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# Why are consumers following social media influencers on Instagram? Exploration of consumers' motives for following influencers and the role of materialism

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the ubiquity of social media influencers (SMIs) and the clear value they hold for marketers, little is understood about the sociopsychological motives that drive consumers to follow them. The current research identified unique consumer motivations for following SMIs on Instagram and examined its association with important consumer behaviour outcomes (i.e. trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts and frequency of purchasing SMI-recommended brands) as well as materialism. Based on survey data, findings revealed four motivations for following influencers on Instagram – *authenticity*, *consumerism*, *creative inspiration*, and *envy* – which had varying effects on trust and purchase frequency. Additionally, materialism was a significant individual difference variable that was strongly associated with the four motives, some of which served as key mediators underlying materialism's impact on purchase behaviour. Managerial and theoretical implications for marketers and advertisers are discussed as well as suggestions for future research in this burgeoning area.

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## Introduction

Influencer marketing is one of the most important online marketplace trends to emerge in the last decade, whereby online personalities are able to leverage their influence on consumers' decision-making processes to the advantage of branded products and ideas (Femenia-Serra and Gretzel 2020). Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are individuals who cultivate celebrity capital on social media platforms by 'crafting an authentic "personal brand"' (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016, 194), and enable brands to capitalize on their popularity for consumer outreach. Described variably as a novel form of native advertising, branded entertainment content and highly credible word of mouth (Breves et al. 2019), influencer marketing utilizes the ability of SMIs to be 'trusted tastemaker(s)' (p. 798) in the digital realm (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). As online opinion leaders, SMIs seamlessly blend in everyday life

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narratives with branded content, thereby influencing a large array of audiences for brand awareness and purchase (Brown and Hayes 2008; Scott 2015).

Influencer marketing has seen the most noteworthy growth on Instagram due to its wealth of visual affordances and shopping features. For example, the swipe feature on *Stories* (i.e. ephemeral content displayed at the top of the interface) garners instant engagement from consumers by directing them to the brand's website. In fact, Instagram has been ranked as marketers' favourite platform for influencer marketing where they have been found to incorporate creative strategies such as posting discount codes that integrate a SMI's name (e.g. Feldman 2019). As a result, Instagram has seen a tremendous growth in not only the number of active influencers, but also the types – spanning across sectors from fashion and beauty to technology, and from travel and leisure to health and fitness (Droesch 2019; Klassen et al. 2018). This industry has ballooned to new highs in recent years and brands are making note of the potential revenue streams across these industry verticals – a recent report suggests that businesses are making \$5.20 for every \$1 spent on influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub 2021).

As SMIs have come to dominate the commercial landscape of the social media era, academic interest in them has kept pace with market changes (Vrontis et al. 2021). Much work has been done in delineating how various characteristics of SMIs such as perceived credibility, attractiveness, and similarity impact consumer responses (e.g. Breves et al. 2019; Djafarova and Trofimenko 2019; Torres, Augusto, and Matos 2019). Some researchers have paid particular attention to the role of content attributes such as uniqueness, originality, and appeal (Casaló et al. 2020; Ki and Kim 2019). Others have focused on the effects of sponsorship disclosure (De Veirman and Hudders 2020) as well as the various techniques that are carried out by SMIs (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). Studies have also delved into consumers' psychological process that gets activated when exposed to SMIs such as emotional bond, wishful identification and parasocial interaction (Ki et al. 2020; Shan et al. 2020).

While these studies have been able to provide sufficient evidence for influencer marketing to take centre stage in the newer e-commerce settings, a holistic examination of consumers' motives for engaging with SMIs should contribute to a more robust understanding of consumers' responses to SMIs and more importantly, what drives this ecosystem in the first place. Understanding the motivational process within SMI consumption is noteworthy given that the effectiveness of influencer marketing may well hinge on the sociopsychological needs consumers seek to gratify from these influencers. Thus, this research will help to fill gaps by examining motives for engaging with SMIs and the behavioural outcomes that follow.

In addition, the current research examines the role of materialism and proposes that it is an important consumer lifestyle factor that impacts responses to influencer marketing. Social media platforms, Instagram particularly, open windows into other users' lives through dynamic visual affordances and have thus been found to promote materialism (Debreceeni and Hofmeister-Toth 2018). SMIs seem to bolster this phenomenon as they indulge followers with their luxurious possessions and lifestyles – especially the younger generation of consumers who are susceptible to such content as they engage in observational learning through social media (Gentina et al. 2021). Hence, materialism is a phenomenon that warrants more attention in exploring how this construct impacts consumer experience with SMIs.

In summary, the objectives of this study are threefold. Firstly, consumers' underlying motives for following SMIs on Instagram are explored. Secondly, the associations between identified motives on key consumer behaviour variables (i.e. trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts and frequency of purchasing SMI-recommended brands) are investigated. Thirdly, materialism's impact on influencer marketing effectiveness and its association with SMI following motives are examined. This study will consist of (1) a qualitative pretest to develop a list of motive items and (2) an online survey to identify how these items cluster together through an exploratory factor analysis and, further, how the identified factors relate to key consumer variables. It is believed that this study will make a theoretical contribution by shedding light on the fundamental building blocks of influencer marketing and how those impact the consumer journey.

## Theoretical background

### *Uses and gratifications theory*

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, which has been a mainstay of communication literature for decades, can illuminate what compels consumers to go online and seek out SMIs. The foundation of this approach hinges on the premise that individuals' selection and utilization of media are a goal-directed behaviour to satisfy distinct social and psychological needs, in turn predicting types of media usage and recurring media use (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974; Kaye and Johnson 2002; Rubin 1984; Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, and Sweetser 2011). The theory is considered an axiomatic one as it is applicable to almost all kind of media communication, ranging from traditional media to newer forms of digital media (Lin 1999; Elliott and Rosenberg 1987; LaRose, Mastro, and Eastin 2001). More importantly, the framework has proven useful for deepening our understanding of consumer behaviour in various forms of digital and social media advertising, including interactive websites (e.g. Ko, Cho, and Roberts 2005) and social media brand communications (e.g. Athwal, Istanbuluoglu, and McCormack 2019; Kwon et al. 2014). As SMIs have become a mainstay of the current online landscape as influential figures utilized by brands for reaching out to specific audiences online, the U&G approach can provide a solid theoretical framework to comprehend why audience gravitate towards SMIs in the first place.

Contextualizing the use of this theory within the framework of SMIs necessitates a step back into how the theory has been used by researchers to explore motives with respect to social media usage in the first place, especially as social media provides unique gratifications that did not exist when the original U&G theory was developed (Sheldon and Bryant 2016). One of the most important studies in this regard has been done by Whiting and Williams (2013), their qualitative, in-depth interview-led research concluding ten essential motives to use social media, including *social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information seeking and surveillance/knowledge of others*. While this study was more wide-ranging and not limited to merely brand-related content, as researchers in the field of influencer marketing, consumers' engagement with brands is critical to gauge. In this respect, Muntinga and colleagues' (2011) work acts as an important signpost, their work on consumers'

online brand-related activities (COBRAs) providing a comprehensive understanding of how consumers engage in brand-related social media usage. Muntinga et al. (2011) reported a full spectrum of COBRA types (consuming, contributing and creating content), with sub-motivations for each type: with *information*, *entertainment* and *remuneration* deemed critical for consuming content; contributing content being driven by *personal identity*, *integration and social interaction*, and *entertainment*; and creating content containing the same sub-motivations as contributing content with the addition of the *empowerment* sub-motive. As such, this study has been influential in our understanding of contextualizing branded content and why audiences seek them online.

Given that social media has become a primary vehicle for branded content, and Instagram in particular, understanding motivations for its usage has also come under the purview of researchers' interests. Lee et al. (2015) in particular observed Instagram's primarily photo-sharing based opportunities for Korean users and concluded that Instagram users have five primary motives for using the app: *social interaction*, *archiving*, *self-expression*, *escapism*, and *peeking*. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) study based in the U.S provided similar motivations for Instagram usage, concluding that *surveillance*, *documentation*, *coolness* and *creativity* were critical factors for users, whilst also providing evidence that interpersonal interaction and narcissism were positively related to these motives.

Expanding specifically into SMI-related motives, existing research on traditional celebrities can provide some guideposts as SMIs are often regarded as a new type of celebrity, hereby *micro-celebrities* (Freberg et al. 2011; Marwick 2013). Regarding celebrity-following behaviour on social media, previous research mainly touches on *information seeking* and *social-interpersonal* motives, highlighting the value of interacting with and accessing information about favourite celebrity figures (Kim, Kim, and Yang 2019; Schubert and Seyffert 2017). In terms of more general celebrity interactions across various media formats, Hung (2014) proposed *aspiration* (driven by the need for achievement) and *play* (pinned by the desire to relax) as the two salient motives that compel people to seek out entertainment experiences vis-a-vis celebrities.

While such findings provide important insights, these studies fail to acknowledge characteristics that are unique to SMIs. Social media is often the sole stage for SMIs to communicate with fans and showcase brand sponsorships, driving SMIs to engage in various self-promotion activities on the platform (Marwick 2013). As such, SMIs invest greater amount of time and effort to provide quality content, solicit intimate social interactions, and offer a wealth of brand information to constantly acquire and manage relationships with new and existing consumers (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). Consequently, SMIs are not only non-traditional brand endorsers or celebrity figures, but they are also trendsetters who are shaping the social media ecosystem and even transforming consumers' lifestyles. One of the few pioneering studies in this context is Morton (2020), who undertook a qualitative approach to understanding SMIs amongst 30 Mexican young adults and was able to narrow down their motives for following influencers on social media to six motivations: *information*, *inspiration*, *communication*, *entertainment* and *surveillance*. However, given the sampling and research method, this study was merely a starting point, and still leaves a gap to be validated with more quantitative methods.

To better understand the role of SMIs and formulate a baseline understanding of consumers' motivations, the current research explores the gratifications consumers

seek from following these micro-celebrities on Instagram. Rather than borrowing the motives from previous work, the current research identifies its own unique motives. Open-ended responses are collected from SMI followers regarding their reasons for following SMIs and, subsequently, an online survey is conducted to explore which motives emerge from those refined responses (i.e. items) via exploratory factor analysis. By doing so, this research highlights consumers' motives that are unique to Instagram SMIs as well as similar to those identified previously.

**RQ1:** What are the underlying motives for consumers to follow SMIs on Instagram?

### ***Trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts***

Managing consumers' trust towards SMIs' branded content has become an essential practice for both SMIs and marketers (Lou and Yuan 2019). Trust enables the construction and maintenance of various forms of interactions when there is a sense of uncertainty and potential risks involved (Doney and Cannon 1997; Huh et al. 2020). Indeed, trust is a central concept in all forms of exchange including relationship marketing (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992), consumer-brand relationships (Hess and Story 2005; Veloutsou 2015), interpersonal relationships (Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985) and spokesperson credibility (Ohanian 1990). In marketing and advertising, trustworthiness forms based on the expertise, reliability, and intentionality of a target person or object (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993). Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) define it as a 'a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence' (p. 315). In sum, trust is the belief that the target is reliable, and a sense of confidence or expectancy that one will not be at risk by relying on a target (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993).

Research has noted that various factors impact consumers' trust in SMIs and their branded content which further determine the effectiveness of influencer marketing. For instance, Campbell and Farrell (2020) suggested authenticity and trustworthiness can be improved for micro-influencers (i.e. influencers with a relatively small number of followers) by being more connected to the needs of their followers. On the other hand, Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide (2012) noted that the number of followers an influencer has can either positively or negatively influence evaluations of expertise and trustworthiness such that having too many followers may elicit perceptions that the SMI is preoccupied with amassing followers while having too few can imply SMI's inability to generate quality content. Studies also suggest improved disclosure and influencer-product congruence can benefit perceptions of transparency, and in turn positively impact consumers' attitude and intention to follow the SMI (De Cicco, Iacobucci, and Pagliaro 2020).

The current study seeks to advance the current literature by examining the role of consumers' motivations given that the benefits of branded content on social media can largely depend on the uses and gratifications one derives from engaging with them (Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton 2011). For example, in an examination of motivations for following brands on Twitter, Kwon et al. (2014) found that the five motives (i.e. *incentive seeking*, *social interaction seeking*, *brand likeability*, *information seeking*, *entertainment seeking*) have varying effects on important consumer outcomes including brand identification, brand community commitment, relationship continuance intention,

and brand recommendation intention. Similarly, in an examination of how users' motives for using chatbots impact perceptions of trust, only the *information* motive had a significant impact while the *playfulness* motive did not (Yen and Chiang 2020). To the authors' knowledge, there has not been an examination of how overall perceptions of trust towards influencers' brand-related posts are impacted by consumers' unique motives for following them. Hence, the second research question is advanced:

**RQ2.** How are SMI following motives associated with trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts?

### **Purchase frequency**

As an end point, the consumer journey comes to its most likely conclusion at purchase and, hopefully, that turns into a recurring loyalty loop for the brand. In the online environment, brands are constantly seeking novel ways to drive online purchases through both websites and social media platforms. The current study investigates purchase frequency, a behavioural outcome that hinges on consumers' positive experiences with influencer marketing. Purchase frequency refers to how regularly one purchases brands recommended by SMIs – or what is often called a conversion in the online advertising realm. It denotes consumers' current, and ongoing purchase behaviour inspired by influencers. By examining how frequently and regularly consumers embrace brand recommendations by SMIs in everyday life, one can gain a more nuanced understanding of consumer responses to influencer marketing.

Numerous attributes have been found to enhance consumers' purchase SMIs' brand endorsements from self-influencer congruence (Shan et al. 2020), product-influencer fit (Lee and Eastin 2020), and parasocial relationship (Gong and Li 2017). Additionally, source characteristics including their credibility, attractiveness, and similarity have proven to be strong determinants of intention to purchase brands recommended by SMIs (Chung and Cho 2017; Kurtin et al. 2018; Lim et al. 2017; Shan et al. 2020). Furthermore, the notion of trust has been underscored as both perceptions of SMIs' trustworthiness as well as trust in their branded posts have been found to significantly enhance intentions to purchase their brand endorsements. Findings by Kim and Kim (2021), for example, demonstrate how trust towards the SMI mediates the positive effects of SMI expertise, authenticity, and homophily on key marketing outcomes including purchase intention, product attitude, and loyalty to influencer. Similar findings have been demonstrated in Shan et al.'s (2020) study in which trustworthiness mediated the relationship between endorser type (celebrity vs. SMI) and purchase intention, suggesting that consumers trust SMIs more than traditional celebrities, which in turn increases intention to purchase their endorsements. Additionally, Lou and Yuan (2019) illustrated that source credibility and informative value positively influence trust towards SMIs' branded post, which further leads to greater purchase intention. Based on the above literature review, it is presumable that high trust in SMIs' brand-related posts will yield more frequent purchase of their products, as summarized in the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Trust in branded posts will be positively associated with frequency of purchasing products recommended by SMIs.

Although limited, few studies have also demonstrated the associations between gratifications sought from SMIs' content and consumer purchasing behaviour. For



example, Ki and Kim (2019) evidenced consumers' desires to mimic a SMI as a central antecedent to both intentions to share and like a SMI's content and purchase their products. More recently, Kim (2020) found those who watch unboxing videos for *information seeking* and *passing time* indicated greater willingness to purchase the featured brand while parasocial interaction mediated the effects of *entertainment*, *interpersonal utility*, and *passing time* motives on purchase intention. Extending this stream of research, the current research explores how SMI following motives influence consumers' frequency of purchasing their brand recommendations.

**RQ3.** How are SMI following motives associated with frequency of purchasing products recommended by SMIs?

### ***SMIs as remedies for materialists***

Described as both a personal and cultural value, materialism is defined as the importance one puts on acquiring and owning material possessions in one's life (Gurel-Atay and Sirgy 2018; Richins and Dawson 1992). Materialists think of material possessions as important life achievements (Richins and Fournier 1991) and enjoy spending money and frequently engaging in impulsive buying (Fitzmaurice 2008). Richins and Dawson (1992) conceptualize materialism as involving three domains including success, centrality, and happiness. That is, a materialistic person uses material possessions as a standard for judging the *success* of others and oneself, emphasizes the *centrality* of possession in life, and believes that possessions enhance one's *happiness* and psychological well-being (Richins 2004). On the bright side, materialism motivates individuals to work hard for material achievements (Joseph Sirgy et al. 2013). However, materialism is more commonly known for its association with negative psychological factors including lower self-esteem (Kasser 2002), depression (Mueller et al. 2011), loneliness (Pieters 2013), and dissatisfaction with life (Tsang et al. 2014). Evidence suggests that materialists seek to account for such psychological deficiencies through material acquisition (Reeves, Baker, and Truluck 2012).

Regarding its association with celebrity figures, Reeves, Baker, and Truluck (2012) demonstrated that levels of materialism are highly correlated with celebrity worship, providing support for the Absorption-Addiction model (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002). The Absorption-Addiction model theorizes that individuals with an inadequate sense of self are more likely to attribute greater meaning to the parasocial relationship with celebrity figures and engage in more excessive behaviour, such as stalking and acquiring goods related to them (Maltby, Houran, and McCutcheon 2003; McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002). Evidence illustrates that affection for media figures is a means to fulfil poor self-concepts such as low self-esteem, loneliness, and unhappiness – characteristics that are prevalent in materialistic consumers (Maltby, Houran, and McCutcheon 2003).

This phenomenon can be well applied to SMIs as they are more identifiable through greater parasocial interaction compared to traditional celebrities (Gong and Li 2017; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Furthermore, with the fashion industry accounting for more than a quarter of sponsored influencer posts along with the proliferation of lifestyle influencers (Driver 2018; Report Linker 2020), SMIs not only strategically appeal to consumers' materialistic tendencies



but also promote materialism by leveraging the right amount of aspiration and intimacy (Lou and Kim 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Findings by Lou and Kim (2019) substantiates this observation illustrating that parasocial relationships with a SMI are positively associated with young followers' materialistic values. Moreover, given that materialistic consumers are more likely to fancy and worship SMIs to satisfy psychological inadequacies, they are more likely to exhibit more positive perceptions towards their content, including greater trust towards their brand-related posts, and purchase their brand recommendations more frequently.

H2: Materialism will be positively associated with (a) trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts, and (b) frequency of purchasing SMI's brand recommendations.

Further, to more clearly understand the gratifications materialistic consumers seek to fulfil from SMIs, the current study explores how materialism is associated with SMI following motives.

RQ4: How is materialism associated with SMI following motives?

## Method

### *Procedure and participants*

An online survey was conducted during a one-week period in March 2020. Using the Dynata online panel, U.S. Instagram users between the ages 18 to 29 were sent invitations to participate via email. The specific age group was recruited given that they are the most active age group of social media users (Smith and Anderson 2018). Further, only those who indicated they were following at least one SMI on Instagram were able to partake in the survey after thoroughly reading the provided definition of SMIs (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2020; Lee and Eastin 2020) for at least fifteen seconds. Qualified participants answered questions regarding motives for following SMIs on Instagram, trust towards SMIs-brand related posts, purchase frequency, materialism tendencies, and demographic information.

Of the 395 qualified respondents who completed the survey, 77% were female with an average age of 24 years old (18–29;  $SD = 3.54$ ). While the sample's gender distribution does not represent general Instagram users as the former skews slightly more female (77% vs. 55%; Auxier and Anderson 2021; Pew Research Center 2021), there is a rather female-heavy gender distribution (83%) when it comes to followers of some of the most popular categories that dominate the influencer market, such as beauty and fashion (Driver 2018; Upfluence 2021). In terms of ethnicity, sixty-one percent of the respondents identified as being Caucasian, followed by African-American (13%), Hispanic (12%), Asian (8%), Multiracial (4%), Native American (2%) and Other (2%). Most were high school graduates (53%), followed by Bachelor's degree (37%), Master's degree (6%), and Ph.D or higher (1%). Respondents were active Instagram users – 68% of indicated they access the platform several times a day. The average number of SMIs respondents were following on Instagram was 13 ( $SD = 21.59$ ).

## Measures

### Independent variables

*Motivation for following SMLs* items were developed based on open-ended responses. Responses were collected from undergraduate students at a large southeastern university, in which they participated in an open-ended survey in exchange for extra credit. Report by Pew Research Center (Smith and Anderson 2018) suggests that Americans ages 18 to 24 are the most active group of Instagram users. Hence, college students were deemed as an appropriate sample for item generation. A total of 58 students who indicated they were following at least one SMI on Instagram completed the survey. After reading a definition of SMLs, respondents were asked to write down all the reasons for following them. This process developed a list of 105 motive items. For initial screening, items were grouped into similar themes and screened for redundancy, leaving a total of 59 items for subsequent evaluation. In the next step, to ensure construct validity of the items, three independent expert reviewers (i.e. doctoral candidates specializing in social media and consumer behaviour research) further scrutinized the items. The reviewers provided feedback on clarifying or rewording vague items, eliminating irrelevant items, and including additional items they deemed necessary. This process further reduced the number of items to 44. The refined set of 44 items were included in the main survey. Survey participants indicated how much each of the items describe why they follow SMLs on Instagram on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all descriptive, 7 = Extremely descriptive).

*Materialism* was measured with nine items using Richin's (2004) Material Value Scale (MSV). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the provided statements (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). The MVS scale yields scores for three subdimensions, which consists of success (e.g. 'I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes'), centrality (e.g. 'I like a lot of luxury in my life'), and happiness (e.g. 'I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things'), as well as an overall single factor score. In the present study, both the single factor scale (9 items,  $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ), and the three separate subscales (success: 3 items,  $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=1.45$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ; centrality: 3 items,  $M=3.99$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ,  $\alpha = .57$ ; happiness: 3 items,  $M=4.60$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ) were employed to examine the associations between materialism and motives.

### Dependent variables

*Trust towards brand-related posts* was adapted from Ohanian's source credibility scale (1990) which assesses the observer's 'degree of confidence in, and level of acceptance of' (Ohanian 1990, 41) SMLs' brand-related posts in general. Five items were measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale: 'Undependable/Dependable', 'Dishonest/Honest', 'Unreliable/Reliable', 'Insincere/Sincere', 'Untrustworthy/Trustworthy' ( $\alpha = .96$ ;  $M=4.48$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ).

*Purchase frequency* was measured with a single item that asked how often the participant purchased products and brands recommended by SMLs (1 = Never, 7 = Very frequently;  $M=2.98$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ).

## Results

To answer the first research question (i.e. What are the underlying motives for consumers to follow SMLs on Instagram?), a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was performed with the 44 items. Items that had a loading score below .60 or cross-loaded on one or more factors were eliminated. Factors with eigenvalues below 1 were also removed. A parallel analysis (O'Connor 2000) was also conducted to confirm the number of factors to be extracted. The eigenvalues of the first four components extracted from the PCA exceeded those obtained from the random data (Ndatasets = 1000, percent = 95). For details, refer to Table 1.

As a result, 28 items were eliminated, resulting in a final set of 19 items across four factors. The four factors that were identified explained 70.52% of the variance. The first factor *authenticity* explained 38.55% of the variance. The second factor *consumerism* explained 13.76% of the variance. The third factor *creative inspiration* explained 10.23% of the variance. The fourth factor *envy* explained 7.99% of the variance.

To answer the remaining RQs and hypotheses, Model 80 of the Process Macro 3.5 (bootstrapping  $m=5,000$ ; mean centred for construction of products) was conducted. Materialism (X) was an independent variable, the four motives (authenticity, consumerism, creative inspiration, and envy) were the first parallel mediators ( $M_1 - M_4$ ), and trust towards SMLs' brand-related posts ( $M_5$ ) was the serial mediator. Purchase frequency (Y) was the dependent variable. Age and gender (male = 1, female = 2) were included as covariates. Please refer to Figure 1 for conceptual model and Table 2 for partial correlation among the variables.

For RQ2, regarding the association between the identified motives and trust towards SMLs' brand-related posts, the *authenticity* motive was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $t=7.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), then *consumerism* ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t=5.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The effects of *creative inspiration* ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $t=1.36$ ,  $p = .18$ ) and *envy* ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $t = .12$ ,  $p = .90$ ) were not significant. Such results indicate the more one follows SMLs because of their authenticity and for brand information, they are more likely to trust their brand-related posts, but not for those who follow SMLs due to creative inspiration and envy. Regarding the two covariates, only gender ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $t = -2.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had a significant effect on trust towards SMLs' brand-related posts, suggesting males indicated greater trust compared to females. Age did not have an effect ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $t = .26$ ,  $p = .80$ ).

For (RQ3) purchase frequency, *consumerism* had the strongest effect ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $t=7.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by *envy* ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t=4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). *Authenticity* ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $t=1.21$ ,  $p = .23$ ) and *creative inspiration* ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t = -.64$ ,  $p = .52$ ) were not significant predictors. In summary, the higher the *consumerism* and *envy* motives, individuals reported more frequently purchasing SML-recommended products and brands. Again, only gender had a significant effect on purchase frequency in which males reported more frequent purchasing of SMLs' brand recommendation compared to females ( $\beta = -.09$ ,  $t = -2.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Age did not have a significant effect ( $\beta = .03$ ,  $t = .78$ ,  $p = .43$ ). Regarding the relationship between trust towards SMLs' brand-related posts and purchase frequency, the two variables were significantly and positively associated ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t=3.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ) suggesting that purchase frequency increases with greater trust. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis results.

	1	2	3	4
<i>Authenticity</i> ( $\alpha = .90$ ; $M=4.76$ , $SD=1.29$ )				
Because they are genuine	<b>.86</b>	.05	.12	.14
Because they are down-to-earth	<b>.81</b>	.16	.08	.16
Because they are open with their followers	<b>.80</b>	.16	.25	-.01
Because they are likable	<b>.80</b>	.11	.21	.06
Because they are engaging	<b>.75</b>	.15	.26	.00
Because they are relatable	<b>.73</b>	.08	.07	.23
<i>Consumerism</i> ( $\alpha = .91$ ; $M=4.68$ , $SD=1.60$ )				
To hear about new products	.16	<b>.87</b>	.18	.13
To get discount codes or special deals	.12	<b>.84</b>	.11	.16
To discover new brands	.14	<b>.83</b>	.26	.09
To easily find new items to shop for	.17	<b>.82</b>	.20	.20
<i>Creative inspiration</i> ( $\alpha = .84$ ; $M=4.80$ , $SD=1.28$ )				
To see photo styles that I like	.11	.20	<b>.78</b>	.11
To appreciate the aesthetic design of their post	.20	.13	<b>.75</b>	.15
To see how they express themselves	.33	.04	<b>.74</b>	.07
To help me express my talents as freely as they do	.26	.25	<b>.66</b>	.17
To get tips for taking and editing pictures better	.03	.35	<b>.63</b>	.27
<i>Envy</i> ( $\alpha = .87$ ; $M=3.63$ , $SD=1.65$ )				
To live vicariously through them	.14	.18	.10	<b>.84</b>
To fantasize over their unrealistic lifestyle	.00	.15	.18	<b>.84</b>
Because I am envious of their lifestyle	.10	.17	.10	<b>.80</b>
Because I want to be like them	.24	.05	.21	<b>.78</b>
Actual eigen value from PCA	7.33	2.61	1.94	1.52
Criterion value from PA	1.48	1.39	1.32	1.26
% of variance	38.55%	13.76%	10.23%	7.99%
Cumulative %	38.55%	52.31%	62.54%	70.52%

Notes: Loadings above .60 are set in bold, PCA: Principal Component Analysis; PA: Parallel Analysis.

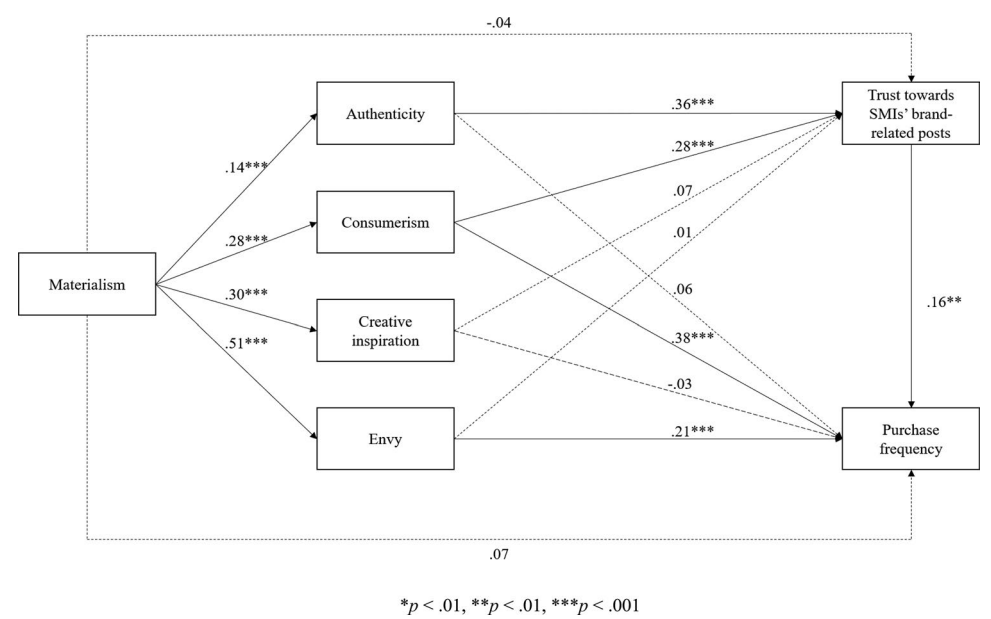


Figure 1. Summary of standardized coefficients.\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 2.** Partial correlations among variables.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Materialism	—								
Success	.80 .000***	—							
Centrality	.78 .000***	.47 .000***	—						
Happiness	.80 .000***	.39 .000***	.46 .000***	—					
Authenticity	.14 .005**	.13 .011 *	.06 .26	.14 .005**	—				
Consumerism	.28 .000***	.29 .000***	.16 .002**	.20 .000***	.35 .000***	—			
Creative inspiration	.30 .000***	.24 .000***	.17 .001**	.29 .000***	.47 .000***	.51 .000***	—		
Envy	.50 .000***	.52 .000***	.30 .000***	.36 .000***	.31 .000***	.38 .000***	.42 .000***	—	
Trust towards SMLs'	.11 .03 *	.17 .001**	.05 .36	.04 .47	.49 .000***	.44 .000***	.38 .000***	.23 .000***	—
brand-related posts									
Purchase frequency	.30 .000**	.33 .000***	.20 .000***	.17 .001**	.33 .000***	.55 .000***	.36 .000***	.43 .000***	.40 .000***

Notes: Age and gender were controlled; pr: partial correlation;

\*p < .05,

\*\*p < .01,

\*\*\*p < .001.

RQ4 explored the associations between materialism and the four motives. Materialism as a single construct was associated with all four motives while the relationship was strongest with *envy* ( $\beta = .51, t = 11.53, p < .001$ ), followed by *creative inspiration* ( $\beta = .30, t = 6.13, p < .001$ ), *consumerism* ( $\beta = .28, t = 5.76, p < .001$ ), and *authenticity* ( $\beta = .14, t = 5.24, p < .01$ ). The two covariates, age and gender, were not significantly related to the four motives ( $ps > .05$ ). To further explore whether the associations between the motives and materialism differ for the three subdimensions, additional analysis was conducted using partial correlations controlling for age and gender. For *envy* and *consumerism*, the associations were strongest for success (*envy*:  $pr = .52, p < .001$ ; *consumerism*:  $pr = .29, p < .001$ ), followed by happiness (*envy*:  $pr = .40, p < .001$ ; *consumerism*:  $pr = .20, p < .001$ ), and centrality (*envy*:  $pr = .30, p < .001$ ; *consumerism*:  $pr = .16, p < .01$ ). For *creative inspiration*, the associations were strongest for happiness ( $pr = .29, p < .001$ ), followed by success ( $pr = .24, p < .001$ ), and centrality ( $pr = .17, p < .01$ ). *Authenticity* was associated with both happiness ( $pr = .14, p < .01$ ) and success ( $pr = .13, p < .05$ ), but not with centrality ( $pr = .06, p = .26$ ).

Contrary to H2, which predicted that materialism will be positively associated with trust and purchase frequency, materialism did not have a significant direct effect on neither trust ( $\beta = -.04, t = -.90, p = .37$ ) nor purchase frequency ( $\beta = .07, t = 1.50, p = .14$ ). However, the indirect effects from materialism through *consumerism* ( $\beta = .11, 95\% \text{ CI } .11, .24$ ) and *envy* ( $\beta = .10, 95\% \text{ CI } .09, .25$ ) to purchase frequency were significant. Additionally, the indirect effects of the serial mediation – from materialism through the individual motives to trust to purchase frequency – were significant for *authenticity* ( $\beta = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } .002, .03$ ) and *consumerism* ( $\beta = .01, 95\% \text{ CI } .01, .04$ ). See [Table 3](#) for details.

## Discussion

Based on predictions pre-COVID-19, the overall influencer marketing industry is set to grow to approximately \$7.9 billion in 2020 (Edelman 2020). While pre-pandemic there were concerns that the market was set to shrink, as only 36% of consumers were convinced of its effectiveness, influencer marketing in fact seems to have had a resurgence of sorts (Taylor 2020). Youth marketing firm YPulse reports (2020) that amongst young consumers, influencers are ‘as influential as ever’. As such, there is an urgent need to comprehend what makes a SMI so compelling to users. To better understand this line of inquiry, the current research developed a comprehensive list of reasons why consumers follow influencers on Instagram and identified four unique motives and their impact on influencer marketing effectiveness. And, given that the current influencer landscape promotes materialism among consumers, the effect of materialism was investigated.

The first and most dominant factor, explaining the greatest amount of variance, was the *authenticity* motive. Consumers follow influencers because they are genuine, open, and relatable. This corroborates previous literature that suggests SMIs consciously manage an authentic persona to be perceived as close friends whom consumers can relate to and identify with (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Marwick 2013). Indeed, parasocial interaction or the illusion of interpersonal relationship is a key

**Table 3.** Total, direct, and indirect effects of regression analyses.

	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Materialism → Authenticity	3.51	.03	.17	.60	.14	5.24	.000	1.96	4.31
Materialism → Consumerism	11.83	.08	.42	.07	.28	5.76	.000	.28	.56
Materialism → Creative inspiration	13.07	.09	.35	.06	.30	6.13	.000	.24	.47
Materialism → Envy	44.63	.25	.78	.07	.51	11.53	.000	.64	.91
Materialism → Trust	27.24	.33	-.06	.07	-.04	-.90	.37	-.21	.07
Authenticity → Trust			.44	.06	.36	7.44	.000	.33	.56
Consumerism → Trust			.28	.05	.28	5.59	.000	.18	.37
Creative inspiration → Trust			.09	.07	.07	1.36	.18	-.04	.22
Envy → Trust			.01	.05	.01	.12	.91	-.09	.10
Authenticity → Purchase	31.72	.40	.08	.07	.06	1.21	.23	-.05	.21
Consumerism → Purchase			.40	.05	.38	7.60	.000	.30	.51
Creative inspiration → Purchase			-.04	.07	-.03	-.64	.52	-.18	.09
Envy → Purchase			.21	.05	.21	4.17	.000	.11	.32
Trust → Purchase			.17	.05	.16	3.31	.001	.07	.28
Total effect Materialism on Purchase	14.22	.10	.47	.08	.30	6.13	.000	.32	.62
Direct effect Materialism on Purchase	31.72	.40	.11	.07	.07	1.50	.14	-.04	.26
Materialism → Consumerism→ Purchase			.17	.03	.11			.11	.24
Materialism → Creative inspiration→ Purchase			-.02	.03	-.01			-.07	.03
Materialism → Envy→ Purchase			.17	.04	.10			.09	.25
Materialism → Trust → Purchase			-.01	.01	-.01			-.04	.02
Materialism → Authenticity→ Trust→ Purchase			.01	.01	.01			.002	.03
Materialism → Consumerism→ Trust→ Purchase			.02	.01	.01			.01	.04
Materialism → Creative inspiration→ Trust→ Purchase			.01	.005	.004			-.003	.02
Materialism → Envy→ Trust→ Purchase			.001	.01	.001			-.01	.02

Notes: Age and gender were controlled; *t* and *p* not given for indirect effect. LLCI = 5000 bootstrapped 95 percent lower-level confidence interval; ULCI = 5000 bootstrapped 95 percent upper-level confidence interval.

strength of SMIs and influencer marketing (Gong and Li 2017; Shan et al. 2020). Our findings further demonstrate that such feelings of closeness may gratify consumers' desire for social interaction and sense of community, and follow previous findings regarding social interpersonal needs as a driver for following celebrities on social media (Kim, Kim, and Yang 2019) as well as more general Instagram usage (Lee et al. 2015). Regarding its relationship with consumer behaviour variables, *authenticity* was the strongest predictor for trust towards SMIs' brand-related posts. Its impact on perceived trust is consistent with findings that illustrate consumers not only feel more similar to SMIs, but also trust them more compared to traditional celebrities (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Although *authenticity* was not directly associated with purchase frequency, data indicated that the positive effect on trust spills over to purchase behaviour, underscoring the importance of trust-management in SMI marketing.

*Consumerism* was identified as the second motive, suggesting that consumers actively seek brand information from SMIs. This shows that SMIs are key contributors to Instagram's growth as a social commerce platform; Facebook reports that more than 70% of shopaholics depend on Instagram for brand information (Facebook 2019). As can be seen from the factor's items (e.g. 'to easily find new items to shop for', 'to discover new brands', 'to get discount codes or special deals'), SMIs are shopping curators who select and recommend qualified brands, making brand exploration easier and less risky for consumers. Such information motive is often identified in consumers'



brand-related activities on social media including following brands on Twitter and watching unboxing videos (Kim 2020; Kwon et al. 2014; Muntinga et al. 2011). Furthermore, the *consumerism* dimension significantly predicted both trust towards brand-related and purchase frequency. In fact, *consumerism* was the strongest predictor for purchase frequency.

The emergence of the *creative inspiration* motive underscores the importance of taste leadership on visual-oriented platforms (e.g. Instagram, Tiktok, YouTube). This motive is also partly in line with Sheldon and Bryant (2016)'s study that identified *creativity* as one of the motives for using Instagram, whereby it was identified as 'showing off one's skills and finding people who have similar interests' (Sheldon and Bryant 2016, 93). McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) state that influencers acquire cultural capital by practicing taste leadership. Taste refers to one's aesthetic preferences and presentation of visually pleasing objects (e.g. arts, fashion etc.) that act as indications of sophistication and prestige (Ki and Kim, 2019). For example, Ki and Kim (2019) identified attractiveness, prestige, and expertise as antecedents of Instagram SMLs' taste leadership, which further elicit followers' desire to mimic them. In addition, Kusumasondjaja (2019) demonstrated that Instagram posts that are characterized by creativity and originality receive more engagement (i.e. likes and comments) than ordinary posts. The current findings further shed light on the importance of visual communication by revealing that consumers look up to SMLs as role models of impression management on social media ('to get tips for taking and editing pictures better', 'to help me express my talents as freely as they do'). Although the motive had no effect when it came to predicting the two consumer behaviour variables, future research should delve into how visual aesthetics and creativity of SMLs' sponsored content impacts advertising effectiveness given that creativity fosters perceptions of authenticity, reducing the friction that usually exists in bland or unnatural brand partnerships (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard 2020).

The identification of *envy* as the fourth motive is noteworthy given that much of the existing literature focus on concepts such as similarity (Lou and Yuan 2019), identification (Schouten et al. 2020), and parasocial relationship (Gong and Li 2017) as drivers of influencer marketing. While more research is needed to better understand the emotional responses involved in the processing of SMLs' content, our study suggests that it may be an amalgamation of parasocial interaction (as can be seen from the emergence of the *authenticity* motive) as well as aspiration and envy. The motive also suggests some overlap between traditional celebrities and SMLs as it resonates with Hung's (2014) study that have identified *aspiration* as a key reason to why people are drawn to celebrity entertainment. The effect of *envy* on consumer behaviour was promising, as greater *envy* motive led to more frequent purchase of SMLs' brand recommendations. Such finding supports studies that have illustrated the positive impact of *envy* or upward comparisons with SMLs (Shan et al. 2020; Singh and Ang 2020). For example, Lee and Eastin (2020) showed envy enhances consumers' evaluation towards a low-sincerity influencer. However, in the current study, *envy* did not influence perceptions of trust, suggesting that consumers who follow influencers for inspiration and to fantasize over their luxury lifestyles may be more preoccupied with finding ways to associate themselves with the SMLs more than scrutinizing the trustworthiness of their brand recommendations. Future research should examine how

consumers' motives impact consumers' scepticism towards influencers' content and sensitivity to sponsorship disclosures (De Veirman and Hudders 2020).

Consumers' materialism level appeared to be an important individual difference variable as the trait showed a positive relationship with all four motives implying that materialists depend on SMIs to a higher degree as they seek to enhance their poorly defined self-concepts through celebrity figures, as postulated by the Absorption-Addiction model. Meaning, given that materialists suffer from internal deficits and are vulnerable to social comparisons (Schroeder and Dugal 1995), they are more likely to aspire SMIs (i.e. *envy*), perceive them as significant role models (i.e. *creative inspiration*), desire to connect with them on a personal level (i.e. *authenticity*), and utilize them for brand information (i.e. *consumerism*). Indeed, previous research demonstrated celebrity-related social media use having a more positive impact on highly materialistic consumers' life satisfaction (Seo and Hyun 2018). This research also further delved into the three sub-dimensions of materialism (i.e. success, centrality, and happiness) and demonstrated that each of the three subdimensions have varying effects on consumers' motives. *Envy* and *consumerism* were most strongly associated with success, suggesting that these two motives are influenced by a sense of wishful identification and admiration as the dimension highlights materialists' tendency to use possessions not only to impress others but also to evaluate one's life accomplishments. *Creative inspiration* and *authenticity* were most strongly associated with happiness, possibly implying that for materialists, these two motives are stimulated by a need to fulfil affective inadequacies and enhance emotional wellbeing from engaging with SMIs.

Regarding materialism's association with consumer behaviour, while the direct effects of materialism to perceived trust of SMIs' branded posts and purchase frequency were not significant, the indirect effects were significant for the *envy*, *consumerism*, and *authenticity* motives. *Envy* and *consumerism* mediated the effect of materialism on purchase frequency, while *consumerism* and *authenticity* linked materialism and trust which ultimately led to frequent purchase. Taken together, this suggests that materialists' consumption of SMIs' brand-recommendations is triggered by these three motives. Such findings advance existing knowledge by illustrating how unique SMI following motives and perceptions of trust serve as important mechanisms underlying materialism's impact on purchase behaviour (Lou and Kim 2019).

The value of the current research lies in providing a panoramic view of why consumers voluntarily engage with SMIs through open-ended responses collected from more than 50 social media users and quantitatively identifying the most meaningful factors. This study also provides a new prospect by acknowledging that consumers' perceptions of trust and purchase behaviours of SMI endorsements are contingent upon the gratifications sought, thus bridging the U&G theory and influencer marketing. It needs to be noted, however, that this research does not distinguish among the different types of SMIs (e.g. nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega; Britt et al. 2020; Campbell and Farrell 2020; Djafarova and Trofimenko 2019), nor were the motives identified specific to any categories of interest that influencers operate in (e.g. fashion, food, makeup, fitness, etc.; Lou and Yuan 2019). Consequently, this research serves as a starting point for future research to expand upon the current findings and examine how the effects of these motives may hinge on the diversifying forms of SMIs as well as content types. In addition, our research on the relationship between

the unique motives and materialism can also provide the impetus for more pointed work that examines the confluence of influencer type, content type, platform and specific consumer traits.

### ***Practical implications***

By understanding why consumers follow SMIs, marketers are not only able to better align their communications objectives with the right influencers for their marketing but also develop content aligned with these findings. This benefit can be critical to saving costs and increasing efficiency. Furthermore, with nearly 4,000 niche agencies who specialize in influencer advertising (Clutch 2020), an effective influencer strategy is no longer an option, but instead a requirement to compete in today's marketplace. However, this specialized area of marketing is still in the nascent stages. Therefore, competitive strategies can help set apart an exceptional marketing initiative from a mediocre approach.

Important new insights identified within this research arm marketers with the tools to go beyond basic media planning. In creating their content strategies, SMIs should consider how materialism impacts their engagement and create a content mix that includes fashion related imagery, celebrity endorsements, and fashion influencers to fulfil this consumer need (Vasquez). Our findings showed that materialistic consumers follow SMIs because of envy and this in turn increases purchase frequency. In this context, a fashion retailer may further cultivate materialism and purchase through envy appeal. For example, fashion retailers could use Instagram stories or other types of live streams that include real-time endorsements to create a sense of envy as well as fear of missing out (FoMO) among potential customers (Lee, Bright, and Eastin 2021).

The distinct effects of the four motives on the consumer behaviour variables can provide some guidance for marketers regarding SMI selection strategy. For example, if a brand seeks to enhance brand awareness or improve brand image, a precursor would be to engage with SMIs who gratify consumers' *authenticity* motive given that the motive most strongly predicted trust towards SMIs' branded content. An example of this is the recent trend for SMIs to do 'getting real' posts on Instagram to highlight 'unfiltered moments or points of struggle' in an effort to portray an authentic self instead of the hyper-curated self that SMIs so often imbue (Battan 2019). Brands could potentially benefit from doing a similar 'behind the scenes' content strategy that includes celebrity endorsers or brand advocates. In addition, the *consumerism* motive had a consistent impact on both perceptions of trust and purchase frequency. Again, *consumerism* refers to the need to hear about new products and discover new brands, meaning that conversion may be most prevalent among consumers who value information about new brands and products. Accordingly, brands should seek to diversify the types of SMIs whom they sponsor so that they constantly reach a newer group of audience who are in search for new product information.

### ***Limitations and future research***

Findings from this research should be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, the current research used a student pool to develop the list of motives as they are part of the motive active generation of social media users. Additionally, the sample

group for the online survey skewed heavier toward highly educated females than that of the U.S. national usage rates for Instagram due to the natural sampling bias caused by convenience sampling (Auxier and Anderson 2021). Although the current research tried to overcome this shortcoming by controlling for gender throughout the analyses, future research may benefit from additional sampling that includes a more representative sample. Caution should also be taken in future research by asking participants the names of the SMLs they follow to make sure they fit with the researchers' conceptualization. Third, while survey methods are appropriate for answering the research questions, further exploration of how the four motives impact purchase intention and trust could be investigated in a natural setting. Because social media data and metrics have the potential to further explain consumer behaviour (Voorveld 2019), these findings may be further explored to better understand the four motives associated with trust and purchase behaviour through social media behavioural data. In addition, a single item measure was used to capture purchase frequency. Single item measures are somewhat unreliable, therefore more sound methods that hinge on longitudinal data should be used to assess the behaviour variable more accurately.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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