endorsing Booking.com vs. SMI endorsing Airbnb) or SMI personality traits. Follower-follower relationships could be based on personality traits.

8. Research themes and research agenda

8.1 Content

8.1.1 Content cues. Major content cues include product placement, as well as visual and textual cues (Kay *et al.*, 2023). Visual cues of products serve as heuristics (Argyris *et al.*, 2021), and the visual appeal of SMIs may signal expertise in a category, such as beauty products. Textual cues, including narrativity and storyline elements such as characters, goals, actions, and outcomes (Kay *et al.*, 2023), could be another area for future research. Non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, dress, hand gestures, body language, and voice quality or modulation, could also be relevant (Ayeh *et al.*, 2013).

RQ1a. How do non-verbal content cues influence the SMI credibility?

8.1.2 Content processing. SMI content characteristics, namely, the quality of design and technology, and creativity, significantly influence parasocial relationships (Cheung *et al.*, 2022) and, therefore, may impact SMI credibility. Thus, the quality of content, whether simple or complex to process, would affect SMI credibility.

RQ1b. Does the simplicity or complexity of processing SMI content impact SMI credibility?

8.1.3 Content style and characteristics. Content strategies such as narratives in advertising persuasion (Escalas, 2004) could also enhance SMI credibility. Narratives help counter any adverse effect of sponsorship disclosure and strengthen influencer-follower relationships through audience transportation (Feng et al., 2021). The narrative content strategy would further aid content comprehension and believability, thus enhancing SMI credibility and engagement.

RQ1c. How do elements of narrative strategy contribute to SMI credibility?

Wrontis et al. (2021) revealed content attributes as one of the significant themes related to consumer outcomes (engagement, brand attitude, etc.). Similarly, SMI strategies related to content characteristics (Cheung et al., 2022) could also lead to WOM and brand loyalty. Furthermore, if the content is AI-generated, the perceived authenticity of the endorsed brand is likely to be lower (Brüns and Meißner, 2024).

RQ1d. How would SMI content characteristics (including AI-generated content) impact WOM and brand loyalty?

8.1.4 Content co-creation. Research shows that the positive implications of co-creation between SMIs and brands extend beyond simply showcasing the brand in SMI content (Filali-Boissy et al., 2025). SMI credibility drives followers' participation in value co-creation (Hasan et al., 2025). At the same time, content co-creation with followers could enhance SMI credibility, given the significance of content and relationship dimensions in SMI marketing.

RQ1e. Does content co-creation with followers increase SMI credibility?

8.2 Relationships

8.2.1 Relationship between SMI and follower. SMIs can develop PSR with followers through two-way communication by posting authentic and valuable content, responding to comments, and offering giveaways, which enhance PSI (Breves et al., 2021), thereby increasing SMI credibility. SMIs value building connections (emotional bonds) with their followers to achieve "audience portability", i.e. transporting followers from platform to platform (Brooks et al., 2021). Audience portability reflects the audience's commitment to the SMI.

RQ2a. How does SMI credibility help achieve audience portability?

The relationship with followers helps SMIs develop reciprocal collaborative content (Brooks et al., 2021). Such collaboration should further establish credibility among followers.

RQ2b. Is there a two-way connection between PSR and SMI credibility, i.e. does high SMI credibility further strengthen the relationship?

8.2.2 Relationship between SMI and brand. The components of SMI credibility positively influence brand satisfaction, brand image, and brand trust (Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim, 2021), thus impacting brand attitude (e.g. Lee and Johnson, 2022), purchase intention (e.g. Breves et al., 2021), and sometimes causing impulsive and compulsive buying (Soomro et al., 2025). Moreover, SMI content demands consistency in topic and style (Brooks et al., 2021), which may require congruence between the brands they endorse.

RQ3a. How does the congruence between different product categories or brands endorsed by an SMI impact SMI credibility?

RQ3b. How does the type of endorsed brands impact the consistency of SMI content?

RQ3c. How does SMI credibility lead to brand equity?

8.2.3 Relationship between followers. Followers form relationships through constant, active interactions with the SMI, its content, the endorsed brand, and the content posted by

other followers. SMIs cultivate active communities of followers, much like small, engaged groups. This vibrant community catalyzes many positive implications for influencer marketing, including brand trust, WOM, SMI credibility, and purchase intention.

RQ4. How can a credible SMI build a brand community with positive marketing implications?

8.2.4 Relationship between SMIs. Relationships between SMIs can be healthy or unhealthy, depending on several factors, including similarities or homophily between SMIs and whether they work with related (competing) or unrelated brands. Healthy relationships between SMIs can strengthen the trustworthiness component of credibility, thereby increasing SMI credibility. In contrast, unhealthy relationships may lead SMIs to view each other as competitors, resulting in conflicts and tensions.

RQ5. How does the relationship between SMIs vary based on factors such as homophily and the type of brands endorsed (competing/non-competing)?

8.3 SMI characteristics

8.3.1 Credibility. As discussed earlier (see [Figure 2](#)), credibility is a multi-dimensional construct (e.g. [Xie and Feng, 2023](#)). Moreover, a contextual effect is associated with SMI credibility ([Beuckels and De Jans, 2022](#)), implying that SMI credibility is not absolute. For instance, a credible SMI for an automobile brand may not be credible for beauty brands (e.g. [Janssen et al., 2022](#)).

RQ6a. How does the product context influence SMI credibility?

According to [Ayeh et al. \(2013\)](#), the higher perceived credibility of SMIs will ensure that their content is viewed and not missed. Credible SMIs are likely to get loyal followers and gain recommendations.

RQ6b. How does SMI credibility help in gaining more followers (subscribers)?

8.3.2 Human vs. virtual SMIs. Several trends are emerging in virtual SMIs with the development of AI. AI could bring novelty to virtual SMIs ([Thomas and Fowler, 2021](#)), thereby impacting virtual SMI credibility. Similarly, new forms of virtual SMIs are gaining popularity in the media, e.g. virtual TV anchors ([Kaur, 2023](#)). Finally, the components of SMI credibility vary across human and virtual SMIs. For instance, perceived warmth in virtual SMIs might be lower than in human SMIs.

RQ7. How do components of credibility vary across virtual vs. human SMIs?

8.3.3 Gender. There is limited research on gender in SMI ([Hudders and De Jans, 2022](#)), which influences perceived credibility. For example, a body tattoo negatively influences the credibility of a male SMI (vs a female SMI) due to their lower perceived attractiveness ([Fernandes et al., 2022](#)).

RQ8. How does the gender of the SMI impact SMI credibility?

8.3.4 Pets and other entities as SMIs. Pet SMIs are perceived as more credible (vs. human SMIs) because of their cuteness (e.g. [Di Cioccio et al., 2024](#)), especially for pet-related products. The companionship associated with pets could drive PSR and, hence, credibility. SMIs also include non-human-like entities, such as animals/graphics/cartoon characters ([Gambetti and Kozinets, 2024](#)), as well as plants and trees, with their anthropomorphism driving credibility.

RQ9. How do PSR and companionship affect the credibility of pet SMIs?

8.4 Follower characteristics

Follower personality characteristics, such as the need for cognition, could influence the relative importance of attributes of perceived SMI credibility. Similarly, skepticism (Rynarzewska *et al.*, 2025), gullibility, and situational factors, such as loneliness and vulnerability to potentially fraudulent persuasive messages, could affect follower behavior, thus directly or indirectly impacting SMI credibility.

RQ10. How do the personality and situational factors of followers affect SMI credibility?

9. Implications

9.1 Research implications

With growing academic interest and global relevance of SMI marketing, this first systematic literature review on SMI credibility will benefit future researchers. This article makes the following contributions. First, this research offers comprehensive conceptual and operational definitions of SMI credibility. Prior research has not provided a universal conceptual definition of SMI credibility, whereas multiple operational definitions were offered. Second, this research offers an objective distinction between SMI and traditional celebrities along several parameters. This contribution is significant when the brands move towards SMIs and away from traditional celebrity endorsement. SMI credibility (primarily driven by internal factors) is likely to differ from the credibility of traditional celebrities (driven more by external factors). Third, this research presents an integrative framework for a holistic view of SMI marketing, encompassing critical processes and key actors. This framework will facilitate the comprehension of SMI marketing and stimulate research in the domain.

Our integrative framework advances theoretical understanding of how influencer marketing works. It comprises four key actors: SMI, followers, content, brand, and the critical processes in SMI marketing. Thus, this framework is comprehensive. Besides content being the primary driver, it also showcases various relationships in SMI marketing. The framework portrays SMIs as primarily content creators who become influencers over time due to the popularity of their content. Brands are constantly seeking SMIs who can integrate their content well with brand offerings and reach out to those SMIs for endorsements or advertising. These SMIs have a follower base who may develop purchase considerations for brands endorsed by their favorite SMIs over time. In content exchange, various relationships develop, including those between SMIs and their followers, between followers, between SMIs, and between the SMI and the brand. Furthermore, some unique characteristics of SMIs make them more popular than those of other SMIs. Likewise, some characteristics of followers make them follow SMIs and get influenced.

Prior research includes frameworks in the SMI context, such as those by Vrontis *et al.* (2021), Mallipeddi *et al.* (2022), and Leung *et al.* (2022a, b). The framework by Vrontis *et al.* (2021) is based on the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences identified in the literature concerning SMI. Mallipeddi *et al.* (2022) developed a data-driven optimization framework to design effective short-horizon or long-horizon influencer marketing campaigns. The conceptual framework by Leung *et al.* (2022a) links influencer marketing spend and engagement. It also shows the role of sender characteristics (e.g. SMI activity), receiver characteristics (follower brand fit), and message characteristics (post positivity). Another framework, proposed by Leung *et al.* (2022b), focuses on the effectiveness of online influencer marketing. Spörl-Wang *et al.* (2025) recently proposed a comprehensive framework to predict the effectiveness of SMI marketing. Our framework is more broad-based and would apply to a wider range of scenarios in SMI marketing. Like Spörl-Wang *et al.* (2025), our comprehensive, integrative framework can serve as a foundation for both specific and general research in SMI marketing.

Finally, four research themes are identified based on the integrative framework: Relationships, Content, SMI Characteristics, and Follower Characteristics. These themes

are strongly supported in the literature that we reviewed. We provide below the count of studies, along with a few examples, that focus on these themes.

- (1) Content: 94 studies (e.g. [Pozharliev et al., 2022](#); [Ghosh and Islam, 2023](#))
- (2) Relationship: 113 studies (e.g. [Lim and Lee, 2023](#); [Ballester et al., 2025](#))
- (3) SMI characteristics: 148 studies (e.g. [Lee and Johnson, 2022](#); [Rynarzewska et al., 2025](#))
- (4) Follower characteristics: 44 studies (e.g. [Pan et al., 2025](#); [Salunke et al., 2025](#))

Further, we identified areas for future research under each theme (see [Table 7](#)). We also uncovered some conflicting views in the literature that warrant further exploration. Additionally, since no reviews exist on SMI expertise or attractiveness, researchers can focus solely on these

Table 7. Research themes and research agenda

Major themes	Sub-themes	Future research questions (RQ)
CONTENT	Content cues	RQ1a . How do non-verbal content cues influence the SMI credibility?
	Content processing	RQ1b . Does simplicity or complexity of processing SMI content impact SMI credibility?
	Content style and characteristics	RQ1c . How do elements of narrative strategy contribute to SMI credibility? RQ1d . How would SMI content characteristics (including AI-generated content) impact WOM and brand loyalty?
	Content co-creation	RQ1e . Does content co-creation with followers increase SMI credibility?
RELATIONSHIPS	Relationship between SMI and follower	RQ2a . How does SMI credibility help achieve audience portability? RQ2b . Is there a two-way connection between PSR and SMI credibility, i.e. does high SMI credibility further strengthen the relationship?
	Relationship between SMI and brand	RQ3a . How does the congruence between different product categories/brands endorsed by an SMI impact SMI credibility? RQ3b . How does the type of endorsed brands impact the consistency of SMI content? RQ3c . How does SMI credibility lead to brand equity?
	Relationship between followers	RQ4 . How can a credible SMI build a brand community with positive marketing implications?
	Relationship between SMIs	RQ5 . How does the relationship between SMIs vary based on factors such as homophily and the kind of brands endorsed (competing/non-competing)?
	Credibility	RQ6a . How does the product context influence SMI credibility? RQ6b . How does SMI credibility help in gaining more followers (subscribers)?
SMI CHARACTERISTICS	Human vs Virtual SMIs	RQ7 . How do components of credibility vary across virtual vs. human SMIs?
	Gender	RQ8 . How does the gender of the SMI impact SMI credibility?
	Pets and other entities as SMIs	RQ9 . How do PSR and companionship affect the credibility of pet SMIs?
		RQ10 . How do the personality and situational factors of followers affect SMI credibility?
FOLLOWER CHARACTERISTICS		
Source(s): Authors' own work		

aspects for review. Given the pervasive use of PSR and Para-Social Interaction (PSI) theories in SMI credibility, the limited use of warmth to operationalize SMI credibility is surprising. Focusing on warmth as an independent construct and as a component of SMI credibility can open multiple avenues for future research on SMIs.

9.2 Methodological implications

Based on our analysis of the literature, we suggest the following topics for review, each accompanied by a specific methodology that scholars interested in SMI marketing can study. A conceptual framework can accompany all the reviews below.

- (1) Meta-analyses: SMI expertise and SMI attractiveness; these topics are homogeneous in scope and have a vast literature (Paul and Barari, 2022).
- (2) Scoping Review: Virtual SMI engagement and Virtual SMI effectiveness; the relevant literature is emerging and needs clarification of key questions (Munn *et al.*, 2018).
- (3) Bibliometric Analysis: SMI content characteristics; the scope of this literature is broad and the dataset is likely too large for manual review (Donthu *et al.*, 2021).
- (4) SLR: SMI relationships with brands, followers, and other SMIs; these topics are heterogeneous in scope and the literature is not too extensive for manual review (Paul *et al.*, 2021).

9.3 Practical implications

This research may have several implications for both brands and SMIs. Brands can collaborate with credible SMIs (beyond follower count) to drive purchases. Since congruence between different products or categories endorsed by SMIs will likely be important for building SMI credibility through consistent content, brands could collaborate with credible SMIs whose endorsements align with their offerings. Thus, brands could drive purchase behavior (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023), attitude towards product and brand, and word of mouth. Furthermore, associations with credible SMIs can enhance brand equity (i.e. willingness to pay a price premium) and foster a brand community. Also, credible virtual SMIs would help brands connect with younger followers (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2025). In addition to follower count and factors such as domain expertise, the following checklist could help brands evaluate the credibility of SMIs:

- (1) Alignment of SMI content with brand offerings
- (2) Congruence between different products or categories endorsed by the SMI
- (3) Quality of SMI-follower relationships (PSR), as this helps build brand community
- (4) Warmth of SMIs, as evaluated on suitable scales developed by brands
- (5) Quality of SMI-SMI relationships

Despite the above, the necessary conditions for brands to evaluate SMIs include strict verification, searching for verifiable evidence, and performing due diligence, as SMIs might indulge in negative behaviors.

SMIs could enhance their credibility by collaborating with congruent brands or categories. Once SMIs establish credibility, they may benefit from audience portability and not be limited to specific social media platforms. This lack of restriction would further open avenues for them to be public figures or celebrities in traditional advertising, OTT content, or movies. Being credible would also help SMIs gain followers (subscribers).

9.4 Societal- and policy-level implications

Credible SMIs play a crucial role in shaping public preferences and trust, as well as promoting pro-social behavior. For sustainable products, marketing messages perceived as credible are generally honest, show brand commitment, provide sufficient details, and focus on shared values of consumers (Verleye *et al.*, 2023). Since credible SMIs will typically meet most criteria through their expertise or homophily, marketing products with credible SMIs is likely to be a fruitful endeavor. Credibility of SMIs can also be leveraged for health communication (Gupta *et al.*, 2022) and financial decision-making (Luan *et al.*, 2024). However, some SMIs may attempt to establish credibility by intentionally deceiving consumers through dissemination of disinformation, i.e. spreading false and misleading information (Bahar and Hasan, 2025). SMIs might also unintentionally share fake news due to their belief in it, without recognizing its falsity, which can negatively impact brand reputation (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021). For example, expert and credible SMIs were inadvertently involved in spreading misinformation about vaccines (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, fake news is more likely to be reshared by followers when the SMI (the source of information) is perceived as credible (Talwar *et al.*, 2019). Such issues may result in a loss of public trust in SMIs and brands and require attention from regulators. For instance, social media platforms can self-regulate by using their algorithms to label and discourage the promotion of misinformation, while encouraging legitimate use of expert credentials (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, governments could collaborate with social media platforms and social services groups to regulate the spread of fake news by educating social media users to recognize and disregard misinformation.

SMIs may also reinforce unrealistic beauty/fitness standards, foster a culture of comparison, and casually share personal data, leading to privacy concerns (Ekinci *et al.*, 2025). AI-driven deepfakes have given rise to synthetic advertising, where consumers are misled into having positive reactions to manipulated ads, such as those that appear more expensive (Campbell *et al.*, 2022a). Deepfakes can also be used to alter a model's skin tone, age, gender, voice, and other characteristics. Deepfakes might lead to deceptive perceptions of SMIs, potentially damaging their credibility in the long run. To prevent such consumer manipulation and loss of SMI credibility, regulators could formulate and enforce policies that require disclosure of the use of AI techniques. Moreover, social media platforms could also regulate SMI content. For example, Instagram and Facebook have begun detecting AI-generated content and flagging such posts (Dutta, 2024). However, these steps might not be adequate because deepfakes that falsify one's identity, persona, and physical appearance could have serious consequences. To address this issue, pre-approval of SMI content, which excludes deepfakes, could be made mandatory. This is similar to the suggestion made by Campbell *et al.* (2022b) on preregistering advertisements with regulators before public distribution. Industry bodies, such as the Interactive Advertising Bureau, could also play a role in regulating SMI content.

Furthermore, SMIs are expected to disclose sponsored content and paid partnerships, thereby promoting transparency. Non-disclosure prevents consumers from distinguishing between paid promotions and content shared without a monetary incentive. Such SMI content may mislead people. Regulators, such as the European Advertising Standards Alliance, have established disclosure guidelines for SMIs (Giuffredi-Kähr *et al.*, 2022). Following these guidelines enhances the perceived credibility of SMIs.

10. Conclusion

To summarize, this research goes beyond a standard review of the SMI credibility literature, presenting a promising future for SMI marketing research. As discussed, this article provides significant implications for researchers, practitioners, and society. Most importantly, through our integrative framework (Figure 3), we outline the critical processes and key actors involved in SMI marketing. To our knowledge, a framework summarizing SMI Marketing is not

available in existing research. The four research themes we identified based on the framework and the ten main questions we developed are expected to interest future researchers in the SMI marketing domain.

This review may not be exhaustive, as research on SMI credibility may have been conducted without explicitly using the terms “credibility” or “credible”. Another limitation of the current research is the use of Web of Science as the journal database and the exclusion criteria, which only include ABDC-rated journals and those with an impact factor of at least 1. These aspects were selected to ensure that the articles we reviewed were of high quality and suitable for inclusion in our review. However, we might have missed articles involving SMI credibility in the journals we exclude and in databases such as Scopus or Google Scholar.

Despite these limitations, we are confident that the SMI marketing domain will benefit from the key insights and recommendations presented in this research.

Appendix

Table A1 presents the prominent measures and scales of SMI credibility, with sample studies that utilized these scales.

Table A1. Measures and scales of SMI credibility used in the literature

Measure/Scale of SMI credibility	Scale adapted from	Sample studies
<i>Sincere, Honest, and Trustworthy</i> on Likert scales ranging from <i>not at all</i> = 1 to <i>very much</i> = 5	Ohanian (1990)	Hartmann et al. (2025)
<i>Attractive</i> (Attractive-unattractive, beautiful-ugly), <i>Trustworthy</i> (sincere-insincere, trustworthy-untrustworthy), <i>Expert</i> (Expert-unexpert, experienced-inexperienced)	Ohanian (1990)	Lee and Johnson (2022)
<i>Trustworthiness</i> (Dependable-Undependable, Dishonest-Honest, Sincere-Insincere, Trustworthy-Untrustworthy), <i>Expertise</i> (Not an expert-Expert, Experienced-Inexperienced, Knowledgeable-Unknownledgeable, and Unqualified-Qualified); 7-point semantic differential items	Ohanian (1990)	Pozharliev et al. (2022) (EJM)
<i>Trustworthiness, Expertise, and Attractiveness</i> on 7-point semantic differential scale	Ohanian (1990)	Leite et al. (2024)
<i>Expertise</i> (experts, knowledgeable, qualified to offer, skilled) and <i>Authenticity</i> (dependable, honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy)	Ohanian (1990)	Kim and Kim (2021) (JBR)
Ohanian’s source credibility scale (1990), consisting of 14 items	Ohanian (1990)	De Veirman and Hudders (2020)
<i>Expertness</i> (knows a lot, competent, expert, sufficiently experienced), <i>Trustworthiness</i> (honest, trustworthy, truthful); 7-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”)	Munnukka et al. (2016)	Ballester et al. (2025)

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Measure/Scale of SMI credibility	Scale adapted from	Sample studies
<i>Trustworthiness</i> (honest, trustworthy, sincere, serious), <i>Expertise</i> (knows a lot about the destination they are advertising, able to make statements about the destination, expert on the destination, sufficient expertise to make statements about the destination), <i>Attractiveness</i> (appealing, stylish, attractive, sexy), <i>Similarity</i> (have a lot in common, very alike, identify easily)	Munnukka <i>et al.</i> (2016), Ohanian (1990), Bower and Landreth (2001)	Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024), Xie and Feng (2023)
<i>Attractiveness</i> , <i>Expertise</i> , <i>Trustworthiness</i>	Munnukka <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Ooi <i>et al.</i> (2023)
<i>Expert</i> (expert-unexpert, experienced-inexperienced, knowledgeable-unknowledgeable, qualified-unqualified, and skilled-unskilled), <i>Trustworthy</i> (dependable-undependable, honest-dishonest, reliable-unreliable, sincere-insincere, and trustworthy-untrustworthy), and <i>Attractive</i> (attractive-unattractive, classy-not classy, beautiful-ugly, elegant-plain, and sexy-not sexy)	Weismueller <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Chaihanchanchai (2025)
<i>Honest</i> , <i>Trustworthy</i> , <i>Convincing</i> , <i>Biased</i> , <i>Not Credible</i> on 7-point Likert-scale items	Wojdyski and Evans (2016)	Lim and Lee (2023)
<i>Warmth</i> (tolerant, friendly, warm, well-intentioned, good-natured, trustworthy, sincere), <i>Competence</i> (competent, independent, capable, confident, efficient, competitive, skillful, intelligent), <i>Attractiveness</i> (handsome/pretty, very sexy looking, very attractive physically, I don't like the way this SMI looks, somewhat ugly, not very good looking, well-groomed, repulsive)	Fiske (2012), McCroskey and McCain (1974)	Fernandes <i>et al.</i> (2022)
<i>Trustworthy</i> , <i>Honest</i> , <i>Expert</i> , <i>Experienced</i>	Müller <i>et al.</i> (2018), Ohanian (1990)	Belanche <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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