

## **What emotional and psychological factors lead consumers to form parasocial relationships with influencers, and what are the negative implications?**

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# **What emotional and psychological factors lead consumers to form parasocial relationships with influencers, and what are the negative implications?**

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## List of abbreviations

SMI = social media influencer

PSRs = parasocial relationships

KPI = Key Performance Indicator

1K = 1 thousand

1M = 1 million

DMs = Direct Messages = Messaging interface on social media platforms





## Chapter 1 : Introduction

### 1.1. Context

In 2025, the global market share of influencer marketing has been valued at \$32.55 billion, representing a 35.63% increase compared to 2024 and a 235.57% increase compared to 2020 (*Global Influencer Market Size 2025*, n.d.). In addition, in 2023, 49% of consumers reported finding influencers' recommendations more engaging than traditional advertising, and 45% were more likely to purchase a product recommended by an influencer (*How Much Millennials Trust Influencers' Brand Recommendations Worldwide 2023*, n.d.).

Over the years, social media platforms have emerged as both a strategic resource and a new field to work on for companies, allowing brands to intensify the ways they connect with their consumers (Li et al., 2021). Indeed, social media allows companies not only to reach new customers, build and maintain relationships with them but also to exchange resources with customers in a reciprocal process. In this way, interactions such as brand-to-consumers and consumers-to-brands can be converted into marketing capabilities (Li et al., 2021). Moreover, as social media networks can be viewed as a set of nodes (i.e., users) interrelated by two-sided ties, the interactions that happen on these platforms impact the relationships between companies and consumers not only directly but also indirectly with interactions such as consumers-to-consumers, where consumers themselves act as intermediary between the brand and other consumers (Kane et al., 2014). Similarly, influencers-to-consumers interactions can also be converted into marketing capabilities. Indeed, influencers on social media act as intermediary between brands and consumers and can facilitate brand engagement by driving emotional connection and action towards the brand (Delbaere et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Furthermore, social media platforms create places for consumers to rely on other's information in order to experience themselves a better purchasing process as it reduces uncertainty (Majidian et al., 2021; Perse & Rubin, 1989). To this aim, influencers' reviews and feedbacks are critical sources for consumers (Delbaere et al., 2021).

As a result, in 2024, one of the most effective way to promote a product to affect efficiently audience's purchase intention was through influencers on social media (Lee et al., 2024). Indeed, Social Media Influencers are able to influence consumers' thoughts, decisions and behavior because they bond emotionally with their followers and like that create a relationship (Ki et al., 2020; Kutz et al., 2024). This created relationship between influencers and followers create proximity and trust which can be used by brands as an advantage to create brand-consumer relationship through influencers-followers relationship (Gomes et al., 2022).

To serve consumers effectively, companies must not only be present where their audiences are, but also understand their behaviors, preferences, and decision-making processes. Many firms are increasingly adopting customer-centric strategies to meet the needs of each individual (Sheth et al., 2000). In order to improve engagement, brands should focus on relationships with customers: their creation but also their continuity. On social media, this purpose can be reached with the development of effective influencer marketing strategies including the choice of the right influencer to work with. (Djalolovna, 2025; Khodabandeh & Lindh, 2020; Ryding et al., 2023; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). This selection may be based on factors such as the influencer's follower count, content type, industry (e.g., fashion, food, lifestyle), and especially the alignment between the influencer's audience and the brand's target audience. Therefore, by understanding the underlying intrinsic factors that make consumers building relationships with influencers, companies can take a step further in understanding their audience.

## **1.2. Research Motivations**

### **1.2.1. Managerial motivations**

Managers should understand that social media is a strategic resource and that influencers are part of this resource. Social Media Marketing Strategy refers to *“an organization’s integrated pattern of activities that, based on a careful assessment of customers’ motivations for brand-related social media use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, transform social media connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes”* (F. Li et al., 2021,p.54)

First, using social media influencers to promote the product of a brand is effective in driving consumer’s purchase intentions and is also more effective than brand-only advertising (Lee et al., 2024; Su et al., 2021). SMIs are able to influence consumers at each step of the marketing funnel, from brand awareness to purchase, with a stronger role in the brand awareness phase (Delbaere et al., 2021). Then, companies do not have full control over the communication created around their brand : SMIs have a substantial impact on how a consumer perceives a brand (Delbaere et al., 2021). Indeed, influencers are considered to be trustworthy and reliable sources of recommendation due to PSRs with their followers (Conde & Casais, 2023). In this way, companies that work with influencers in an effective way can access more control over what it is said about their product/services or brand. Besides, creating a successful influencer marketing strategy also reside in the wise choice of the influencer consistent with the level of impact the company wants on the consumers (brand awareness, subject matter expertise, brand preference and preference) (Chopra et al., 2021).

Thereby, it is important for managers to understand not only the factors attributed to influencers that make them able to build PSRs with their followers, such as their attractiveness, their content type, their credibility, but also what are the factors attributed to the consumers: how consumers think and what lead them to create and maintain PSRs with influencers. By understanding their audience’s psychological and emotional patterns, brands will be able not only to select the right influencers to work with based on this consumer-centered approach but also to better design what, where, why and for who using influencer marketing strategies. Moreover, it is equally important to consider the potential negative consequences of PSRs. From an ethical standpoint, managers hold a responsibility toward consumers and should avoid strategies that might exploit consumer vulnerabilities.

### **1.2.2. Academic motivations**

Previous studies have delved into the attributes of influencers that make consumers attract and tend to form PSRs with the SMI. For instance, Su et al. (2021) have found that interpersonal attraction, which is based on three key components (task attraction, physical attraction, social attraction), was a strong factor leading consumers to build PSRs. Meaning that a person is more likely to form a relationship with an influencer if they find that the influencer is good at doing task, is physically attractive and if they feel an emotional connection with them (Su et al., 2021). Moreover, other studies have found that influencer’s expertise and communication have a positive impact on follower’s intentions to maintain the PSR (Qian & Mao, 2023).

However, limited research has explored the consumer perspective, particularly the emotional and psychological mechanisms behind the formation of PSRs with influencers. Liu and Campbell (2017), for instance, examined the role of the Big Five traits (extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism) and the Big Two (plasticity, stability) in social network site activities (content creation, interactions with others on social media, gaming, photo posting,...). They found that extraversion and openness were the strongest predictor of social network site activities, whereas

agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism were only linked with a few activities. However, this study was not focused on PSRs and was only guided through individuals' behaviors on social media. Similarly, in a study conducted on the impact of the Big Five traits on PSRs in the context of TV character, it was showed that openness was the strongest predictor of PSRs, but did not showed any strong evidence of the link that could exist between the other traits and parasocial relationships (Waqas, 2023). Moreover, Sun & Wu (2012) studied the impact of personality traits on parasocial relationships with sport celebrities. The study was based on Mowen's 3M model of motivation and personality (Mowen, 2000) which organizes the traits in four level : Elemental traits (include the Big Five), Compound Traits (include need for competition, self-esteem..), Situational Traits and Surface Traits. The study found evidence that neuroticism, need for learning and competitiveness were positively linked with PSRs while self-esteem was negatively linked with PSRs. Neither these studies provide us a clear answer to what psychological and emotional factors of consumers push them to create PSRs with influencers in a social media context, but they do provide us some track about how to conduct our research.

Finally, parasocial relationships have benefits as well as negative implications. In literature, it has been found that PSRs contribute not only to addiction to social network use but also to a lower trust in others and, at the end, that a greater dependence on PSRs is linked with higher levels of loneliness (Baek et al., 2013). In addition, compulsive media use causes social media fatigue, which can increase anxiety and depression (Dhir et al., 2018). Therefore, a better understanding the potential negative impacts of such relationships is needed.

In summary, there are notable gaps in the existing literature, particularly concerning the consumer-side psychological and emotional factors driving PSRs formation, and the negative implications that may result from such relationships.

### 1.2.3. Problem statement

Based on the current context as well as on the managerial and academic motivations exposed previously, this thesis consider the following research question:

*"What emotional and psychological factors lead consumers to form parasocial relationships with influencers, and what are the negative implications?"*

This research question can be understood as having two interconnected dimensions. On one hand, it seeks to uncover the psychological and emotional factors that make consumers likely to develop parasocial relationships with influencers on social media. On the other hand, it considers the potential negative consequences of these relationships. These aspects are explored in parallel in this thesis: the mechanisms that lead to the formation of PSRs often help explain the risks and implications that follow. In order to answer to our research question, this study aims, in a first place, to understand the psychological and emotional mechanisms attributed to consumers underlying their relationship to influencers. To go further and if it is possible, the study will also attempt to establish links between the level of PSR with the consumers' psychological traits. In a second place, potential negative impacts of PSRs on consumers will be explored.

### 1.3. Approach

This thesis is structured into six chapters, the first one being the introduction covering the context of this thesis as well as the managerial and academic motivations for the research topic. The second chapter is dedicated to a literature review, exploring key concepts such as influencer marketing, the characteristics and types of social media influencers, the concept of parasocial

relationships and their potential negative implications, as well as the psychological and emotional mechanisms underlying these relationships. Then, Chapter 3 details the research design and methodology used in this study, including the development of the qualitative approach, the details of the sample, the interview guide, and the method of analysis used on the collected data. Afterwards, the results and analysis of the study are exposed in chapter four. Chapter 5 offers a discussion between the results obtained in the thesis and results from previous research exposed in literature review. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a conclusion including a summary of the thesis, the managerial and academic implications of the results, and addresses the limitations encounters during the study as well as suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 2 : Literature review

This second chapter presents a review of scientific literature concerning influencer marketing as well as the relationships between influencers and their audiences. It is structured into three main sections. First, an overview of the context of influencer marketing and the key characteristics of social media influencers. Then, the concept of parasocial relationships and its development in previous studies are explored, starting outside the area of social media. Finally, a review of studies that contribute to the understanding of the psychological and emotional mechanisms underlying parasocial relationships is discussed.

### **2.1. Influencer Marketing and influencers**

#### **2.1.1. Social media and Influencer marketing**

According to Taprial and Kanwar (2012), the term “social media” have appeared way before the apparition of social networks as we know today. Indeed, social media has evolved from one of the earliest forms of tech-driven exploration: the “phone phreaking era” in the late 1950’s, a practice of manipulating telecommunications systems to make free calls or to access restricted networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). These early phreaking were informal networks used to exchange knowledge, much like how people use social media today to share information and collaborate. Besides, some tech pioneers were influenced by phreaking such as Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, the founders of Apple, who contributed to the rise of social media communication as we know it (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also mark the 1950’s as a starting point for social media, with the creation of “Online Diary” which enabled writers of online diaries to connect with each other.

Between the 1960’s and the 1980’s, the public faced various innovations in terms of communication that paved the way to social media platforms. First, commercial online services were paid computer networks that allowed users to connect via a modem to access features such as email, chat rooms and news. The first such services, CompuServe and The Source, launched in 1979 and were owned by large corporations. They provided text-based interfaces with menus for users to communicate, share information, and participate in online forums. At that time, computer networks, primarily via systems like ARPANET, were not accessible out of university, government, and military connections. In this way, email was firstly a way to communicate from one computer to another, but with the requirement for the computers to be online (Edosomwan et al., 2011; Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). The same year, in 1979, a worldwide discussion system called the Usenet was created, allowing internet users, originally universities and research institutions, to post public messages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Also, BBS (bulletin board system) was created in 1978 and allowed users to upload and download software, read news, and exchange messages via a modem connection, often one user at a time. It was one of the earliest forms of online communication and file-sharing (Edosomwan et al., 2011).

After that in 1991, the World Wide Web (WWW), a new system that allowed easy navigation and sharing of documents over the internet, became publicly available (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). As communication evolved, people sought real-time, direct interactions. Social media sharing emerged in peer-to-peer applications in the late 1990s when people began sharing files, photos, and links via platforms like email and instant messaging. In 1999, Napster was introduced: a P2P file-sharing application that allowed users to easily download MP3 music albums. Other P2P applications like Limewire emerged, and BitTorrent later became the dominant tool for legal file sharing (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). As technology matured, and due to the increasing accessibility and speed of the Internet, the concept of social media as we know today was officially born. In the early 2000, a lot of social media networking platforms were created such as MySpace, Linkdn, Facebook, Youtube or Sky Blog. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Taprial & Kanwar, 2012).

Social media as we know today can be described as primarily internet-based platforms which allow for creation and exchange of user-generated content (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). They include social networking sites, forums, blogs, podcast, Q&A sites, review sites, virtual game worlds etc.. (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). In common speech, when we talk about social media, we often mean to talk about social media networking platforms, like Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. These are one type of social media platforms, which is different than other social media platforms in its two-way communication and relationship-building aspects (Edosomwan et al., 2011). They are platforms where users, who are individuals, organizations, institutions and brands, can build networks by communicating with each other, sharing and looking for information, and where they document their life and feelings (Appel et al., 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). While social media is more about visibility and content sharing, networking platforms focus on interactions and community-building (Edosomwan et al., 2011). These social media networking platforms possess features that make them distinct from traditional communication channels, such as an unique digital user profile customized by the users, digital content that enable users to connect with each other by sharing similar interests and a transparency of the networks meaning that users can view their connections as well as other's (Kane et al., 2014). For the aim of this thesis, when we refer to social media, we actually refer to social media networking platforms.

Nowadays, for many people social media is the primary way in which they receive and share information, either with relatives, friends or strangers, making it culturally significant (Appel et al., 2020; Barreto, 2014). This phenomenon converges with the statement that social media has emerged as a place where word-of-mouth is now spread. Word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to *"a person-to-person communication that the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service"* (Arndt, 1967, p.3). In the digital world, online WOM can be generated by unpaid individuals such as ordinary consumers (organic WOM), who share their satisfaction with a brand or a product/service, or by paid individuals such as influencers (fertilized WOM), who aims to promote a brand or a product/service (Barreto, 2014). Offline and online WOM are quite similar because they share the same goal, which is spreading information, opinions, and recommendations. However, eWOM, which relies heavily on social media use (H. Liu & Jayawardhena, 2023), differs to some extent due to its digital nature : it can be generated by more than one person at a same time, it can be spread to a wider audience and it can persist more over time (Barreto, 2014). In this way, companies, who used to develop only traditional marketing strategies such as direct marketing, telemarketing, radio, television advertising or owned website, can now use online WOM strategies, including influencer marketing, to display brand-related information and develop relationships with consumers (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014).

Influencer marketing is, according to Chandler & Munday (2016), the part of the marketing strategy of a company that aims to promote a brand, products or services through selected individuals who are considered most likely to influence the purchase intention of a specific target. Influencer marketing strategies usually take place in the digital world, where social media networks are transformed into valuable means (Li et al., 2021). We can also talk about online influencer marketing (OIM), which can be define as *"a strategy in which a firm selects and incentivizes online influencers to engage their followers on social media in an attempt to leverage these influencers' unique resources to promote the firm's offerings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing firm performance"* (Leung et al., 2022, p.1). Even if the concept of "influencer marketing" seems quite new, it can be seen as the digital transformation of "opinion leadership", which has been used long before the existence of social media platforms. Indeed, the concept of opinion leadership was first developed in a study called "The People's Choice", published in 1948, which analyzed how people made voting decisions during the U.S. presidential election from 1940 and 1944 (Lazarsfeld et al., 2021). This study presents the opinion leadership as the ability of some individuals to influence the attitude of others, and to act as intermediaries between mass media and general public by filtering, interpreting and spreading information (Lazarsfeld et al., 2021). With the rise of social media, traditional opinion leadership with

opinion leaders like friends, community experts or industry professionals, expanded to a greater and global reach on social platforms, where brands now implement influencer marketing strategies. In this field, influencers are considered as opinion leaders who guide consumer's behaviors, attitudes and thoughts regarding a brand, a product or a service, because their audience trust their expertise (Chu, 2023; Sicilia & López, 2023). In this way, influencer marketing is just an evolution of opinion leadership, adapting it to a digital world by increasing reach, leveraging technology, and developing strategies that engage and persuade an audience.

Thereby, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are the main element of influencer marketing strategies. Even if there is no consensus in the academic literature regarding a definition of SMIs, they can be considered as Internet users with a significant number of followers who engage with their own audience built through social media, and who are able to promote customer-brand relationships via authentic content, as well as influence other's decisions, behaviors and opinions (Delbaere et al., 2021; Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Lou, 2021; Veirman et al., 2017). Their content is either educational, entertaining, or promotional in most cases (Kutz et al., 2024). They first appeared on the internet in the years 2010 as ordinary individuals who were sharing their life and interests. Nowadays, they are often referred as micro-celebrities due to their gain of followers, perceived authority and credibility, and are used in the marketing mix (Chopra et al., 2021; Delbaere et al., 2021; Sicilia & López, 2023). In addition, they act as opinion leaders on social media, being intermediaries between brands and consumers (Kutz et al., 2024). This is because influencers are perceived as being expert in their domain and detain a certain authority on a subject (Chu, 2023; Farivar et al., 2021). Nevertheless, having a large number of followers, and thus being a popular influencer is not a *sine qua non* condition to be an opinion leader : if the influencer is following too few people, consumers might perceive this as an artificial popularity, leading them to like less and engage less with the influencer (Veirman et al., 2017). Furthermore, because consumers make links between the influencer's image and the product or brand they endorse, their feeling about the influencer will bounce on the feeling they have about the product : if they like the influencer and if the product endorsed is align with the SMIs image, consumers will be more likely to follow their recommendations as they will be more likely to relate (Belanche et al., 2021; Chu, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Several studies have highlighted the fact that social media influencers have an impact of each step of the consumer journey funnel : they take action in the retention and advocacy phases with WOM and blogging among other, and they influence consumers from awareness to purchase (Delbaere et al., 2021; Farivar et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). By using influencer marketing, brands can move their consumers through each stage of the journey in order to ultimately create brand engagement (Delbaere et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Indeed, influencers tap in each of the three factors of brand engagement. First, cognitive processing, because by creating content, even on a specific product, influencers transmit brand awareness to their followers, who remember the brand rather than the general terms or specificity of a product (ex. "*Charlotte Tilbury*" rather than "*pink liquid blush*") (Delbaere et al., 2021). Next, the affection is introduced by consumers' feeling regarding influencers' content : they express their liking for the SMI and for the brand mentioned (Delbaere et al., 2021). Lastly, the brand activation is endorsed by the number of followers who comment the content about the brand (Delbaere et al., 2021). Moreover, the effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign can vary with the size of followers base, the platforms used to create content, the demographic of the audience, the perceived credibility of the message and the visual appeal of the content (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Aside with the influence hold on consumers by SMIs, consumers also rub off an influence on SMIs. Indeed, social media influencers really take into consideration engagement behaviors such as comment and feedback in order to create content that will resonate with their audience (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). This is due to the fact that the main *raison d'être* for influencers is creating content for their audience. They are able to make from influence on social media a job because of their



audience: they are, thus, reliant on this audience to be who they are and to do what they do.

### 2.1.2. Characteristics of Social Media Influencers

In the current literature, there are key characteristics, more mentioned than others, to describe a social media influencer and to explain their effectiveness in communication : credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and authenticity (Sicilia & López, 2023; Ying & Dikcius, 2023). In addition, similarity is one of the most social characteristic assigned to influencers : meaning that users on social media follow influencers that look like them in some ways or to whom they can relate on some points (Ying & Dikcius, 2023).

Credibility is very often used in the literature as a characteristic related to influencers that explain their impact on their audience (Azhar et al., 2024; Jia, 2022; Majidian et al., 2021; Sicilia & López, 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Walter et al., 2024, 2024; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; Ying & Dikcius, 2023; Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). In the 4th century BC, Aristotle already emphasized credibility as a key for persuasion in his rhetorical proof triangle consisting of three components : *ethos (credibility)*, *logos (reason)* and *pathos (emotions)* (Higgins & Walker, 2012; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Credibility can be understood as the sum of other characteristics like trustworthiness and expertise, as stated in the source credibility model of Hovland and al. (1953). Indeed, consumers look at influencers as credible sources when they consistently provide valuable (expertise) and transparent (trustworthiness) content (Vrontis et al., 2021). Some studies have also found that attractiveness, which goes beyond physical attraction, can be considered as a third dimension of an influencer's credibility (Walter et al., 2024; Ying & Dikcius, 2023; Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021). Thereby, these dimensions (expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness) build and shape influencers' credibility as a whole (Walter et al., 2024; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; Ying & Dikcius, 2023; Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021). Some also argue that credibility is an even more important KPI to use than numbers of followers when analyzing one influencer's performance (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Indeed, credible influencers are able not only to foster emotional bond and trust among their audience, but also to transfer their credibility into credibility for the brand they endorse (Azhar et al., 2024; Kutz et al., 2024).

The first sub-dimension of credibility, which is, like other sub-dimensions, sometimes used on its own in the literature, is expertise. Expertise can be seen as to what extent a source, an influencer, is perceived to have the knowledge or skills in a specific domain, to give valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953; Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencers are frequently perceived as experts on specific ideas, lifestyle or product categories, and users follow them because they are interested in this expertise (Bogoevska-Gavrilova & Ciunova, 2022; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Influencers with higher perceived expertise, who usually act in one particular niche, such as beauty, fitness, technology or fashion, are also found to be more persuasive (Vrontis et al., 2021). In their study aiming to develop a framework for social media influencer marketing, Vrontis et al. (2021), have concluded that influencers' expertise is based on two main mechanisms: influencer congruence with endorsed product and popularity. On one hand, influencer-product congruence refers to what extent the product endorsed by the influence fits his image, his personality (Belanche et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Followers are more likely to follow an influencer's recommendation if it fits their perception of the influencer (Belanche et al., 2021). On the other hand, popularity, which is not only represented by the number of followers but also by the emotional attachment to the influencer and the similarity felt, also increases the perceived expertise (Veirman et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021). In this way, expertise is stronger when an influencer is more popular and when the promoted products fit his persona (personality and domain). Besides, the more an influencer's perceived expertise will be high, the more followers will continue to follow this influencer (Qian & Mao, 2023).

Next, trustworthiness has also been found to be a specific characteristic hold by an influencer

as well as a sub-dimension of their credibility (Vrontis et al., 2021). It reflects the degree of confidence in an influencer's intention to disclose the most valid information, represented by their perceived honesty, transparency and integrity (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Vrontis et al., 2021). Trust plays a fundamental role in the construction and in the reinforcement of the relationship between influencers and their audience : consumers build more emotional connection and are more loyal to influencers they trust (Azhar et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

A fourth characteristic which can also be viewed as a dimension of credibility is attractiveness. This dimension encompasses the physical and social attractiveness of the influencer such as appearance and personality traits like charisma and relatability (Delbaere et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). It relies on several mechanisms such as familiarity, similarity and likeability as people are attracted to what they like, what they feel familiar with and what they relate to (Vrontis et al., 2021). Attractiveness plays a crucial role in forming connections between followers and influencers (Vrontis et al., 2021). Moreover, it also strengthen this relationship as the more a person is attracted to someone else, the more they will be influenced by this person (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). In their study Su et al. (2021) talk about the concept of interpersonal attraction which can be seen as an antecedent of parasocial relationships. Interpersonal attraction can be understood as the process by which individuals assess whether they like someone and whether they find their interactions pleasing. It is built on three levels: task attraction, physical attraction, and social attraction. (Huston & Levinger, 1978; Su et al., 2021). Seen as an antecedent of PSRs, it means that users on social media will bond more easily with influencers when they are attracted to them on these three level (McCroskey & McCain, 1974; Su et al., 2021). The first dimension of interpersonal attraction is the task attraction, which is to what extent someone is attracted to another based on their ability to carry out a task. Then, physical attraction simply captures how someone is physically appealing to another. Finally, social attraction includes how much someone like someone else on a personal and emotional level, looking to deepen the relationship (McCroskey & McCain, 1974).

Another characteristic which is sometimes assigned to influencers, but not related by literature to credibility, is their authenticity (Delbaere et al., 2021; Sicilia & López, 2023; Walter et al., 2024). Indeed, influencers are considered to provide authentic content to their audience (Delbaere et al., 2021). Authenticity refers to an influencer's ability to present themselves in a genuine way, and is the reflection of their relatability, honesty and transparency as opposed to act in the sense of other's expectations (Tisdell, 2003; Vrontis et al., 2021). Consumers are more willing to pay attention to an influencer when they are seen as having control over their authentic content and endorsements (Kapitan et al., 2022). In this way, influencers who share personal stories and disclose their deals transparently are more able to foster a relationship with their audience compared with influencers who appear too promotional (Vrontis et al., 2021). In this way, when developing an influencer marketing approach, brands should not take all the control over the campaign, and let the influencer some freedom to express their originality and authentic self in order to make the campaign more effective (F. Leung et al., 2022).

Finally, similarity is also often assigned to influencers. Indeed, studies have found that influencers are able to create a sense of friendship with their audience not only because of their authenticity but also because they seem like sharing similar interests, identity and lifestyle (Chu, 2023; Pimienta, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Similarity refers to the perceived shared characteristics between an influencer and their followers (Vrontis et al., 2021). According to Nosofsky's model, which focus on identification and categorization mechanisms, people categorize and relate to things based on similarity (Nosofsky, 1986). In this way, when people sees someone similar to them, they will be more likely to identify, pay attention to them, categorize them as "like me", and further to trust them because of this similarity (Nosofsky, 1986). In their study, Croes & Bartels (2021) have found that young adults follow influencers on social media due to six factors : information sharing, trends, entertainment, companionship, habit and information seeking. According to them, social

identification played a crucial role in all of these factors, meaning that when users identify themselves socially to an influencer, they will be more likely to follow them. This finding highlights the importance of similarity in influencers' characteristics. Furthermore, it has been found that when consumers feel similarity with an influencer, they are more likely to trust them and to react positively to their recommendations, even when the influencer disclose their commercial partnerships (Naderer et al., 2021).

Consequently, based on literature, influencers are brought out by their credibility, which is built on trustworthiness, expertise, and attraction, and can be seen as individuals who show similarity with their audience and share authentic content on social media on a specific domain.

### 2.1.3. Differences between Social Media Influencers and Celebrities

As said before, SMIs are often referred as micro-celebrities (Delbaere et al., 2021). However, several studies highlight differences between SMIs, used for influencer marketing, and celebrities, used for celebrity endorsement. Besides, the use of influencers in marketing strategies is replacing traditional celebrity endorsements because SMIs are seen as more relatable to consumers, driving authenticity and trust (Appel et al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). With the common use of social media, celebrities have also started to post on social platforms. In this way some studies, such as the one from Campbell & Farrell (2020), include celebrities as a type of influencers who enjoy their recognition outside of social media. However in the past few years, several studies have highlighted the fact that influencers and celebrities should be considered separately given that they differ in their origin, their role as content creators, their relationships with brands, the source of their influence and in the way they are perceived by followers (Sicilia & López, 2023). Also, according to Sicilia & López (2023), these differences are true for both celebrities that were born before and after 2000, which refers to the first appearance of influencers on social media.

The first distinction between influencers and celebrities lies in the origin of their recognition. Indeed, even if they are both considered as opinion leaders and even if some influencers manage to access a celebrity status due to their large audience, influencers and celebrities don't hold their power of persuasion and their fame for the same reasons (Ahmadi & leamsom, 2021; F. F. Leung et al., 2022). As a matter of fact, influencers are unknown before they start posting content on social media, and they usually start as ordinary individuals who share their life and interests : they only exist because of social media (Belanche et al., 2021; Sicilia & López, 2023). Moreover, according to Gross & Wangenheim (2018), everyone can be an influencer. This emphasizes the closeness between influencers and the "average person". On the contrary, celebrities build their recognition outside of social media and separate themselves from the average person by their unachievable status and high significance (Belanche et al., 2021).

In this way, their roles on social media have opposite purposes. On one hand, influencers' role on social media is to create valuable and authentic content, with content creation at the core of their persona (Delbaere et al., 2021; Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Sicilia & López, 2023). On the other hand, celebrities use social media platforms to support their existing career (Sicilia & López, 2023). Furthermore, brands will create celebrity endorsement campaigns regardless of the celebrity's presence on social media, using their recognition to promote goods in a punctual advertising campaign or over a longer partnership, whereas influencers are only interesting for brands due to their valuable content creation and their large follower base (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Kutz et al., 2024; McCracken, 1989; Sicilia & López, 2023).

As for their source of influence, influencers are in fact attracted to celebrities, who hold a higher status than them (Kapitan et al., 2022; Sicilia & López, 2023). Furthermore, according to the literature, they owe their opinion leadership to different mechanisms: celebrities hold their influence

based on their status, while influencers are able to influence consumers because of their perceived authenticity and expertise on specific topics (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018; Kapitan et al., 2022).

Finally, celebrities and influencers differ in the way they are perceived by consumers. Compared with celebrities, influencers interact more with their audience and share more of their personal beliefs, experiences and opinions (Schouten et al., 2020; Sicilia & López, 2023). Because of this, influencers are seen as more authentic and trustworthy, while celebrities' actions are seen as scripted. Moreover, it causes consumers to relate more with influencers who are then seen as approachable, as a kind of friend, whereas they see celebrities as distant aspirational figures (Belanche et al., 2021; Naderer et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). Furthermore, according to Schouten et al. (2020), celebrities are perceived as credible sources across different industries : for instance, the actress Eva Longoria is credible when she endorses L'oréal's beauty products. In contrast, influencers hold credibility only in their specific domain : for example, a fitness influencer will be trusted for sports nutrition but not necessarily for financial matters (Schouten et al., 2020).

#### 2.1.4. Types of Social Media Influencers

In the literature, social media influencers are often categorized by their size, that is to say their number of followers. Campbell & Farrell (2020) divide influencers into five categories namely : celebrity influencers (the rich and famous), mega-influencers (the everyday celebrity), macro-influencers (the sweet pot), micro-influencers (the rising stars) and nano-influencers (the new comers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Ryding et al., 2023). It is worth noting that the authors include a celebrity category for influencers, which they define as *"any individual who enjoys public recognition outside of social media and is leveraged by brands for their large follower base"* (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p.3). Nonetheless, as shown aforesaid, celebrities and influencers should be considered separately, even if some influencers are able to reach a certain celebrity status outside of social media : they still differ from celebrities strictly speaking at least due to their origin of recognition (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; F. Leung et al., 2022). Regarding the other categories of influencers, Conde & Casais (2023) also include the mega, macro and micro influencers in their study, which analyzed the differences between influencers' categories in terms of perceptions and relationships with their audience. They developed a classification of influencers on three levels based on previous research, excluding nano-influencers. They make the distinction between micro-influencers, macro-influencers and mega-influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023). On another side, Sicilia & López (2023) have separated the influencers based on their reach rather than on their follower base. Indeed, they also choose to talk about mega-,macro-,micro-, and nano- influencers but, this time, evaluated in terms of the number of individuals who may be exposed to the influencer's content (Sicilia & López, 2023).

When we look at the influencers' characteristics, according to the literature, mega-influencers are perceived as having more expertise and as being more attractive than micro-influencers. However, micro-influencers reach a higher level of trustworthiness, authenticity and similarity , which makes them able to drive effective word-of-mouth mechanisms (Conde & Casais, 2023; Walter et al., 2024). Moreover, as nano-influencers are highly personally accessible to their followers, they are perceived as highly authentic in their content creation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). When it comes to engagement rates, micro-influencers and nano-influencers are considered to have the highest rates because of their high perceived authenticity and accessibility (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023). Nevertheless, in terms of persuasion, mega-influencers are quite more effective than nano-influencers due to their level of perceived expertise (Lee et al., 2024). Macro-influencers, on their side, still retain strong engagement rates, less than micro but more than mega (Conde & Casais, 2023). Finally, in terms of price and reach, mega-influencers hold the highest position, followed by macro, micro and nano (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023).

To conclude, even though influencers clearly differ in their follower base, reach, characteristics levels and engagement rates, they all, regardless of their size, represent three marketing functions : they give access to a potentially highly engaged audience, they have an endorser persona, and they possess skills in social media management (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In addition, in Aristotle's rhetorical proofs, the philosopher already understood that persuasion was based on three key dimensions : ethos (credibility), logos (reason) and pathos (emotion) (Higgins & Walker, 2012; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). As a result, by being perceived as credible sources who bond emotionally with their audience, and who use their expert opinion to give recommendations, influencers, regardless of their classification, can be seen as following this persuasion triangle.

	#followers	Reach	Description	Characteristics
Mega-influencers	1 million at least	more than 150 million	Have reached celebrity status from their expertise and global audience and are widely recognized on social media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Global reach</li> <li>- High perceived expertise</li> </ul>
Macro-influencers	100k to 1 million	15 to 150 million	Are highly successful but don't have celebrity status yet. Their audience is more diverse than micro-influencers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active in specific domains</li> <li>- Provide great brand exposure</li> </ul>
Micro-influencers	10K to 100K	1.5 million to 15 million	Known for their strong voice in a specific niche or community. Their audience is often more localized.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Close relationships with their audience</li> <li>- High perceived trustworthiness, authenticity, and similarity</li> </ul>
Nano-influencers	Less than 10K	Less than 1.5 million	Are at the beginnings of their influencer careers: their followers are mostly friends, acquaintances, and others who live close by.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal accessibility</li> <li>- High perceived authenticity</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Types of influencers by number of followers (own figure based on literature (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023; Sicilia & López, 2023) )

## **2.2. Parasocial Relationships**

### **2.2.1. The concept of Parasocial Relationships**

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) was first introduced as an extension of social interaction by Horton and Whol (1956), who highlighted watching TV as a form of social interaction where a one-sided relationship was created between the viewer and the character of a performer. Parasocial relationships are thus characterized by this one-sidedness, which makes them different from other relationships (Boyd et al., 2022). In the context of social media influencer marketing, we can define a PSR as a non-reciprocal, one-sided and non-face-to-face social-emotional long-term relationship developed by audiences with an influencer, which involves intimacy and psychological connections (Boyd et al., 2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Joshi et al., 2023; Su et al., 2021). PSRs are distinct from interpersonal or two-sided relationships, however, according to Lotun et al. (2024), people believe that they can use a PSR to fulfill their emotional needs in the same way that a two-sided relationship does, even if personalized emotional support is not necessarily accessible. Indeed, they found that when the PSR is strong, it is closer to strong two-sided relationship than to a weak two-sided relationship. As a result, perceiving that PSRs can help to meet emotional needs is enough to feel validated and supported (Lotun et al., 2024).

In the literature, the concept of PSRs has been linked with several theories. Among other, Perse & Rubin (1989) have used the Uncertainty reduction theory and the Personal construct theory to understand parasocial relationships, comparing them with real-life or interpersonal social

relationships. By applying the uncertainty reduction theory, they argued that as individuals seek information to reduce uncertainty, repeated exposure to a media figure reduces uncertainty and increases their liking. Thereby, the more a media figure communicates by observing, asking and disclosing themselves, the more PSRs with individuals will be predictable (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Similarly, the authors use personal construct theory to draw a parallel between PSRs and interpersonal interactions: this theory states that individuals try to understand the world by creating personal mental constructs or filters through which they classify objects and people to interpret and predict events (Perse & Rubin, 1989). For example, ones will see others as “good” or “bad” while another will classify the same persons as “friendly” or “unfriendly” and they will take decisions based on their own personal construct (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In their study, Perse & Rubin (1989) showed that audiences actively construct and refine mental representations of media figures, just as they do with interpersonal relationships in real-life. For instance, they will see an influencer or an actor as “funny”, just as they would have done with a friend. By testing their hypothesis, they confirmed that a longer exposure to a media figure and a more complex understanding of their personality lead to greater confidence in predicting their behavior and demonstrated that both PSRs and real-life social relationships are created via social cognitive processes.

Furthermore, Pimienta (2023) has linked PSRs with the Attachment theory, arguing that parasocial relationships can be seen as an attachment process, just like interpersonal relationships, by which individuals bond emotionally with media figures. The attachment theory explains that humans’ attachment behavioral system enable them to create and maintain affectional bond with other because they biologically seek protection (Bowlby, in Pimienta, 2023). According to the author, seeing PSRs as an attachment process gives answers to three major questions surrounding this concept, namely why do individuals establish PSRs, when do they establish it and what is their goal. Accordingly, individuals establish PSRs naturally with media figures who draw closeness, familiarity, and intimacy, throughout any stages of their lives because it contributes to their biological goal of protection (Pimienta, 2023). In this way, PSRs can be seen as complementary to social relationships and not only as a substitute. This also involves that anyone can form PSRs, just like anyone can form interpersonal relationships (Pimienta, 2023).

Additionally, Belanche et al. (2021) argue that as individuals feel emotionally connected to media figures such as influencers, they will try to adopt similar preferences to maintain cognitive consistency, which is the tendency of individuals to align their attitudes and behaviors to avoid internal contradictions. This statement refers to individuals’ psychological need for congruence where they try to align their self-concept with those they admire (Belanche et al., 2021). Thereby, when followers feel connected with influencers through their PSR, they will align their preferences, including product recommendations, with influencers to maintain cognitive consistency, strengthen their PSR with the influencer, and reinforce their self-concept based on their aspirational regard on the influencer (Belanche et al., 2021).

### 2.2.2. Parasocial Relationships, Social Media and Influencers

Going further, Lou (2021) has proposed that, in the context of social media, parasocial relationship has evolved in a new form that captures the evolution of these interactions where influencers are able to drive reciprocity and to co-create the relation. This evolving concept is called trans-parasocial relationships and is, unlike traditional parasocial relationships, more reciprocal, interactive and co-created (Lou, 2021). Indeed, even if followers admit that their relationships with influencers are not full reciprocal, they nonetheless describe these relationships as intimate and relatable friendships, and consider that influencers try to create reciprocity thanks to real-time interactions, comments, content suggestions, and other interactive social media activities (Lou, 2021). In this way, influencers are able to interact, in real-time or not, with their audience thanks to social

media networks' features, contrary to TV or radio characters.

Furthermore, when feeling a sense of trust and familiarity, PSRs are stronger. On social media, this feeling is created easily thanks to ongoing, accessible and personalized content : it is, thus, a place where parasocial relationships are amplified (Joshi et al., 2023). Besides, followers seek not only information but also emotional bonds with influencers (Farivar et al., 2021). Thereby, one key success factor of social media influencers primarily resides in their ability to build parasocial relationships with their followers. When developing PSRs with their audiences, influencers are able to drive consumers' behavior by increasing loyalty, trust and purchase intention (Delbaere et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2023; Ki et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, according to Vrontis et al. (2021) and Sicilia & López (2023), PSR is one of the factors that explain the effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign, among other characteristics related with influencers, endorsed product, consumers, used platform and created content. Additionally, according to Farivar et al. (2021), consumers adopt influencers' recommendation because of their perceived expertise and opinion leader position but also because of their created PSRs which has more impact on purchase intention than opinion leadership : that is to say that emotional connection are more powerful than expertise alone. In this way, influencers who are able to create strong PSRs with their audience are in return able to build more effective marketing campaigns (Farivar et al., 2021). Indeed, PSRs make audiences feel an emotional connection with influencers which drives proximity, similarity, trust, and finally purchase intentions (Caruelle, 2023; Gomes et al., 2022).

According to Su et al. (2021), audiences will be more likely to develop PSRs with influencers who they perceive have skills, with who they build emotional connections, and to who they are physically attracted. Some studies also argue that similarity with influencers also strengthen PSR (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Once a PSR is established, consumers will be more likely to rely on information provided by influencers they see them as credible and trustworthy sources. In addition, the more the influencer will share personal facts and the more they will be authentic, the more followers will perceived them as a friend, which will reinforce the emotional attachment (Chu, 2023; Su et al., 2021).

In their attempt to develop a questionnaire aiming to assess the level of PSRs held by an individual with a specific media figure on a social media context, Boyd et al. (2022) stated that parasocial relationships consist of four dimensions. The first one is "interest in", which refers to a user's degree of interest regarding one influencer's content. Then, "knowledge of" is the effort made by the individual to learn about the influencer's life. The third dimension is "identification with", which encompasses the level of shared beliefs and opinions between the individual and the influencer. And the last one, "interaction with", assesses the degree of social connection or friendship feeling felt by the follower (Boyd et al., 2022). The resulting survey, called PRISM survey, is specially applicable to social media context, which was not the case with previous survey aiming to test the level of PSRs (Boyd et al., 2024). In addition, the PRISM survey has been proven valid across platforms (Boyd et al., 2024).

### 2.2.3. Potential negative implications of Parasocial Relationships

Even if PSRs can push people toward healthy habits and attitudes, previous studies have given some clue about the potential negative implications on individuals' behavior and psychological state derived from PSRs. (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

First, according to Hoffner & Bond (2022), users on social media show and see idealized lifestyles which can cause negative self-comparisons that can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and body dissatisfaction. In their study, Fox & Vendemia (2016) found that women usually cultivate a socially attractive appearance more than men, and edit their online pictures to this aim. This mechanism can lead to negative social-comparisons as they compare themselves with others and try to maintain excessive beauty standards set by others (Fox & Vendemia, 2016).

Then, both teenagers and adults with insecure attachment seem to use social media as a way to replace their real-life relationships which are lacking affection (D'Arienzo et al., 2019). In this way, PSRs can blur the line between real and online interactions as followers will perceive influencers as real friends, which can create confusion and lead to unrealistic expectations from followers regarding influencers (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Moreover, unlike real relationships, PSRs lack risk of rejection and can be seen as a safe place for low self-esteem individuals to feel connected and validated (Derrick et al., 2008). These individuals are more likely to benefit from strong PSRs as they can project their ideal selves in their favorite influencer who they feel closer to, and ultimately, are more likely to feel emotional distress, betrayal and loneliness after an influencer's scandal or disappearance (Baek et al., 2013; Derrick et al., 2008; Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Regarding behavioral implications, Baek et al. (2013) found that a strong PSR can increase social media addiction, which in return can lead to social isolation. Social media addiction also conducts to social media fatigue, anxiety and depression (Dhir et al., 2018). Furthermore, the concept of PSRs has been found to be linked with compulsive and impulsive buying behaviors (Shemeis et al., 2021; Sheruly & Koentary, 2023). However, these behaviors are weakened when individuals have a high self-control sense, and on the contrary, are increased when individuals lack of self-control (Sheruly & Koentary, 2023). Finally, PSRs can harm consumers when influencers are promoting risky behaviors such as smoking, alcohol use, fast food consumption or non-ethical consumption (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Indeed, as explained beforehand, individuals who hold a strong PSR with influencers are more likely to follow their recommendations because they trust them.

## **2.3. Psychological and Emotional mechanisms**

### **2.3.1. Psychological mechanisms**

According to Sicilia & López (2023), consumers' personality traits have a part in explaining why influencers can impact their audience. Personality traits can be understood as a combination of ethical and mental traits that make an individual distinct from another and impact how they behave by showing patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions that are consistent across life stage but vary across situations in the way they are manifested (Caspi & Shiner, 2007; Najm, 2019; Sicilia & López, 2023; Steenkamp & Maydeu-Olivares, 2015). Human behavior can be widely understood and predicted through personality traits (Caspi & Shiner, 2007).

In marketing literature, different personality traits have been studied, but the Big Five model is the most used and scientifically validated taxonomy of personality traits (D. Liu & Campbell, 2017). It identifies five traits of personality : openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In the 1980s, the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI), a questionnaire that aims to determine individuals' personality traits, was developed by P.Costa and R.McRae based on the Big Five model (Najm, 2019). In their studies, Costa & McCrae (1992, 1995) have associated different scores in each five personality traits with other sub-traits. For instance, they associated high score on neuroticism with anxiety, depression, and emotional instability. High extraversion, on the other hand, is linked with social competencies, optimisms, and talkativeness. Openness to experience illustrates the ability to seek, detect and use abstract patterns as well as with interest to art and fantasy. Next, agreeableness refers to an individual's orientation towards others: high scores in this trait showcase sympathy, kindness, trust, forgiveness and interpersonal flexibility. Finally, conscientiousness is one's degree of self-discipline, organization and goal-directed behavior. People with high score in this trait tend to be reliable, hardworking and careful. Several questionnaires to assess the Big Five traits have been developed afterwards, varying in length, traits coverage, formulation, structure, cultural context and purpose of use (Najm, 2019). Among them, some questionnaires have been scientifically validated for the French-speakers population, namely : the Big



Five Inventory (BFI) (Plaisant et al., 2010), a 44 items questionnaire ; the BFPTSQ (Morizot, 2014), an adaptation of the BFI that can be self-evaluated by teenagers ; and the BFI-10 (Courtois et al., 2020), a 10 items questionnaire.

Few studies have been conducted regarding the links between the Big Five and PSRs creation. Indeed, Waqas (2023) conducted such study but regarding PSRs with TV characters and not influencers. They found that individuals with high score in openness were more likely to develop PSRs, but they did not find any evidence regarding the other traits. Then, Sun & Wu (2012) attempted to explain the impact of personality traits on PSRs with sport celebrities. However, they did not take the Big Five as personality traits per se but rather Mowen's 3M model of motivation and personality (Mowen, 2000), which encompasses four level of personality traits including the Big Five traits among others. Moreover, the research focused on sport celebrities and not influencers on social media. In this study, the authors found that individuals with high score in neuroticism were more likely to form PSR but lacked from other evidence (Sun & Wu, 2012). As a result, current literature lacks research and support when analyzing the links between the Big Five traits and PSRs with social media influencers.

### 2.3.2. Emotional mechanisms

Emotions can be viewed as a mental state created by a process of thoughts, feelings, subjective experiences, behavioral responses and physiological reactions (Reisenzein, 2007). Besides, Boiger & Mesquita (2012) see emotions as a dynamic, interactive process that shapes and are shaped by relationships through social construction. This means that emotions will be different across contexts and time.

In marketing literature, several studies has been made regarding emotions and influencer marketing. However, they usually do not detailed emotions in specific models but rather talk about emotions in general. Nonetheless, emotions have been shown as an important component when it comes to driving purchase decisions but also to build relationships with others, with consumers and with brands (Gaur et al., 2014). Indeed, Ki et al. (2020) showed in their study that social media influencers were able to influence consumers because of the emotional bonds they create with their audience by fulfilling followers' needs for ideality, being relatable and showcasing expertise. Moreover, according to Reisenzein (2007), parasocial relationships are emotionally-driven. Emotional intimacy creates a sense of reciprocity that makes audiences perceive influencers as relatable and trustworthy, and ultimately enable followers to follow one influencer's recommendations (Reisenzein, 2007; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). In their study Baek et al. (2013) stated that individuals who felt vulnerable emotions, such as loneliness, were more likely to form a strong PSR with influencers. In addition, when analyzing the effect of empathy on PSRs, Scherer et al. (2022) found that this emotion towards others led to increase identification with a media figures and, thus, led to PSRs creation.

In psychology literature, on the other hand, more precise models aiming to identify and classify emotions have been developed and used in marketing research afterwards (Huang, 2001). In their study about emotions on tweeter, Mondal & Gokhale (2020) refer to Parrot's Emotion Model, which consists of three level of emotions : primary emotions are fundamentals emotions that serve as a basis for more complex secondary emotions which are then refined into more specific situation-based emotions (Parrott, 2001). Parrot's six primary emotions are namely love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear. They are next divided into secondary emotions such as, among others, affection and longing (from "love"), cheerfulness, optimism, and pride (from "joy"), irritation, frustration and exasperation (from "anger"), and finally suffering, disappointment and neglect (from "sadness")<sup>1</sup>. The final level of emotions include various forms of emotions such as fondness, caring, compassion, fondness, caring,

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendice 1 : Parrot's Emotion Model and Plutchik Wheel of Emotions

or compassion (Parrott, 2001). Among other models, the Plutchik Wheel of Emotions has also been often used in both marketing and psychological fields (Mohsin & Beltiukov, 2019). This primary psychological model, developed by Robert Plutchik, classifies emotions with eight primary emotions organized in polar opposites : joy vs sadness, trust vs disgust, fear vs anger and surprise vs anticipation (Mondal & Gokhale, 2020; Plutchik & Kellerman, 1980). Each primary emotion also presents variance according to its intensity, for instance, “rage” is stronger than “anger”, and “annoyance” is the weakest form of anger. Next, each primary emotion can be combined to form more complex emotions, such as : optimism, love, submission, awe, disapproval, remorse, contempt and aggressiveness (Plutchik & Kellerman, 1980). As a result, both Parrott’s and Plutchik’s models provide valuable frameworks for understanding emotions, though they differ in focus. Parrott’s model organizes emotions hierarchically based on increasing complexity and specificity, whereas Plutchik’s model emphasizes emotional intensity and the relationships between opposing emotions.



## Chapter 3 : Research Design

This third chapter is dedicated to the development of the research design and to the methodology used in the present research thesis. The first section explains how the research was conducted in order to gather relevant data. Then, this chapter presents the sample on which the study was conducted, followed by an overview of the interview guide used on the sample. Finally, the last section details how the collected qualitative data was analyzed.

### **3.1. Methodology**

#### **3.1.1. Research design**

The present research is exploratory by nature as it aims to identify and explain the psychological and emotional factors underlying parasocial relationships formed with influencers, which is an under-researched area. This study also aims to investigate the negative implications of these relationships, which goes beyond a basic description (Malhotra et al., 2017).

Therefore, a qualitative methodology was adopted, which is defined by “*an unstructured, primarily exploratory design based on small samples, intended to provide depth, insight and understanding*” (Malhotra et al., 2017, p.169). Moreover, as PSRs usually rely on emotional connections and subconscious motivations, consumers may be unable to answer accurately to questions that tap this subconscious level. In this way, a qualitative approach was the most fitted way to explore these subconscious feelings (Malhotra et al., 2017). Moreover, this qualitative research was coupled with an inductive approach, as the purpose was to allow insights to emerge from the data collected during the interviews. As a consequence, this study aims to a better understanding of the emotional and psychological processes supporting parasocial relationships (Malhotra et al., 2017).

In order to gather detailed information on participants’ feelings, experiences and opinions, I conducted in-depth interviews with open-ended questions using a flexible semi-structured interview guide. This approach was the best way to explore the subject by allowing participants to answer with rich information and transparency (Malhotra et al., 2017). At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to fill two short surveys. The first one was based on the BFI-10 items questionnaire developed for a French-speaking population and aimed to assess personality traits of the respondents, and the second one was based on the PRISM questionnaire which assess the level of parasocial relationships held by an individual towards an influencer on social media (Boyd et al., 2022, 2024; Courtois et al., 2020).

#### **3.1.2. Samples**

The sample consisted of social media users for whom the only criterion to be interviewed was to currently follow or to have followed one or more influencers on at least one social media platform. The sample was quite homogenous with a majority of women, and an age range between 21 and 32 years old, which can be referred as “generation Z”, for those born between 1997 and 2004, and “millennials”, for those born between 1981 and 1996. According to the statistics, in 2024 individuals aged between 18 and 34 represent the largest user groups on Instagram and Facebook (*Global Facebook User Age & Gender Distribution 2024*, n.d.; *Instagram*, n.d.). In this way, the sample used in the present study is relevant as respondents belong to a population that is used to social media and spends a significant time on these platforms, making them more likely to form PSRs with influencers on social media.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Profession
1	Male	26	Marketing and business consultant
2	Female	23	Student
3	Female	26	Radiologist
4	Female	32	Secretary
5	Female	22	Student
6	Female	21	Student
7	Female	29	Secretary and photograph
8	Female	23	Student
9	Female	26	Stylist
10	Female	27	Stylist
11	Male	22	Student

*Figure 2 : Composition of the sample (own figure).*

As for the sample technique, it was based on a non-probability sampling based on a convenience sample as the respondents were found in my own personal network (Malhotra et al., 2017). The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely via videoconferences, depending on the participants' availability and preferences. With each participant's total consent, all conversations were audio-recorded and later transcribed word-for-word. This method ensured that not only the nuances of language were preserved, but also that all answers and piece of information were captured as accurately as possible, providing a solid basis for a detailed analysis. All interviews were conducted in French, the native language of each respondent.

### 3.1.3. Interview guide

In order to answer the research question, in-depth interviews were conducted as stated above based on an interview guide which was structured on a funnel approach starting with general questions about influencers, then gradually moving toward more specific questions about participants' personal experiences and opinions regarding influencers that aimed to catch the emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs but also the negative implications of these relationships <sup>2</sup>.

More specifically, the interview first started with a comprehension question about the definition of influencers according to respondents. This question aims to test the knowledge of the respondent about who is considered as an influencer, and who is not. This is important because, due to their perception of what an influencer is, some people might not be aware that they follow influencers. For example, some might think that can considered as influencers only reality show stars and therefore might neglected content creator as influencers. In the same way, some might think that celebrities fit in the influencers' sphere while they are, according to previously examined literature, different from each other. The second part of the interview examines the habits of the respondent with influencers including interactions with influencers, specific influencers that participants follow, the types of influencers they engage with, as well as potential experiences lived by participants who may have followed influencers' recommendations before.

Then, more specific questions regarding emotional and psychological mechanisms were asked. Firstly, respondents were asked if they have lived a negative experience involving an influencer before which was not necessarily based on a product recommendation. Then, participants were asked to put themselves in situations where they could feel negative emotions towards influencers and explain the potential contexts that could led them to feel these emotions. For instance, what an influencer that they liked could say that would make them feel sad, disappointed, betrayed, or upset. Respondents were also asked what they would feel if their favorite influencer stopped posting content suddenly.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendice 2: Interview guide

Finally, the interview shifts away from personal experiences to personal opinions by asking respondents thoughts on potential negative impacts on an individual who hold a PSR with an influencer.

At the end, the interview was concluded with two quick questionnaires. The first one aimed to catch the psychological pattern of the respondent based on personality traits covered in the Big Five Inventory traits, namely extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. These personality traits were assessed with the 10-items Big Five Inventory questionnaire, which has been validated by scientific literature and proven to give accurate results when used on a French-speaking population (Courtois et al., 2020). The second short questionnaire was based on the PRISM survey developed by Boyd et al. (2022, 2024) that assesses the level of parasocial relationships hold by the respondent towards an influencer. For this questionnaire, respondents were asked to answer the questions in relation to their favorite influencer, as the aim was to assess the level of PSRs with a specific influencer rather than in general. This questionnaire measures four key dimensions of PSRs: interest in, knowledge of, identification with and interaction with. It is worth noting that the accuracy of the PRISM survey has been found to be invariant across different social media platforms, meaning that this survey can be used to assess PSRs on any social media platform.

#### 3.1.4. Analysis process

For the data analysis part of this study, interviews were recorded on audio tape with explicit consent of each participant. These audios were then transcribed word-for-word into text and incorporated into Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software designed to help researchers organize, code, and analyze non-numerical data (Malhotra et al., 2017). In order to analyze the generated data, a coding process was executed, which is “the process of bringing together participants’ responses and other data sources into categories that form similar ideas, concepts, themes, or steps or stages in process”. (Malhotra et al., 2017, p.244). This coding process allowed me to create parent node and child node to structure and explore data in a coherent and meaningful way<sup>3</sup> (Malhotra et al., 2017).

At the end of each interview, two short questionnaires were given to participants in order to take into consideration their personality traits assessed on the Big Five traits in a first place using the BFI-10 item questionnaire, and to evaluate the level of PSRs they were able to form with influencers in a second place using the PRISM questionnaire. Both theses questionnaires were based on established questionnaires validated by scientific literature formerly and consisted of statements to which participants had to assess themselves. As for the BFI-10 item questionnaire, each of the five traits was represented by two statements. Each statement was rated by participants on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Then, an average score was calculated, resulting in a final score categorized from “very low” to “very high” for each trait. Regarding the PRISM questionnaire, the process was similar. The level of PSRs was calculated based on four components, as detailed earlier in literature review. Each component included several statements rated by participants on a 5-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Each statement received a score, and the average of those scores determined the value of each component. The overall level of the PSR was then calculated as the average of the four component scores. For both questionnaires, scores were assigned based on an even distribution : if the numerical result (of each traits for BFI-10, and of the PSRs level for the PRISM) is less than 1.8, it’s classified as “very low” ; if it falls between 1.8 and 2.6, it’s “low” ; if it’s between 2.6 and 3.4, it’s “neutral” ; if it’s between 3.4 and 4.2, it’s “high” ; if it’s 4.2 or above, it’s “very high”.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendice 3: Coding tree used for the qualitative analysis.



## Chapter 4 : Results

The following chapter presents a detailed analysis of the results obtained through both the interviews and short questionnaires.

### **4.1. Interview analysis**

#### **4.1.1. Respondents' knowledge and perception on SMIs**

All interviews started with the same question aiming to not only see the knowledge of consumers on what an influencer is and do but also to understand the perception of participants on influencers' purpose and goal. When asked about their own definition of influencers, different definitions of influencers based on their primary function on social media have emerged from data.

First, some respondents highlighted influencers' role as being content creators above all, meaning that their primary function is to create content on social media. This content, seen as their primary *raison d'être*, can then be used to build and engage with a community on one hand, and to generate money by using their content to leverage brand collaborations on the other hand. Then, other defined influencers as individuals who hold a certain visibility and influence on audiences on social media. Participant 12 specified that this visibility would allow influencers to build a community afterwards. Finally, three respondents considered influencers as individuals who promote brands on social media. Respondent 6 defined an influencer by two aspects being having an online community and being supported by brands, while respondents 7 and 9 only highlighted the aspect of promoting brands on social media.

*"For me, an influencer is someone who creates video on social media and sometimes on Youtube."*  
-Respondent 2

*"For me, an influencer is, as the name suggests, someone who influences, whether in a good or bad way."* – Respondent 10

*"For me, an influencer is someone who has a certain visibility on social media and manages to gather a community."* – Respondent 12

*"For me, an influencer is someone who advertises certain brands by doing product placement. That's how they get paid. It also allows them to create content on their page and build a community."* - Respondent 9

*"For me an influencer is someone whose job is to represent brand only via social media."* - Respondent 7

Based on this analysis, three main categories can be identified in how influencers are defined, namely:

- influencers seen as content creators, creating content on social media in order to gather a community, seeing money as a consequence rather than a primary goal,
- influencers seen as visible individuals on social media, recognizing influencers by the influence they have on an audience,
- influencers seen as individuals who aim to make money on social media above all by promoting brands, seeing content creation as a tool to leverage money.



These categories are not entirely mutually exclusive: some respondents incorporate multiple dimensions in their definitions, such as linking content creation and brand promotion. However, this structure helps to clarify the main trends in how the interviewees perceive influencers.

*"I'd say it's someone who is active on a platform, a social network, and who creates content that can take different forms, often targeted at a specific type of audience. And thanks to that, let's say through these platforms, they can showcase products or other things and get paid for it. The products they present are also tailored to the kind of audience they address, in order to make money." -Respondent 11.*

### Perceived purpose

The perceived purpose of influencers can be divided into five categories which are not entirely mutually exclusive. The first category highlighted by four respondents involves the first goal of influencers as being entertainment above all, placing money as a consequence of success but not a *raison d'être*. Respondent 12 also added the aim to inspire in addition to entertain. On the contrary, three participants clearly stated that they were considering making money as the *raison d'être* of influencers. Then, three respondents considered influencers' primary purpose as creating content above all, allowing them to grow a community as well as to be noticed by brands in order to make money out of content. Moreover, according to respondent 8, the main goal of influencers is to make their audience discover new things. Finally, respondent 9 viewed the role of influencers as being solely focused on promotion and advertising.

*"I'd say it's mainly entertainment, above all. Money is more of an end goal, but not really the purpose. I think for many, it's first and foremost about creating entertainment or sharing things they genuinely like." -Respondent 11*

*"I think they mostly aim to make money, thanks to their content, but the primary goal is to make money." -Respondent 3*

*"I think their main purpose is to produce and create content. And, if it works, they can generate money out of it. But there is influencers who do not generate money yet but are still followed by people and create content." -Respondent 5*

### Distinction between influencer's types

When asked about their understanding of influencers, some participants made distinctions by categorizing them in ways that differ from the follower-based classifications presented in the literature review. Upon analysis, three main distinctions have emerged regarding influencers.

Firstly, a few respondents made the distinction between content creators who have emerged on Youtube and who they consider as making more complex content, content creators who have emerged on Tiktok and who they consider as small creators, and influencers who have emerged in reality-shows and who they consider more influencers than content creators. Next, one participant also made a distinction between "good" and "bad" influencers as in the way that some influencers hold a "bad" influence because they promote harmful or unethical products. Finally, one other respondent highlighted the difference between influencers as understood in literature such as people who were unknown before social media, and individuals who are known for their work or artistry

outside social media and showcase their skills by creating content on social media, using these platforms as communication tools.

*“But, for me they are different than content creators who create content. Like there are content creators such as Gaelle Garcia Diza, who does videos on Youtube and create valuable content really. Then there are “tiktokeurs”, who make mostly videos on Tiktok. So it’s short content, not really valuable. Then there are reality show’s influencers, they can also create content like anyone else on social media platforms, but they are known because of tv shows. But we still call them influencers. And this type of influencers, those who come from reality tv, in my opinion they don’t have any value, they are just talking trash, they don’t make any interesting content, they have nothing to say.” -Respondent 7*

*“I think there are influencers who influence in a good way and other in a bad way. There are plenty of influencers who, I think, have a negative influence. We always tend to believe it’s in a good way, but that’s not always the case. For example, those who promote a lot of cosmetic surgery or who talk about a specific surgeon or clinic that does injections even though it’s dangerous. Stuff like that, you know, offering promotional codes for dangerous things or scams. It’s a minority, but they do exist.” -Respondent 10*

*“When it comes to fashion content, I’m not sure it really counts as influence because it’s often people who are already well-known in the industry talking about their profession.”-Respondent 9*

#### 4.1.2. Consumers’ habits with influencers

##### General habits

After understanding consumers’ perceptions and knowledge on social media influencers, it was time to understand their habits with influencers, such as their favorite category of SMIs in terms of area of expertise, the platforms used to follow SMIs, their interactions with SMIs and finally to delve into a more specific part regarding their favorite influencer and their appreciated characteristics.

Regarding SMIs categories in terms of area of expertise, lifestyle influencers was the most cited category when asked what category of influencers respondents were following. Beauty and skincare influencers were cited by five respondents just like humor or comedy influencers. These categories simply align with respondents’ personal interests, conforming to scientific literature cited earlier which showcased similarity as a precursory of PSRs as individuals are more likely to feel a connection to an influencer who seems to share similar interests, identity and lifestyle (Chu, 2023; Pimienta, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021).

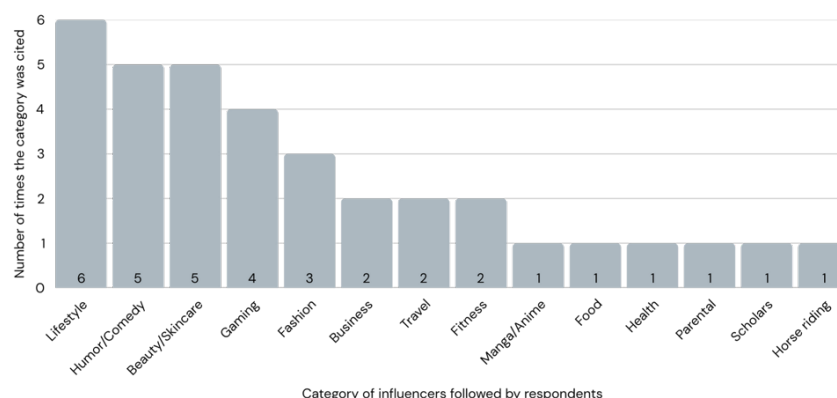


Figure 3 : Categories of influencers followed by respondents (own image).

Secondly, when analyzing the platforms used to follow influencers, the most cited ones were Instagram, Tiktok and Youtube. On Instagram, users can share different types of content, including photos, videos, and stories. Stories are temporary posts that disappear after 24 hours unless they are added to profile highlights, where they can remain visible indefinitely, just like regular posts. Instagram encourages aspirational content and lifestyle admiration, creating a propitious place for individuals to look up to others, such as to lifestyle influencers (Lou et al., 2023). In this way, it is not surprising that Instagram is the most cited social media platforms when asking respondents where they follow influencers, knowing that lifestyle influencers were the most cited category.

A second platform, Tiktok, which was brought out nine times by participants, is primarily oriented towards entertainment, offering rich and engaging content formats (Haenlein et al., 2020). These formats however differ slightly from Instagram, as Instagram is originally based on photos while vidéos, especially short ones, are at the root of Tiktok. Although both platforms now include photos and vidéos as content types, their original formats have impacted the culture on each platforms, creating different culture and digital environments. In addition, the combination of content formats on Tiktok as well as the boost experienced by the platform during Covid-19, has created a place for a mix of authentic, staged, or spontaneous content, making it a propitious place for all influencers' category (Haenlein et al., 2020). Regarding Tiktok's operating, the platforms is based on two pages, "For you" including videos from non-followed users and "Following" including videos from followed users, both working based on algorithm (Haenlein et al., 2020). As a content on Tiktok is promoted via artificial intelligence algorithms, TikTok users are frequently exposed to content from people they don't know and don't follow, including influencers. This means that users can enjoy, engage with, and even be influenced by creators they may never actually follow, making TikTok a space where influence can happen beyond traditional follower relationships. During the interviews some respondents have, at some point, highlighted the fact that they can appreciate content from influencers they do not follow and thus, be influenced by them as well. One explained that she might appreciate and even follow recommendations from influencers she does not follow on social media, but whose content appear on her feed when scrolling content.

*"Also, sometimes I see influencers, ones I don't even follow, talk about stuff on Snapchat, TikTok, or Instagram, and if I find it interesting, I might end up buying the product." -Respondent 11*

*"Instagram, tiktok and youtube. But I don't necessarily follow every influencer that I like. I might see their content on my feed like on Tiktok but still not following them. Yet I can still enoy their content and maybe like their personality." -Respondent 2*

Then, Youtube, such as Tiktok, works as an entertainment hub. However, unlike Tiktok, Youtube is better at foster parasocial relationships with content creators as the platform's format encourages higher engagement and longer viewing durations, which can lead to a deeper and more lasting influence (Haenlein et al., 2020; Lou et al., 2023). Youtube is particularly effective for content like reviews, tutorials, and narrative-driven endorsements (Lou et al., 2023). Later in our analysis, we will see that when asked about their favorite influencer, respondents mostly talked about individuals who started on Youtube with long format videos, which aligns with the statement that this platform can be at the origin of deeper PSRs than Instagram or Tiktok.

Next, Twitch, a live streaming video platform, was mentioned by two respondents, one of them highlighting the platform as a platform used to only follow one content creator. This indicates a real interest in seeing this influencer's content on each platform he is active on. Snapchat and Facebook were also mentioned respectively twice and once by participants.

*"TikTok, Instagram, YouTube. I have Twitch, but I only use it for Squeezie." -Respondent 11*

After getting information on preferences about influencers' category and used platforms, participants have emphasized their habits when interacting with influencers. Most participants only like influencers' content on social media, whether because they truly enjoy the content or out of a reflex of liking posts on social media. Indeed, respondent 1 highlighted the fact that he usually reacts to influencers' post as a reflex just like he does when he sees a friend's post, by liking the content or by replying to the story with an emoji. When replying to a story on Instagram, the reaction comes into the direct message section (DMs) and allow users to start a personal conversation with the influencer. In his case, respondent 1 explained that even if the influencer saw the story's reaction, he did not reply. This non-mutual behavior can lead to diminish or erase interactions with influencers. Indeed, respondent 10 said that she stopped sending DMs to influencers because they did not reply. Also, the same participant brought out the search of information for a product's reference as the main reason to DM an influencer. Moreover, one said that she never sends message to influencers, reacts to stories, or comments posts because she does not want them to put her name and profile in their stories by sharing the reaction publicly. Indeed, some influencers, whether it is to thank their community or to answer a common question, sometimes post followers' reaction in their stories without blurring their profile. These experiences might suggest that although followers seek for reciprocity, they might want this reciprocity to stay private and not publicly showcased.

*"On social media directly, maybe once, like out of reflex, like when I see a friend's story, I'll just react with a smiley. I've done that once, but nothing more. He saw it, but didn't respond." -Respondent 1*

*"A DM for asking for info, like a link or reference for a fashion item or something. I don't think I ever got a reply, so I stopped" -Respondent 10*

As for the comments section, most participants find it weird or irrelevant to comment influencers' posts. One participant emphasized that the only case she would comment would be for a giveaway. One also said that she only comments on content from influencers she knows personally, whether through social media or through real-life, as a way to support their journey as content creators. One also stated that she never reacts in any ways because she did not see the interest in doing so, saying that she was only following influencers for the entertainment of their content.

*"The influencers I do comment on or talk to are mostly smaller creators on TikTok, people I've already talked to or met outside social media, they're basically friends, and I support them on TikTok. It's more mutual." – Respondent 11*

*"Never because I don't have any energy to give to these people actually. I don't feel the interest to interact with them, they don't matter to my life, they just entertain me with their content." - Respondent 7*

### Focus on specific influencers

Respondents were then asked to name influencers they appreciate and explain why. Twelve influencers were mentioned, seven of whom started on YouTube. Among them, two were cited multiple times: Squeezie (mentioned four times) and Gaëlle Garcia Diaz (twice). Squeezie is the most followed French YouTuber with 19.5 million subscribers. He started with gaming content and now creates long-format videos in diverse categories. Gaëlle Garcia Diaz launched her humorous beauty-focused YouTube channel and later created her own makeup brand, Martine Cosmetics.

Other respondents have talked about other influencers including :

- Léna Situations : Lifestyle vlogs and fashion, first French content creator invited to the MET Gala (2024) and first woman creator on Forbes France cover (2025).

- Océane Amsler : Beauty and lifestyle on YouTube, now also on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch.
- Stéphanie Andrea : American fashion influencer active on YouTube.
- Yanissa : DIY and motivational content, now shares family-oriented posts across platforms.
- Fleur De Force : British influencer known for honest reviews, cooking tips, and beauty content.
- Kinda : Known on Snapchat and Twitch, shares lifestyle and gaming content.
- Luxleseul : TikTok comedian.
- Shayna Heriquet : Known for relatable and humorous content, also hosts a podcast.
- Julie Bourges (Douze Fevrier) : Burn survivor who promotes body positivity and shares her recovering journey.
- Withaxie : Travel and hiking creator, known for scenic content on TikTok and Instagram.

Most participants appreciated their favorite influencers for their humor and entertainment value. Some participants underlined that they were interested in the offered content in addition as being entertained. Two participants have also said that they like the fact that the influencer gives them tips on a specific subject of interest such as food or travels. Moreover, four participants highlighted authenticity as an appreciated characteristics saying that they liked that the influencer would stay true to himself in any way and showcase natural and un-biased reactions. In addition, one participant has underlined that she liked influencers who were showcasing inspirational message and motivational journey such as Léna Situations and Julie Bourges. In the same way, personal identity seems to be an important variable in the liking of an influencer as many participants have mentioned not only authenticity and personal journey but also influencer's personality and mindset. Furthermore, one interviewee added that she appreciated Squeezie because it felt like she has grown along with him, since she was following his content and his journey since 2013. In this way, this participant might like this particular influencer because she has been used to him and his content. As she likes his content and keeps consuming it, she has fostered a PSR with him, driving a feeling of attachment. Moreover, one respondent has emphasized the fact that he likes Kinda because he actually reminds him of a friend of his, showcasing one again that similarity plays a role in forming PSRs on social media.

In conclusion, most participants described entertainment, interest, and inspiration as reasons to appreciate on influencer. They also emphasized authenticity as an important aspect of character. Some have also been following one specific influencer for years or stated that one influencer reminded them of a friend, which create attachment. This suggests that familiarity and similarity also play a key role in creating PSRs.

*"Squeezie. I've been following him for a really long time. [...] And I like him because it's like growing up with someone; you get attached. I also like how his content has evolved over the years, how he's managed to keep creating innovative and different ideas. Plus, he offers different types of content at the same time. [...] story videos, games, pure gaming content on Twitch, and his other YouTube channels. Personality-wise, he's funny. His content helps you forget your problems for a bit, helps you escape. It's funny, but also interesting. [...] I feel entertained and have a good time."*

*-Respondent 11*

*"Kinda, for his authenticity and his laugh. He actually reminds me of a friend." – Respondent 1*

*"I like Yanissa because she has a natural aspect like she is true to herself, authentic."*

*– Respondent 8*

*"Julie Bourges [...]she's a fire survivor. Her whole content, her life philosophy, really inspires me. [...]. She warns people about things, and I think that's great for young people because she hit rock bottom and still managed to come out of it. So really, it's the message behind it. People who've made it through hard times show you there's always hope in life." -Respondent 10*

#### Past experiences with influencers' recommendations

The recommendations emitted by influencers and followed by respondents vary in nature. For this part, respondents were asked to recall a recommendation from an influencer that they had followed, whether it was a product, a service, advice, an opinion, or anything else that an influencer might have encouraged them to follow. During interviews, I noticed that most of the participants were either directly tempted to say that they have never bought something from an influencer or immediately thought about something they could have bought from an influencer. However, as seen in the introduction of this thesis, influencers can influence not only product and service consumption, but also lifestyles, behaviors, beliefs, and other things that cannot be bought (Ki et al., 2020; Kutz et al., 2024). In this way, it is interesting to see that participants were not necessarily aware that they might have been influenced by something else than buying a product. Moreover, some participants were so quick to claim they had never bought anything recommended by an influencer that it almost felt like admitting otherwise would be embarrassing, as if being influenced, especially when it comes to a product, was something to be ashamed of. Yet, they may not realize they could have been influenced in more subtle ways, beyond just purchasing a product.

As for the rest, most mentioned recommendations about beauty and skincare products. Other recommendations include fashion tips, diet programs, restaurants, wellness spots, digital services subscriptions, and sportive activities. In addition, one participant had already purchased an e-book containing a list of professional suppliers across various fields such as fashion and decoration, because as a consultant, he needed that information for his work. Furthermore, as mentioned beforehand, some participants also underlined the fact that they can also follow a recommendation from an influencer that they do not follow if they find the recommendation interesting. As for the recommendation given by a specific influencer, respondent 7 cited Gaelle Garcia Diaz's brand, as she once purchased her makeup products line. Also, two respondents subscribed to NordVPN after seeing it promoted by Squeezie. Overall, respondents were satisfied with these recommendations, except for respondent 4, for whom the diet program was not very successful.

Interestingly, one respondent has cited that she had purchased a skincare product not after one specific influencer talked about it but because she saw several influencers, that she was following or not, talking about this product and then she saw sponsored content from the brand on social media. In this case, the awareness of the product was established by “a girl” who was talking about the product on social media. Then, the respondent’s interest increased thanks to the several influencers and sponsored content, leading her to consider buying the product and also potentially causing her to buy it by converting her awareness to purchase action. This situation is interesting as it highlights influencer marketing as a leverage for the mere exposure effect. This effect is a psychological phenomenon where repeated exposure to a stimulus, such as a product, a dance, or a song, increases a person’s liking for it (Bornstein & Craver-Lemley, 2022). In this way, the more consumers will see influencers talk about a product, the more they will be tempted to like the product.

*“I have already followed tips regarding beauty products like a lash serum, which was good because the product worked. I also followed a health recommendation with a diet program subscription, but it did not work that much.” -Respondent 4*

*“I already bought some beauty products [...] I bought Gaëlle Garcia Diaz’s makeup products when she launched her brand which is cruelty free and good for the skin.” -Respondent 7*

*“The first thing that comes to mind is the brand Typology, a skincare brand. I started buying because I saw a girl sharing it. Then I kept seeing influencers talk about it everywhere, even ads on Instagram. So, in the end, it was Instagram that made me buy it the first time, with the pressure.” -Respondent 10*

*“Because I know it’s marketing. And when several influencers are all promoting the same thing, it just feels less authentic and more commercial. So I’m not especially interested in buying it. I feel like there’s nothing genuine about it.” -Respondent 9*

*“No, not really. I never felt the need to do so. I don’t try to be commercially influenced; I try to form my own opinion about products.” -Respondent 6*

However, one participant mentioned that she avoids following influencers’ recommendations because when many influencers promote the same products, it feels inauthentic and overly commercial to her. In this way, it can be understood that leveraging influencer marketing to create mere exposure effect can also lead to a decrease of trust in influencers’ recommendations due to diminished perception of authenticity, if the strategy is seen as too commercial or unmatched with the chosen influencer. Generally speaking, respondents gave three main reasons for not following influencers’ recommendations such as a lack of interest, a distrust of influencers’ claims due to a perceived commercial aspect, and a conscious effort to avoid being influenced.

#### Impacts on respondents’ perception of influencers

For respondents whose experience was satisfying, perception on influencers either stayed the same or changed in a way that made them more cautious. On one hand, in the case where the perception did not change, some participant stated that they still take precautions with influencers’ claims, specifying that even if they are more likely to trust influencers they have been following for a certain time, they will still check other sources of information and compare different options, as they are used to do. Another satisfied participant only mentioned the efficacy of her purchased product, without saying if her perception has changed or not. On the other hand, one respondent explained that he realized how he had been influenced, and even though he was satisfied with the outcome, he no longer wanted to be influenced in the future.

As for the negative experiences' outcomes, one respondent has experienced a deception regarding a recommendation and decided to seek for additional information on endorsed products, saying that influencers were promoting *"only for money"*. Furthermore, one stated that after seeing repeated misbehaviors among influencers she started to see some of them more often as being *"scammers"* not worthy of trust. Yet, she specified that she still trusts some influencer depending on who they are.

*"I still stay cautious. If I know the influencer and have been following them for a while, I'm more likely to trust them. But I always check reviews and compare options."* – Respondent 12

*"I still use it, and it's been pretty useful, especially when you travel, so you can access your usual stuff from anywhere. It's also helpful for browsing certain websites where you want to change regions to see different content."* – Respondent 11

*"But afterwards, I told myself never again, because I started to see how people get influenced into buying."* – Respondent 1

*"I started to be more careful with influencers' recommendations and I learned to check consumers' opinions before purchasing. Because influencers promote only for money but it does not guarantee that the product will be good."* – Respondent 14

In conclusion, several respondents reported growing skepticism towards influencer recommendations, especially after negative experiences or witnessing misleading promotions. While trust remained stronger for influencers they had followed for a long time, most still preferred to verify information independently. Some individuals remained neutral, with their perception of influencers unchanged regardless of their experience's outcome. However, disappointments often led to a more cautious approach. Additionally, concerns about increasing commercialization made some respondents question the authenticity of influencer content.

#### 4.1.3. Emotional and psychological factors underlying parasocial relationships

This section explores more deeply the emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs as revealed through the interviews, not only thanks to pre-established questions from the interview guide but also by means of the discussions with participants who, at some point, have highlighted by themselves some aspects relevant to the first part of our research question.

##### Emotions regarding favorite influencer

When asking what emotions respondents feel while consuming their favorite influencer's content, most of them said they feel entertained as opposed to being bored. Some also added that they feel amused as the content is quite funny. Two respondents also added that they feel happy when watching their favorite influencer's content. These respondents mostly consume lifestyle and humor content. Moreover, one described that although he does not necessarily feel joy or expectation regarding one influencer's content, when navigating on social media, he still chooses to watch Kinda's content as it makes him laugh.

In addition, one said that even if the content is entertaining, she is mostly motivated by the content she consumes, as she looks up to influencers who share inspirational content and whose journey is admired by their audience. Feeling motivated is not considered as an emotion in itself in theoretical models such as Parrott's emotion model or Plutchik's model (Parrott, 2001; Plutchik &



Kellerman, 2013). However, we can consider motivation as conceptually related to anticipatory feelings associated with goal-directed behavior and positive expectations. Next, one described herself as relaxed when watching likeable content. One other said that she was feeling reassured when she consumes educational content as she succeeds to understand things that she had trouble with. Finally, over the interviews, some respondents specified that they were watching some content because of the interest they felt for it. Overall these emotions, as classify in the Parrot's emotion model mentioned in the literature review, are quite positive (Parrott, 2001). However, one respondent has mentioned a negative emotion. Indeed, she explained that she felt envious of the influencer as she would like to be at her place. This statement could also be taking into account for the negative sides of PSRs, as envy is a complex emotion ensued from anger and can be specify more deeply into jealousy (Parrott, 2001).

*"It's funny, but also interesting, when I watch his stuff, I feel entertained and have a good time." - Respondent 11*

*"I don't particularly feel joy or like I've been waiting all my life for his content. If I'm scrolling through social media, I choose Kinda because he makes me laugh, he entertains me" -Respondent 1*

*"I feel reassured because it helps me understand things I didn't know." -Respondent 5*

*"When I look her content I feel envy like I would like to be at her place." – Respondent 3*

In conclusion, emotions felt by participants while watching content from their favorite influencer include: amusement, entertainment, happiness, feeling good, feel relaxed, feel reassured, envy, motivation, and interest. Most of these emotions are positive, as they drive a feeling of joy whether due to being happy or entertained, or because of interesting content. It can be understood that these emotional states can reinforce PSRs by linking one influencer to positive feelings. However, "envy" can be seen as a negative emotion in a sense that it might create jealousy.

#### Psychological mechanisms underlying

During interviews, some respondents gave information regarding the potential psychological mechanisms underlying their PSR, independently of the interview guide. Among these mechanisms, most respondents indicated that they were consuming certain content because it was interesting to them. Interest, as seen in the previous section, is often characterized as an emotion. However, some studies have explored interest as both an emotional and psychological aspect. Indeed, in his book *"Exploring the Psychology of Interest"*, Silvia (2006) attempts to consider interest as a component of personality. Accordingly, some individuals may be naturally more curious, open to novelty, and motivated to explore, making them more likely to form deep connections or engage intensely in experiences, including PSRs.

Next, some emphasized friendliness and sense of friendship as a reason why they follow a specific influencer. Indeed, one said he liked one influencer because he reminded him of a friend of his, which underlines not only a sense of friendship but also similarity as he views the influencer as friendly because he shares similar features with interviewee's actual friend. In addition, one explained that she likes one influencer because an attachment bond was built through long-time following. In this way, she felt like she had grown along with the influencer, showcasing a sense of proximity. Finally, some also pointed out the fact that influencer's content was helping them to escape problem and create a sense of evasion.

*"I really like her content and it interests me, this is why I'm watching her." -Respondent 7*

*"He actually reminds me of a friend" -Respondent 1*

*"I like him because it's like growing up with someone; you get attached. I've grown attached to the image we have of him." -Respondent 11*

*"It helps me disconnect from my problems and have a laugh." -Respondent 12*

Furthermore, during interviews, participants were asked to indicate at what point in their lives they started to follow influencers. This aspect might be interesting to see in order to understand if a specific life-situation could have led individuals to form PSRs. According to literature, individuals create PSRs with media figures throughout any stages of their life (Pimienta, 2023). This statement also verified itself with our generated data, as participants mentioned that they started to follow influencers either during their teenage years, childhood or adulthood. Indeed, most interviewees shared that they started to follow influencers on social media when they started to use these platforms during their teenage years. One participant mentioned that she began following influencers as a child, starting to use social media at the age of twelve. Others specified that they started more recently: one explained that active social media use began due to work-related reasons, which led to following influencers, while another started during a home renovation project to find tips online. This last case emphasizes the seek for similarity, as she started to follow Gaelle Garcia Diaz because she was renovating her house at the same time as her.

*"I started to watch her content when I renovated my house because she did the same to hers at the same time and she was sharing tips." -Respondent 7*

*"I started to follow influencers when I was a kid and also now I continue to follow new influencers." -Respondent 5*

Overall, this section provides some track on psychological mechanisms underlying PSR. Among them, the feeling of friendship has been raised and aligns with scientific literature's statement. Additionally, proximity and similarity were also showcased as precursors giving that some interviewees started to build PSRs because of similar interests/situations or due to sense of proximity. Similarity was also expressed in a way that foster identification mechanisms with the influencer. Moreover, the willing to escape real-life situations has also been mentioned by participants.

#### 4.1.4. Negative implications of parasocial relationships

This section focuses on the second part of the research question which encompasses the negative impacts of PSRs on individuals. It first starts with interviewee's personal experiences that have led them to be negatively impacted on an emotional and/or psychological aspect. Then, participants were asked to put themselves in imaginative scenarios aiming, in a first place, to understand what they could feel in a specific situation, and in a second place, which situation could lead them to make them feel negative emotions. Then, a general opinion question was asked to conclude the interview. The purpose of this final question was to gather participants' perspectives on the potential negative effects of having a strong PSR.

### Personal experiences

In this section, respondents shared two types of experiences that have impacted them on a personal level: personal experiences lived in their personal life, and experiences they have witnessed but that were lived by other individuals. From these experiences, the following emotions can be emphasized: disgust, anger, discomfort, disappointment, loss of interest, loss of self-confidence.

First, four respondents have mentioned feeling disgusted or angry in specific situations. The first one shared his thoughts about *“empty culture”*, which he defined as situations where influencers are staging fake scenarios or creating content with no real value underneath. He explained that this type of content, being neither constructive nor beneficial according to him, could negatively impact people's lives by wasting their time and money rather than gaining knowledge or accessing valuable products. This situation also led to a loss of interest from this respondent. This loss of interest was also mentioned by other respondents after considering influencers' content was not delivering any value anymore. One detailed that she did not find one influencer's content valuable anymore as the content appeared too self-centered. Next, one mentioned one influencer revealed on reality shows and who has now started a profession in pornography. This influencer currently uses mainstream platforms like Instagram and TikTok to attract audiences and redirect them towards adult content on sites like OnlyFans. The respondent described this behavior as *“disturbing”* and *“repulsive”*, saying that it makes him feel disgusted. The same respondent cited feeling uncomfortable when influencers create shady content addressing inappropriate subjects. In addition, another interviewee mentioned feeling angry or disappointed in cases where an influencer would have adopted an inappropriate behavior, without specifying the behavior. Moreover, one explained that she felt disgusted after seeing that Gaëlle Garcia Diaz had spent a large amount of money to take care of her dog. In her case, she felt disgusted by the amount of money that the influencer could spend, but her feeling was balanced with the compassion she also felt for the cured dog.

Furthermore, several interviewees mentioned disappointment as a result of personal experiences resulting in situations involving a bad experience with a recommendation, a disagreement with one influencer's claims against respondent's values or one influencer's misbehavior without detailing any further. Also, one specified that although she usually enjoys when influencers argue with each other, she still was annoyed and disappointed when Gaëlle Garcia Diaz had criticized Lena Situation's brand. This bad buzz also impacted one other respondent who mentioned Gaëlle Garcia Diaz's behavior as disappointing and disgusting.

Finally, one addressed a loss of self-confidence as she had felt bad about her body image by repeatedly seeing improved beauty on social media. She also mentioned that seeing successful lifestyles could lead her to feel *“left out with her life”*, meaning that she felt like she was not accomplishing anything in her own life compared to some influencers. Additionally, one respondent reported the story of one of her friends, who was deeply attached to Jeremstar, a French online video creator and former blogger known for his expertise in reality TV. She expressed not only social media addiction and self-comparison as resulting issues but also excessive empathy as respondent's friend experienced such a high level of emotional identification with the influencer that negative events affecting Jeremstar triggered similar emotional responses in him, as if he were personally involved. This experience reveals that emotional dependency on influencer can lead to social media addiction, excessive comparison and excessive identification related with excessive empathy.

At the end, this section helps us understand how negative experiences with influencer can impact individuals on both emotional and psychological level when a PSR has been created. Indeed, individuals described feeling negative emotions such as disgust, anger, disappointment, disinterest, or discomfort towards influencers' behavior as being related to deeper psychological effects such as loss of interest, moral boundaries violation, loss of self-esteem or emotional dependency mechanisms which can lead to social isolation and blurred perception between real and digital interactions as well as excessive identification. Participants reported experiencing these emotional and psychological effects in response to various situations including a perceived decline in content quality and authenticity, the crossing of moral boundaries through sexualized content, influencers' excessive displays of wealth, negative experiences with product recommendations, controversial incidents involving inappropriate behavior toward other individuals, unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards on social media, and excessive emotional identification with influencers. As a result, it can be understood that PSRs might foster frustration, disillusion, and value conflicts, especially when influencers are perceived as being inauthentic. Also, despite illusion of intimacy, PSRs can undermine emotional stability and contribute to decrease in self-worth.

*"I hate when influencers promote "empty culture." It harms people's lives : they make people lose their time, and sometimes money, for empty things without giving any productive things back like knowledge, information or great product. So that disgusts me and makes me angry." -Respondent 1*

*"I stopped following her because [...]. I find it very self-centered, she talks a lot about herself and her life. I feel like she doesn't bring anything valuable anymore." -Respondent 9*

*"It actually happened to one of my friends. At one point, he was constantly watching Jerem Star's stories[...]He'd leave his phone running to catch all the stories. And I think it negatively affected my friend's life, because when something bad happened to Jerem Star, my friend would feel empathetic, as if it had happened to him. He also compared himself to him, to his life. He was living Jerem Star's life through Snapchat. It was really weird." -Respondent 10*

#### Imaginative scenario: How participants would feel if their favorite influencer stopped posting content

Additionally, respondents were asked what they think they would feel if their favorite influencer stopped posting content suddenly. Most participants said they would feel unbothered as it would not impact their life per se. Some added that even if it would not negatively impact their life, they would however get curious and would want to find out the reason of this decision. One specified that she would feel indifferent in most situations but would feel disappointed when it comes to educational content saying that *"it would be a shame"* to stop creating this kind of content. This suggests that in cases where the shared content has a significant perceived added value, stopping this content can lead to indignation. Moreover, two participants mentioned that they could be sad in specific situations. Indeed, one said that he would feel sad if the influence does not explain the reason behind this situation but, at the end, it would not impact his life. In addition, respondent 11 explained that she might feel sad because she had been following the influencer for the longest time. She specified that she would feel abandoned if he deleted all his content but clarified that she would be okay if he simply stopped adding new content.

To summarize, emotions mentioned by participants in the case where their favorite influencer would stop posting content suddenly include, on one hand, weak or neutral emotions such as being unbothered or curiosity and, on the other hand, more intense emotions such as sadness, disappointment, indignation, and abandon. This section suggests that PSRs can result in various intensity of emotions as a reaction to influencer's absence. While some participants remain

unaffected, others expressed deeper emotions, although they stated that these emotions would not last for long in most cases. This indicates that some individuals have created a meaningful attachment bond with one influencer. Overall, this section highlights the emotional investment that can be developed through PSRs and their potential impact when the connection is disrupted or erased.

*"Honestly, I don't really care, but it has happened that I wondered why they hadn't posted in a while and went to check. I get curious. But it doesn't really bother me." -Respondent 10*

*"A little bit disappointed but not for long." -Respondent 6*

*"Indifferent for the most part, but I would find it a shame when it comes to educational content." -Respondent 5*

*"I'd feel sad, because I think he's the person I've followed the longest. But I think he's created enough content for a lifetime, so I wouldn't be devastated. If he deleted everything, though, I'd feel almost abandoned. But if I can still watch the content he's already made, then it's fine." -Respondent 11*

#### Imaginative scenario: What situation could lead participants to feel negative emotions

This section aimed to better understand situations that could lead consumers to be negatively affected. In order to help participants to project themselves into realistic scenarios, this section was divided into three categories of potential influencer actions in terms of: (1) brand collaborations, (2) posted content or public claims, and (3) behavior towards their community. For each category, participants were asked to refine the situation in a way that would negatively affect them and to describe the emotions they would feel.

To begin with, respondents were asked what an influencer that they appreciate could do in terms of brand collaborations that could lead them to feel negatively. In overall, respondents stated that they would feel disappointed, and might unfollow the influencer in some cases: if the promoted brand was not aligned with their core values including partnership with a brand that is unethical or if the influencer collaborates with the government or any political institution.

First, most respondents expressed disappointment in the situation when an appreciated influencer promotes services from unethical brand, or a brand engaged in unethical practices. Several instances were cited by participants such as trading schemes described as a twisted practice by one respondent, scams, dropshipping practices which are seen by respondents as providing bad quality products and comparable to scams, gambling, and fast-fashion products. One respondent emphasized that if her favorite influencer was suddenly promoting scams, trading schemes or dropshipping, she would feel disappointed enough to stop consuming the content, specifying that it would feel out of character on behalf of the influencer in question, as he seems to be careful with his collaborations especially regarding his image and community. In addition, two participants who mentioned fast-fashion as an unethical practice also illustrated their remark naming SHEIN as an unacceptable brand to collaborate with, due to poor working conditions and poor-quality products. Both respondents stipulated that they would unfollow any influencer who collaborates with this brand. Some respondents only stated that they would be disappointed if the promoted brand did not align with their core values, without detailing any further. However, one specified that she would unfollow her favorite influencer if she collaborated with a brand known for racist behavior. Additionally, one rejected political affiliation with the National Rally (RN), citing it as an example of a party they perceive as racist while another stated against any collaboration with the government.

*"If Squeezie started doing dropshipping, trading, or scams—honestly, I'd be disappointed. From what I know, he seems like someone who actually tries to be careful, partly for his image but also because he doesn't want to scam his community. But if he started promoting products that are harmful or really low-quality, I'd be disappointed enough to stop consuming his content." - Respondent 11*

*"What would annoy me is, for example, someone I liked and whose style I appreciated starts promoting fast fashion, like Shein. That really annoys me. In that case, I stop following them because I'm no longer interested in that kind of person." -Respondent 10*

*"If Yanissa collaborates with a racist brand I would unfollowed her and feel disappointed." - Respondent 8*

*"If Squeezie collaborated with a political party like the RN, I would feel disappointed" -Respondent 5*

Then, the second imaginative situation involved influencer's claims or posts as a potential source of negative emotion towards the influencer. For this matter, the most common source of disappointed concerned discriminatory or offensive comments such as racist, sexist, or homophobic remarks. One detailed that she could boycott influencers when facing this kind of scenario. One other clarified that he would only react negatively if he appreciates and respects the influencer, but stated that it would not matter to him if he either did not know or did not like the influencer. Another recurring situation dealt with a loss of interest as a consequence of a loss of authenticity and quality in the influencer's content. For instance, respondent 1 stated that he was slightly consuming less of Kinda's content due to an increased perception of lack of depth in his content, saying that his current content was annoying and lacked interest. In addition, one stated that she would lose interest if her favorite influencer would start to post sexualized content, as it would feel off character and, as a consequence, would not feel authentic. Regarding sexualized content, another participant explained that she had unfollowed one influencer as she started to post content on OnlyFans, a social media platform oriented towards adult content. The respondent said that she was surprised to see this shift in behavior and, thus, disappointed. Moreover, some participants underlined mocking behavior as they would feel disappointment if the influencer was making fun of someone in a post in a hurtful way. In addition, some respondents deplored violent behavior as well as any support towards other individuals or fellow influencer knowing for violent or criminal actions or who had made inappropriate or offensive remarks. On the contrary, some participants expressed a degree of emotional neutrality as they would not be particularly affected on a personal level, especially if they are not attached to the influencer in a general manner.

Again, in this imaginative scenario, the main underlying reason had to do with misalignment with participants' core values, considering discriminatory comments, sexualized content, violent behavior, and mean behavior as going against respondents' principles. In addition, some argue that they would not feel impacted negatively in the cases where they do not respect, look up to, like or know the influencer, stating that they would feel neutral.

*"If he made racist or sexist comments, I'd be disappointed in Squeezie. If it's an influencer I don't follow or like, I wouldn't care." -Respondent 12*

*"I would just stop following them or listening to their recommendations if they do something bad like a crime, or promote value that I don't like, like misogyny or racism." -Respondent 3*

*"If Yanissa posts a pictures in underwear or something sexual I would feel disappointed, because it is not her trueself." -Respondent 8*

Finally, the last scenario included influencer's behavior towards their community. Some respondents mentioned that they would feel disappointed or weird (in the sense of badly surprised) in the case where an appreciated influencer started to misbehave towards their online community, that is to say if they were making fun of, being mean or violent towards their followers. One also qualified this misbehavior as a form of disrespect including insulting individuals and promoting scams or harmful products. Another participant also pointed scams promotion as a source of disappointment. Moreover, some participants pointed out that inappropriate behavior could cause disappointment not towards their followers this time but directed at other individuals such as other content creators. For instance, respondent 2 explained a personal situation where one influencer she liked made fun of another content creator, resulting for the interviewee to a loss of liking towards the first influencer. Also, few respondents underlined the fact they would lose interest if one influencer started to fill his content with arguments or negative messages. In addition, some interviewees underlined the case where their favorite influencer would not speak up about subject that matter to them such as war in foreign countries, injustice or mental health issues, which can be seen as respondents attributing a certain responsibility to influencers towards their community on social and societal issues. Additionally, it's worth noting that for respondent 8, the influencer mentioned, Yanissa, is African descent, like the interviewee. This shared background helps explain why, in this particular case, it would seem out of character and strange if Yanissa didn't speak about the war in Congo, since her community and its concerns clearly matter deeply to her.

*"If they're always negative or constantly starting drama, I'd just lose interest. That kind of energy gets tiring real fast." -Respondent 9*

*"I think if Squeezie started to like disrespect his community it would feel weird because it really does not look like him. By disrespect I mean insulting followers, or even promoting bad products and services that can be harmful to people such as, as I said earlier, scams or stuff like that." -Respondent 11*

*"If an influencer that I respect stays completely silent about serious stuff going on, like mental health or injustice, it makes me wonder what they actually stand for. I would be disappointed and maybe I would not respect or trust them anymore." -Respondent 5*

This section highlights the importance of consistency between an influencer's behavior and their audience's expectations which goes beyond content, highlighting a deeper moral investment that individuals place in influencers. In other words, dissonance between influencer's behavior and audience's value system can lead to emotional distress in the case where a PSR has been built. In a way, it involved that influencers, beyond their role as content creators, carry a certain responsibility toward their audiences not only through their actions and public behavior, but also in terms of broader moral and societal expectations.

### General opinion on potential negative impacts of parasocial relationships

The last question of the interview did not rely on personal experiences per se but rather on participants' opinion regarding the potential negative impacts of PSRs. Although the concept of PSRs was not explicitly defined in the question, it was explained as a strong one-sided bond or connection similar to a sense of friendship towards an influencer. When necessary, the idea was illustrated during interviews by comparing it to the feeling of knowing a movie character or a celebrity, despite the relationship being entirely one-sided, and then applying this analogy to influencers.

First, most participants mentioned that individuals who feel a strong PSR could be comparing their self-image, lifestyle, relationships with others, and life goals excessively with the influencer in question. One explained that this situation could impact more often individuals with predispositions to psychological fragility, as the respondent did not find it a healthy process to compare yourself with others and specified that *"at this point, the person has to get some help"*. Some participants also emphasized the risk for individuals to not be able to define or perceive themselves as they really are due to a willing to become like the influencer either in terms of physique, lifestyle, or real-life relationships, defining this wish as being an obsession at some points. Overall, excessive comparison with self was related by participants to danger for mentally unstable individuals, to a loss of self-conception, and to a risk for developing eating disorders.

Additionally, almost all participants mentioned emotional dependency as a negative implication of PSRs due to a deep emotional attachment to the influencer. Most respondents explained that this emotional dependency based on illusory attachment was due to a perception of a mutual connection with the influencer, saying that some individuals might view this PSR as a real-life friendship while it is not reciprocal. One mentioned that younger people might be more vulnerable to this illusory friendship. Overall, interviewees stated that this emotional dependency could lead to emotional distress and disappointment when individuals realize that the relationship is one-sided. Moreover, two participants emphasized this illusory friendship as a reason for individuals to isolate themselves from the real-world, preferring digital relationships. As a result, emotional dependency can lead to illusory reciprocal connections with the influencer as well as to isolation from the real-world, resulting in returns to emotional distress and disappointment. Moreover, respondents mentioned sadness, frustration, hate, anger, and excessive empathy as emotional impacts.

Furthermore, some participants underlined financial risks as a negative impact due to PSRs. According to respondents, financial distress can affect individuals who feel a deep PSR as they would trust the influencer based on this emotional connection and, ultimately, be more likely to buy recommended products. One emphasized that in some cases, individuals could listen to influencers and follow their claims in order to feel closer to the influencer. Some participants went further regarding the will of certain individuals to follow influencers' recommendations because they trust them or want to feel closer, by stating that some individuals might even copy influencers' behavior. In this case, participants emphasized the danger of mimetics when it comes to imitate inappropriate, offensive or violent behavior.

Finally, one participant interestingly mentioned that PSRs could negatively impact both the follower and the influencer in cases where follower would create an obsession regarding the influencer. That is to say that mentally unstable individuals who believe the connection is mutual could develop intrusive or harmful behavior, such as stalking the influencer and trying to approach the influencer as if they were close friends. In this situation, the boundary between real and digital relationships, one-sided and mutual relationships is blurred and can lead to psychological distress for the follower, which in return may cause unsafe situations for the influencer.



This final section highlights several negative impacts of PSRs on individuals as going beyond simple admiration: these relationships can deeply impact identity, emotional states, financial situations, health behavior, and social behavior. In cases where the PSR is intense, psychological risks can be raised from unrealistic expectations, emotional investment and blurred boundaries between reality and media. In extreme cases of obsessive behavior, PSRs can negatively impact both followers and influencers, leading to unsafe situations.

*“Maybe they’d cut themselves off from the real world and create completely digital, imaginary relationships. So in the end, they’d be living in an illusion. They would mostly feel frustrated. And from that frustration, they could start feeling sadness, hate, anger —whatever. But the first thing they’d feel in their body would be frustration.” -Respondent 1*

*“You’ve got younger individuals who often don’t have the maturity to realize that what they’re seeing is just an image [...] And so, they get very attached to that image without realizing that they don’t truly know this person, that this influencer isn’t their friend or family. There are also people who aren’t mentally stable, who might go as far as trying to meet the influencer, harm them, or imagine that the relationship is mutual when it’s not. [...] This kind of relationship can also impact followers financially. If you trust someone and feel a strong connection, you’re more likely to listen to what they say, buy what they sell, or follow what they recommend. So sometimes, people end up spending way too much just to feel closer to them.” -Respondent 11*

*“Some might compare themselves excessively with influencers regarding their physique, their life, their goals, their relationships. Some might be attached too much to an influencer in a way that they lose all their money for them, they misbehave like them, they forget to think by themselves. Some might also prefer to look influencer’s content all day rather than go out and make friends.” - Respondent 2*

#### 4.2. Questionnaires analysis

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to fill two short questionnaires based on MCQ questions, aiming to understand each respondent’s personality traits and level of PSRs. As explained earlier, personality traits were assessed using the Big Five 10-items questionnaire, where each of the Big Five traits (extraversion, openness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness) was measured through two statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, resulting in a categorized score from “very low” to “very high”. The following table summarize the calculated score for each participant:

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12
<b>Extraversion</b>	High	Low	Very high	Very high	High	Neutral	High	Very low	Low	High	High	High
<b>Agreeableness</b>	High	Low	Low	Very high	High	Low	Low	High	High	High	Neutral	High
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	Low	Very high	High	High	Very high	Neutral	Very high	High	Very high	Very high	Low	Very high
<b>Neuroticism</b>	Very high	Very high	High	Very high	High	Very high	Very low	Very low	High	High	Low	Low
<b>Openness</b>	Very high	Very high	Low	High	High	Low	High	Low	Very high	High	High	Neutral

Figure 4 : Results from BFI-10 questionnaire (own figure).

The second questionnaire evaluated PSRs levels through four components, each measured by several statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale, resulting in a categorized score from “very low” to “very high”. An average score across components gave the participant’s overall PSRs level. All scores are summarized in the following table:

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12
<b>Overall PSR level</b>	Low	Neutral	Very low	Low	Low	High	Very low	High	Low	Low	High	Neutral
<i>Interest in</i>	Low	Neutral	Low	Neutral	Neutral	High	Low	Very high	High	High	High	High
<i>Knowledge of</i>	Neutral	Neutral	Very low	Very low	Very low	High	Very low	Neutral	Low	Neutral	High	Neutral
<i>Identification with</i>	Very low	Neutral	Very low	Very low	Neutral	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	High	High
<i>Interactions with</i>	Low	Low	Low	Very low	Low	High	Very low	High	Low	Very low	High	Low

Figure 5 : Results from PRISM questionnaire (own figure).

The results from these two questionnaires can be cross analyzed in order to explore potential patterns between personality traits, as defined in the Big Five theory and assessed with the first questionnaire, and the level of parasocial relationships as defined in the PRISM questionnaire. By doing so, we notice that there is no strong or consistent pattern between specific personality traits' scores and PSRs levels across the dataset. However, a general tendency still appears from the dataset as most respondents with "high" or "very high" scores in personality traits showcase "low" or "very low" PSRs level. For instance, individuals with high levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, or neuroticism more frequently appear to have "low" level of PSR. However, this pattern is not consistent enough across all traits or participants to be considered conclusive nor to confirm a strong predictive link between personality traits and PSRs.

		Very low PSR	Low PSR	Neutral PSR	High PSR
Extraversion	Very low				R8
	Low		R9		
	Neutral	R7	R1,R5,R10	R2	R6
	High	R3	R4	R12	R11
Agreeableness	Very low				
	Low				
	Neutral	R2, R7		R2	R6
	High		R1, R5, R9, R10	R12	R11
	Very high		R4		R8
Conscientiousness	Very low				
	Low		R1		
	Neutral				R11
	High	R3	R4		R6
	Very high	R7	R5,R9,R10	R2,R12	R8
Neuroticism	Very low	R7			
	Low				R8
	Neutral			R12	R11
	High	R3	R5,R9,R10		
	Very high		R1,R4	R2	R2
Openness	Very low				
	Low	R3			
	Neutral				R6,R8
	High	R7	R4,R5,R10	R12	
	Very high		R1,R9	R2	R11

Figure 6 : Cross examination of Big Five traits and PSRs levels (own figure).

This observation may be partially explained by the fact that 63% of the scores from the Big Five questionnaire fall into the "high" or "very high" categories, while 58% of the overall PSRs scores are categorized as "low" or "very low", with only three participants showcasing "high" level of PSRs. This imbalance suggests that the distributions of high and low scores across the two questionnaires are not symmetrical, which might influence the observed inverse relationship. Additionally, the small size of

the samples implies that individual differences can easily mask or distort potential patterns, making it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the impact of personality traits on PSRs levels. These findings could suggest that personality traits might not be a predictor of PSRs, while emotions and psychological mechanisms play a crucial role in the creation of such relationships, as demonstrated by the results generated from the interviews dataset earlier. From this conclusion, we can understand that perhaps influencers' personality and characteristics are more decisive than followers' personality traits, as some influencers are able to leverage emotional and psychological mechanisms in their audiences thanks to their personal characteristics.

#### **4.3. Key takeaways**

In conclusion, the analysis of the data collected through this study provides us key elements to answer our research question "What emotional and psychological factors lead consumers to form parasocial relationships with influencers, and what are the negative implications?", as our analysis has underlined emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs in a first place and has emphasized potential negative implications of such relationships on individuals in a second place. The following presents a summary of the answers to our research question, preceded by relevant contextual insights into influencer marketing from the respondents' perspectives.

##### **General remarks on influencers:**

- Influencers are mostly seen as content creators who entertain, inspire, and build community, with money appearing as a consequence of influencer. However, some still perceive influencers as money chasers above all.
- Consumers distinguish between different types of influencers not based on their follower count, but rather on factors such as the origin of visibility and content value (*YouTube, TikTok, or reality TV*), the perceived ethics of their influence, and whether they use social media as their primary job or as a way to showcase their real profession, like celebrities or artists.
- Repeated schemes in influencers' misbehavior led consumers to be more cautious regarding influencers' recommendations in a general manner.
- Consumers can enjoy, engage with, and be influenced by influencers they do not follow thanks to social platforms' algorithms such as on TikTok.
- Some individuals may not be fully aware of if and how they've been influenced, especially in more subtle ways beyond product purchases, while others might feel embarrassed to admit following or being influenced by an influencer. This can reflect a sense of embarrassment or reluctance to be associated publicly with influencers.
- Influencer marketing can be used to create mere exposure effect but might create the opposite effect if seen as too commercial based on the number of collaborations and alignment with influencer's persona.

### **Psychological mechanisms and emotions as precursors of PSRs:**

- Interest, which can be seen as both an emotional state and psychological trait, is one of the main precursors of PSRs as consumers start to consume one influencer's content because they consider it interesting, making of interest one of the first step to start a PSR, which is then increased by other psychological and emotional factors mentioned hereinafter.
- Authenticity in influencers' behavior, claims, and content is an appreciated characteristics among consumers, making them more likely to trust authentic influencers.
- Similarity, proximity and familiarity as mechanisms can explain the attachment to an influencer, as consumers emphasized building emotional bond with influencer because they share similar interests or life-situations, due to long-time content consumption enhancing a sense of "growing together", and as influencers reminds consumers of actual real-life friends. These mechanisms also lever identification processes, making consumers relate to influencers.
- Friendship has emerged as an underlying mechanism of PSRs not only because some influencers reminded respondents of real-life friends, but also because some support small content creators on social media as they have built a reciprocal friendship whether online or in real-life.
- The more consumers are familiar with an influencer, the more they will be likely to trust them, suggesting that familiarity increases trust by fostering PSRs. However, high trust does not prevent consumers to find other source of information when it comes to recommendations.
- Inspiration through motivational content can also foster PSRs creation.
- The need and desire for entertainment can also push consumers to form PSRs with influencers. Some only wants to be entertain and to have a good time, while others see entertaining content as a way to escape real-life problems.
- On an emotional level, emotions fostering PSRs are mainly positive including feeling happy, entertained, amused, relaxed, reassured, motivated, or interested. However, some negative emotion might also step in PSRs creation such as envy which is rooted in a mix of jealousy and admiration for the influencer.

### **Negative implications of PSRs on individuals:**

- Negative implications of PSRs include excessive comparison with self (*sometimes leading to eating disorders behaviors*), financial risks, misbehavior mimicry, and emotional dependency leading to social media addiction, real-world isolation, excessive identification and empathy, and emotional distress. These negative effects can occur in several situations including decline in content quality and/or authenticity, influencer's excessive displays of wealth, negative experiences with product recommendations, controversial behavior towards others, or exposition to unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards. Situations involving crossing of moral boundaries can also occur due to a shift in influencer's behavior, claim or content in a way that do not align with follower's core system of value. As a result, individuals might feel disgust, anger, hate, disappointment, disinterest, discomfort, loss of self-esteem, sadness, and frustration.
- Consumers might feel either curiosity, disappointment, sadness, indignation, or abandon, if favorite influencer, or influencer producing perceived valuable content, stopped posing content suddenly. This suggest that consumers might feel emotional distress when the one-sided connection is disrupted.
- Dissonance between influencer's behavior, claims, or affiliations, and consumers' social and ethical value system can lead to emotional distress in cases where consumers were emotionally attached to influencers through PSRs.
- PSRs might impact both influencer and follower in extreme cases when follower believe that the one-side connection is reciprocal and want to get closer to the influencer, producing obsessional behaviors, intrusion, and unsafe situations.



## Chapter 5 : Discussion

This chapter aims to put in parallel the results gathered through this qualitative study with insights from the literature review. The following discussions encompasses the emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs, as well as the potential negative implications of such relationships.

### **5.1. Emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying parasocial relationships**

Firstly, this study's results have highlighted several psychological mechanisms building PSRs, starting with authenticity as being an appreciated characteristics of influencers fostering PSRs as consumers develop emotional bond with influencers who they perceive as being authentic. This aligns with literature, as it was exposed that consumers are more likely to perceive an influencer as a friend and reinforcing emotional attachment when the influencer seems to be authentic. (Chu, 2023; Su et al., 2021). Also, influencers showcasing authenticity in their promotional content are more likely to foster and maintain PSRs compared with influencers who appear too promotional, which was also showcased in this study as most participants showcased a loss on interest and/or a loss of trust when influencers appeared too commercial (Vrontis et al., 2021). Moreover, some studies argue that authenticity foster emotional bonds and PSRs not on itself but also because influencers are able to showcase similarity with their audiences, whether this similarity resides in interests, identity or lifestyle (Chu, 2023; Pimienta, 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ying & Dikcius, 2023; Yuan & Lou, 2020). The analysis of our results has confirmed similarity as a main precursor of PSRs, as most participants emphasized creating emotional connections with influencers with whom they share similar interests or life-situations at some point. Additionally, according to Nosofsky's model (1986), people are more likely to identify with, pay attention to, and trust individuals they perceive as similar to themselves, due to cognitive mechanisms of categorization and similarity-based identification.

Next, our results showed that when consumers have been following one influencer for a long period of time, sense of familiarity and proximity with influencers emerged as a feeling of "growing together". These psychological mechanisms of familiarity and proximity then leverage trust and foster PSRs creation. Again, this result is in agreement with literature where familiarity appears as driving PSR, along with closeness and intimacy. Moreover, Perse & Rubin (1989) confirmed that a longer exposure to a media figure and a more complex understanding of their personality lead to greater confidence in predicting their behavior, proving that PSRs are created via social cognitive processes. However, while literature stated that an established PSRs will make consumers more likely to rely on information provided by influencers, results show that, although consumers trust indeed more influencers with whom they have built a PSR, they still stay cautious and search for additional information when it comes to recommendations.

Furthermore, results showcased that some consumers established PSRs with influencers who they look at inspirational and motivational figures. This aligns with findings from Belanche et al. (2021), suggesting that when followers form strong PSRs with influencers, they tend to align their preferences with those of the influencer. This alignment is not only behavioral but also rooted in psychological mechanisms such as the desire to reinforce one's self-concept. When an influencer is viewed as aspirational or motivational, followers are more likely to internalize their values and recommendations as part of their own identity, putting the influencer a symbolic model. In this way, inspiration nature of influencers plays a role in fostering PSRs.

All psychological levers mentioned in previous paragraphs seem to be linked with another lever of PSR: interest. Indeed, interest was the most mentioned factor of influencers' liking in this study, leading to create emotional connections and fostering PSRs. According to Silvia (2006), interest can be

seen as both emotional and psychological aspects. On its emotional side, interest is raised at one specific moment, depending on the context. On its psychological side, interest is taken as personality trait, meaning that some individuals might be more naturally curious and likely to engage in intense experiences and relationships (Silvia, 2006). Moreover, scientific literature emphasizes that consumers follow specific influencers because they are interested in their area expertise such as beauty or lifestyle (Bogoevska-Gavrilova & Ciunova, 2022; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In the same way, in this study, participants were prone to form PSRs with influencers because they were first interested with their content types. In addition, when creating the PRISM survey in the aim to assess the level of PSRs, Boyd et al. (2022) included “interest in”, which refers to a user’s degree of interest regarding one influencer’s content, as one of the four key dimensions of PSRs, highlighting the importance of interest in PSRs creation.

Among potential psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs, some studies highlighted a potential link between personality traits with PSRs creation. Indeed, in their study Sicilia & López (2023) stated that consumers’ personality traits has a part in explaining why influencers can impact their audience. Ultimately, Waqas (2023) conducted a research aiming to establish link between the Big Five personality traits and PSRs. Although it has been showed that high score in openness were more like to develop PSRs, no evidence was found concerning the four other traits. In the present research thesis, despite a general tendency in the dataset linking “high” or “very high” personality trait scores with “low” or “very low” PSRs levels, this pattern is neither consistent nor strong enough to establish a conclusive predictive link. Instead, it seems that influencers’ personal characteristics and their capacity to trigger emotional and psychological engagement play a more influential role in PSRs formation. According to Pimienta (2023), PSRs is more based on attachment theory, meaning that individuals establish PSRs naturally with influencers who draw closeness, familiarity, and intimacy. As a result, this suggest that anyone is able to form PSRs, which does not necessarily depend on consumers’ personality traits.

Then, the results of this study have also emphasized emotional mechanisms underlying PSRs. It has been showed that emotions and psychological levers work together rather than being two separate factors. That is to say, emotions can lead to leverage psychological mechanisms just like psychological mechanisms can leverage emotions. For instance, the more the influencer will share personal facts and the more they will be authentic, the more followers will perceive them as a friend, which will reinforce the emotional attachment (Chu, 2023; Su et al., 2021). This study has observed several emotions fostering PSRs. These emotions were mainly positive and included feeling happy, entertained, amused, relaxed, reassured, motivated, or interested. However, some negative emotion might also step in PSRs creation such as envy which is rooted in a mix of jealousy and admiration for the influencer. In literature review, two models aiming to categorized emotions were cited including the Parrot’s Emotion Model and the Plutchik Wheel of Emotions. To recall, Parrott’s framework highlights the layered complexity of emotions from basic to nuanced forms, while Plutchik’s model focuses on the intensity and interplay of core emotional opposites (Parrott, 2001; Plutchik & Kellerman, 1980, 2013). Although it remains difficult to use one single model to explain emotions as emotions are various and complex, using these two models together offers complementary perspectives. Indeed, although each model has its limitations, they complement each other well as some emotions are better captured by one model while others are more clearly represented in the other. In an attempt to categorize observed emotions from this study with theoretical emotions, the following table was created based on the Parrot’s Emotion Model and the Plutchik Wheel of Emotions:

<i>Emotions regarding influencer’s content</i>	Related emotion from Parrot’s emotion model	Related emotion from Plutchik’s wheel of emotion	Valence (positive, negative, neutral)
<b>Amused / Entertained</b>	Amusement as a tertiary emotion of Joy	Not listed directly – can be related to Joy	Positive

<b>Happy, good</b>	Happiness as a tertiary emotion of Joy	Joy as a basic emotion	Positive
<b>Relaxed</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to trust or comfort as a tertiary emotion of Love and Joy	Serenity as a less intense version of Joy	Positive
<b>Reassured</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to trust or comfort as a tertiary emotion of Love and Joy	Not listed directly – can be related to Trust or Serenity	Positive
<b>Envious</b>	Envy as secondary emotion of Anger	Not listed directly – can be related to Anger	Negative
<b>Motivated</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Hope as a tertiary emotion of Optimism	Not listed directly – can be related Anticipation or Admiration	Positive
<b>Interested</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Surprise or Curiosity as a tertiary emotion of Joy	Interest as a less intense version of Anticipation	Positive

Figure 7 : Emotions felt by participants while watching favorite influencer's content (own figure).

According to Lotun et al. (2024), people believe that they can use PSRs to fulfill their emotional needs in the same way that a two-sided relationship does. This statement is observed in this study as consumers consume their favorite influencer's content to not only be entertained but also to feel happiness, relaxation, comfort and to escape real-life issues. Finally, it worth noting that it can be retained that emotions related to PSRs can be divided into two categories. On one hand, some emotions help the construction of PSRs, leading individuals to appreciate influencer and to build a sense of attachment through positive feelings, as seen when respondents were asked to describe their feeling when watching their favorite influencer's content. These emotions are the one explored in this section, as they underly PSRs formation. On the other hand, some emotions are more a consequence of parasocial relationships than their cause, leading individuals to be potentially impact negatively by the created PSRs in particular situations, such as if their favorite influencer stopped posting content. This second category encompass emotions raising once a PSR has been established and are thus discussed in the negative impactions section of this chapter.

## **5.2. Negative implications resulting from parasocial relationships**

The present study has highlighted several implications of PSRs that could negatively impact individuals on both psychological and emotional level. First, the study emphasizes that PSRs can lead to excessive comparison situations, where individuals would compare either they physique or lifestyle with those from their favorite influencers along with the others unrealistic standards showcased on social media. This align with the statement from Hoffner & Bond's study (2022), which explains that users on social media can compare themselves negatively with others on social media, as idealized lifestyle are often showcased on these platforms. Accordingly, this can lead to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, two consequences also highlohghted in our study notably with eating disorders consequences, but also to anxiety and depression.

Furthermore, results encompassed emotional dependency and real-word isolation, two impacts that are relativey linked with each other. According to literature, individuals use social media to replace real-life relationships which lack of affection, replacing them for instance with PSRs (D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Ultimately, individuals who build PSRs could perceive influencers as real



friends, creating a blurred line between real and digital worlds and leading to unrealistic expectations from followers towards influencers as if the relationship was mutual (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). In other words, individuals relying emotionally on influencers might isolate themselves from the real world. Results from this study suggest that this situation could involve frustration, disillusion, disappointment, and sadness. Additionally, emotional dependency also fosters social media addiction. Indeed, Baek et al. (2013) found that a strong PSR can increase social media addiction, which in return can lead to social isolation.

Moreover, according to literature, individuals who have built a strong PSR with influencers will try to adopt similar preferences, attitudes and behavior in order to maintain cognitive consistency (Belanche et al., 2021). In the present study, misbehavior mimicry was found as a potential negative implication of PSRs, leading individuals to adopt violent, dangerous or inappropriate behavior after seeing an influencer with whom they feel emotionally connected behaving such way. While literature found that PSRs can lead to follow harmful promoted behavior such as smoking, alcohol use, fast food consumption or non-ethical consumption, this misbehavior mimicry goes beyond consumption influence as it can influence misbehavior towards themselves, others and society (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Among implications found in the present study, some were not cited in literature review such as the potential feeling of disappointment, anger, disinterest or discomfort in situations including decline in influencers' content quality and authenticity, shift in content types to content crossing individuals' moral boundaries, influencer's excessive display of wealth, or influencer's inappropriate behavior towards others. In addition, financial risks due to strong PSRs and willing of closeness and similarity has also emerged from analysis. Moreover, the present study also emphasizes situations where PSRs negatively impact both followers and influencers such as in cases of obsession towards the influencers as a consequence of strong PSRs and blurred line between reality and illusory relationship.

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of consistency between influencers' behavior and audience's expectations in terms of ethical and moral behavior. Indeed, results suggest that dissonance between influencer's behavior and audience's value system can lead to emotional distress in the case where a PSR has been built. In literature, some underlined the importance of brand endorsement congruence with the influencer's persona, emphasizing that the more influencers endorse product seen as fitting their personality, the more their perceived expertise increase (Belanche et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). However, these findings do not delve into the negative emotional and psychological impacts that can emerge from a misalignment between audience and influencer's core value system in terms of brand collaboration, claims and behavior. Finally, results from the present study also highlighted emotions felt by individuals in the case where their favorite influencer would stop posting content, suggesting potential emotional distress if the connection was disrupted.

To conclude, focusing now on emotions and in order to provide a clearer overview of the emotional states resulting in these situations, the following table summarizes the observed emotions comparing to the theoretical emotions from Parrott's Emotion Model and Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions:

<i>Emotions if influencer stopped posting content</i>	Related emotion from Parrot's emotion model	Related emotion from Plutchick's wheel of emotion	Valence (positive, negative, neutral)
<b>Unbothered</b>	Not listed directly – neutral emotion	Not listed directly – neutral emotion	Neutral

<b>Curious</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Surprise Zest, as it can provoke these emotional states	Not listed directly – can be related to Interest as a less intense version of Anticipation	Positive
<b>Sad</b>	Sadness as a primary emotion	Sadness as a basic emotion	Negative
<b>Indignation</b> ( <i>A shame for education</i> )	Disappointment as secondary emotion of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness	Negative
<b>Left out / Abandoned</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness	Negative
<b>Disappointed</b>	Disappointment as secondary emotion of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness	Negative
<i>Overall emotions in negative implications</i>	Related emotion from Parrot's emotion model	Related emotion from Plutchick's wheel of emotion	Valence (positive, negative, neutral)
<b>Disgust</b>	Disgust as a secondary emotion of Anger	Disgust as a basic emotion	Negative
<b>Anger</b>	Anger as a primary emotion	Anger as basic emotion	Negative
<b>Disappointed</b>	Disappointment as secondary emotion of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness	Negative
<b>Loss of interest</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Disappointment or Sadness as secondary emotions of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Annoyance	Negative
<b>Discomfort</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Disappointment, Neglect, and Unhappiness as various emotions of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Awe	Negative
<b>Loss of self-esteem</b>	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness, Neglect, and Neglect as various emotions of Sadness	Not listed directly – can be related to Sadness, Disgust or composed emotion Remorse	Negative
<b>Sadness</b>	Sadness as a primary emotion	Sadness as a basic emotion	Negative
<b>Frustration</b>	Frustration as tertiary emotion of Anger	Not listed directly – can be related to Anger	Negative

Figure 8 : Emotions felt by participants in negative contexts (own figure).



## Chapter 6 : Conclusion

### **6.1. Summary of the research**

At a time when social media has become one of the main way individuals communicate, share and seek information, social media influencers have emerged as key elements in digital communication. They are able the shape perceptions, thought, consumption and behavior by shaping emotional connections with their audiences, creating parasocial relationships (PSRs).

This thesis investigates consumers' emotional and psychological mechanisms that lead them to form parasocial relationships with influencers on social media, as well as the potential negative implications of such relationships. To delve into the subject, the study used a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews ending with two short questionnaires aiming, for the first one, to assess participants' personality traits and, for the second one, to evaluate participants' level of PSRs. Results emphasized several emotions involved in emotional connections mechanisms and revealed related psychological mechanisms such as perceived similarity, familiarity, proximity, and authenticity but also admiration, interest, and willingness to escape real-life situations, were key components fostering PSR creation. Conversely, no evidence supported the link between Big Five personality traits and PSRs level. Additionally, the study identified several negative impacts associated with PSRs, including emotional dependency, isolation from real-world, financial risk, misbehavior mimicry, excessive comparison with self, and obsessional behaviors. These negative situations also resulted in some cases into emotional distress among individuals translating by feelings of disgust, anger, abandon, disappointment, loss of interest, loss of self-esteem, indignation, sadness, frustration, and discomfort. Additionally to the research question, some relevant observations concerning consumers' perception of influencers marketing and SMIs were also highlighted

The present thesis highlights the interplay between consumer psychology and influencer marketing, using a consumer-centric approach in order to understand underlying emotions and psychological mechanisms involved in PSR creation. It further discussed potential negative effects of PSRs on individuals.

### **6.2. Managerial implications**

For marketers, influencer marketing is a key communication resource to exploit as SMIs, due to PSRs, can act as key leverage to raise brand awareness, engagement, and loyalty. This study's findings imply first that companies should choose influencers not only based on their number of followers but also on their ability to connect emotionally with their audience, as a stronger PSR will make consumers more likely to trust and listen to one influencer. In addition, managers should understand that choosing few consumers wisely based on the authenticity they draw, which foster PSRs, might be more effective than working with several influencers based on their number of followers. Indeed, authenticity is a key component fostering PSRs creation, and operating a marketing campaign with a lot of influencers could lead to decrease this perceived authenticity and make appeared the claims as too commercial, leading to a loss of interest and trust among consumers. Moreover, to preserve perceived authenticity, the influencer's persona should align with the brand being promoted to avoid any mismatch between the influencer and the product. Similarly, brands should allow influencers to express their creativity and personality within the collaboration, involving real and relatable content. Furthermore, marketers should understand the underlying mechanisms of PSRs from the consumer's point of view including perception of authenticity as explained beforehand, but also similarity, proximity, familiarity, interest, and inspiration in order to create meaningful actions that can help fulfilling emotional needs.

Finally, professionals should also be aware of the ethical implications of PSRs and avoid manipulation strategies that exploit audiences' psychological and emotional needs. Overall, brands should anticipate and manage potential reputation risks in cases where PSRs create negative effects, as audiences might associate one influencer with the brands he endorses. Thereby, managers should prioritize influencers whose behavior, claims, lifestyles, and value align with brand ethics to avoid consumers' backlash due to cognitive dissonance. Also, brands should collaborate with no controversial influencers and monitor potential shift in influencers' personas, translating in a shift of authenticity or inappropriate behavior, leading to negatively impact followers. Moreover, managers should develop communication strategies in case where negative effects are raised to address follower disillusionment or controversy surrounding influencers, especially when the PSR is strong. Additionally, brands could take actions in order to tackle the negative implications of PSRs by creating awareness campaigns based on collaboration with influencers who promote healthy digital behavior.

### **6.3. Academic implications**

Academically, while several studies have highlighted the characteristics of influencers such as credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, authenticity and similarity, few studies have been conducted from a consumer-centric approach focusing on consumers' emotions and psychological mechanisms involved in PSRs creation (Chu, 2023; Pimienta, 2023; Sicilia & López, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ying & Dikcius, 2023). In this way, this thesis contributed to fulfilling this research gap by providing clear statements of emotions involved in PSRs creation as well as psychological mechanisms responsible partly in PSRs development.

First of all, this thesis aligns with studies arguing that similarity with influencers and perceived influencers' authenticity strengthen PSRs (Chu, 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Su et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). However, it also contributes to enrich these studies by adding familiarity, proximity, inspiration, interest and the need for entertainment and happiness as psychological levers fostering PSRs. Additionally, while some studies, such as the one from Caruelle (2023) and Gomes et al. (2022), have argued that PSRs foster feelings of proximity, similarity, and trust, this thesis confirms that the relationship is reciprocal as proximity, similarity, and trust also serve as key drivers in the development of PSRs. Additionally, while according to Sicilia & López (2023), consumers' personality traits explain partly why influencers are able to impact their audience, this thesis did not find any evidence supporting links between personality traits and the PSR level. These findings suggest that personality traits might play a less role in PSRs creation than emotional and psychological mechanisms when taking a consumer-centric perception.

Then, this thesis also supplements previous studies, such as the study by Baek et al. (2013) which highlighted loneliness as a potential precursor of PSRs, by identifying clear emotions involved in PSRs including feeling happy, entertained, amused, relaxed, reassured, motivated, or interested. In addition, some negative emotions can also be involved in PSRs creation, such as envy, suggesting that PSRs can be based on both positive and negative feelings. These findings allow to pave the way for further research on specific emotions.

Furthermore, few studies have been undertaken regarding the negative implications of such one-sided relationships on social media. Indeed, although some negative implications of PSRs have been highlighted previously, such as social media addiction, lower trust in other, emotional dependency, and social media fatigue leading to anxiety and depression, the present thesis supplement these research by adding several potential negative effects of PSRs along with the situations in which they can occur (Baek et al., 2013; Dhir et al., 2018). In this way, this thesis contributed to deepen this research gap by adding disillusionment, conflict of values, excessive social comparison, real-world isolation, financial vulnerability, and misbehavior mimicry to the potential

negative effects of PSRs. The study also highlights specific situations triggering these negative effects including a perceived decline in content quality or authenticity, excessive displays of wealth by influencers, negative experiences with promoted products, transgressions of moral boundaries, controversial interpersonal conduct, or repeated exposure to unrealistic standards of beauty and lifestyle. In addition, it links these negative effects with emotional states such as disgust, anger, disappointment, disengagement, discomfort, diminished self-esteem, sadness, and frustration.

#### **6.4. Limitations and suggestions for future research**

While these findings offer valuable insights on how parasocial relationships are created, several limitations must be acknowledged concerning this thesis. First, because of the nature of the study aiming to discover and explore the emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying PSRs along with the potential negative implications of such relationships, the results are only applicable for the respondents. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research restricts broader statistical validation. A second limitation arises in the sampling technique. Indeed, the sample on which the interviews were conducted being a non-representative sample, mainly composed of women in their twenties, limits the generalizability of the results. This sampling technique was chosen for its cost-effectiveness and time efficiency, however it still has limitations, particularly regarding potential biases in how the sample is constructed (Malhotra et al., 2017). Finally, potential self-report bias may also have influenced the accuracy of participants' answers regarding experiences and motivations but also regarding the self-assessed BFI-10 and PRISM questionnaires. In the same way, some participants might not have been totally transparent or able to give accurate answers as the subject might have been sensitive for some respondents. Indeed, as explained in the results sections, some respondents seemed to showcase a form of embarrassment when asked if they had ever followed one influencer's recommendations. Moreover, some respondents might not even realize that they have been influenced at some point.

Despite these limitations, the present thesis provided relevant reflections surrounding PSR creation from a consumer-centric point of view. Moreover, these findings open up some food for thought for future academic research on influencer marketing and, more specifically, on parasocial relationships.

First, longitudinal studies would enable researchers to track the evolution of PSRs over time, from their initial formation to its potential impacts on a long-term. Offering a more complete view on how these relationships can grow, whether strengthening, weakening, or turning harmful, and impact individuals. In addition, adopting a consumer-centric perspective could deepen the consumer behavior literatures, focusing on how followers' subconscious leads them to form PSRs, as well as how they perceive and interpret influencers' behaviors and personas. Then, future research on the negative implications of PSRs could expand its scope by examining not only the effects on followers, but also the potential impacts on influencers themselves and on society at large.

Moreover, researches based on significant samples, using for instance quantitative techniques, linking personality traits, such as those assessed in the Big Five model, with both PSRs creation and levels could deepen the knowledge on the impact of personality traits in on-sided relationship formation by potentially revealing consistent patterns across different personality profiles, enhancing segmentation and predictive power.

Finally, some researches emphasizing more generally influencer marketing and SMIs could be conducted, including a redefinition of influencer categories not by number of followers but through criteria more relevant to consumers. These categories could involve a distinction between influencers based on the type of content they produce and consumers' perception of this content, or based on the

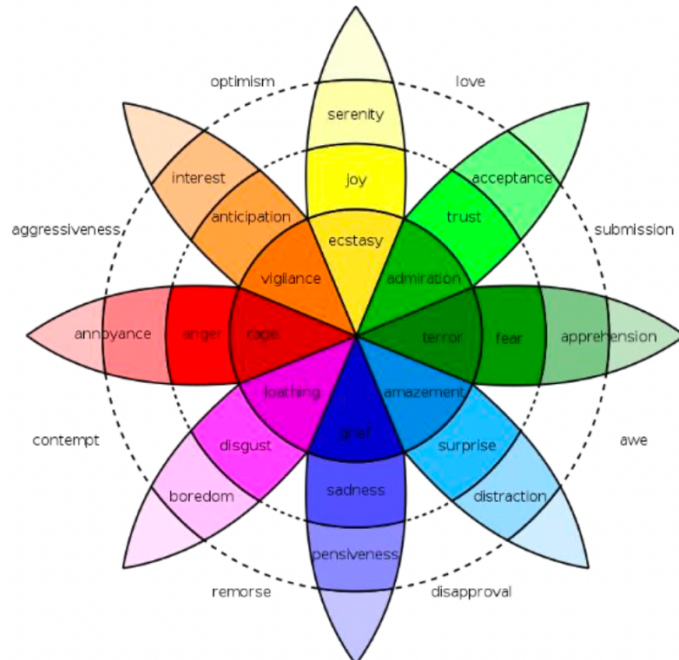
platforms through influencers have gained visibility. Similarly, future research could explore and set criteria concerning a potential distinction between the terms “influencers” and “content creators”, examining whether and how consumers differentiate between these roles in terms of trust, engagement, and perceived value.

## A. Appendices

### Appendice 1 : Parrot's Emotion Model and Plutchik Wheel of Emotions

Primary emotions	Secondary emotions	Tertiary emotions
love	Affection	Compassion, Sentimentality, Liking, Caring, ...
	Lust/Sexual desire	Desire, Passion, Infatuation
	Longing	
Joy	Cheerfulness	Amusement, Enjoyment, Happiness, Satisfaction, ...
	Zest	Enthusiasm, Zeal, Excitement, Thrill, Exhilaration
	Contentment	Pleasure
	Optimism	Eagerness, Hope
	Pride	Triumph
	Enthrallment	Enthrallment, Rapture
Surprise	Surprise	Amazement, Astonishment
Anger	Irritability	Aggravation, Agitation, Annoyance, Grumpy, ...
	Exasperation	Frustration
	Rage	Outrage, Fury, Hostility, Bitter, Hatred, Dislike, ...
	Disgust	Revulsion, Contempt, Loathing
	Envy	Jealousy
	Torment	Torment
Sadness	Suffering	Agony, Anguish, Hurt
	Sadness	Depression, Despair, Unhappy, Grief, Melancholy, ...
	Disappointment	Dismay, Displeasure
	Shame	Guilt, Regret, Remorse
	Neglect	Embarrassment, Humiliation, Insecurity, Insult, ...
	Sympathy	Pity, Sympathy
Fear	Horror	Alarm, Shock, Fright, Horror, Panic, Hysteria, ...
	Nervousness	Suspense, Uneasiness, Worry, Distress, Dread, ...

(as cited in Murgia et al., 2014, p.3)



(as cited in Mohsin & Beltiukov, 2019, p.291)





## Appendice 2 : Interview guide

### 1. Comprehension question :

- 1.1. In your own words, how would you define an influencer?
- 1.2. What do you think is the main role or purpose of an influencer?

### 2. Consumer habits with influencers :

- 2.1. What types of influencers do you follow?
- 2.2. On which platform?
- 2.3. If you have to think about one influencer that you like :
  - Who is it ?
  - What do you like about this/these influencers?
  - How do you feel when you watch their content?
  - When did you start following this/these influencers?
- 2.4. Do you interact with influencers?
  - If yes, how, and how often ?
  - If not, why so ?
- 2.5. Have you ever followed an influencer's recommendation regarding *a purchase, lifestyle change, subscription, travel, or anything else* ?
  - If yes, can you explain the context ? How was your experience? How does this affect your current/future perceptions on influencer recommendations ?
  - If not, why so ?

### 3. Emotions related questions :

- 3.1. Have you ever had a negative experience or felt negative emotions in context related to an influencer? Not necessarily regarding a recommendation. If yes, what happened? ? What did you feel ?
- 3.2. When thinking about your favorite influencer, what could the influencer does/says/etc. that could potentially make you feel disappointed / upset / sad... : (1) in terms of collaboration with brands/product choices? ; (2) in terms of what s/he says or posts? ; (3) in terms of how s/he behaves or considers the community? etc.
- 3.3. If your favorite influencer stops posting content suddenly, what do you think you would feel ?

### 4. Opinion questions :

- 4.1. According to you, what are the potential negative implications that could face a person when having a sense of connection and friendship with an influencer ?

## 5. Short Questionnaires :

### 5.1. Psychological pattern: BFI-10 items survey

Je me vois comme quelqu'un qui ....

	approuve fortement	approuve un peu	n'approuve ni ne désapprouve	désapprouve un peu	désapprouve fortement	ne peut pas dire
est réservé	1	2	3	4	5	
fait généralement confiance aux autres	1	2	3	4	5	
travaille consciencieusement	1	2	3	4	5	
est « relaxe », détendu, gère bien les stress	1	2	3	4	5	
a une grande imagination	1	2	3	4	5	
est sociable, extraverti	1	2	3	4	5	
a tendance à critiquer les autres	1	2	3	4	5	
a tendance à être paresseux	1	2	3	4	5	
est facilement anxieux	1	2	3	4	5	
est peu intéressé par tout ce qui est artistique	1	2	3	4	5	

(Courtois et al., 2020)

### 5.2. Level of PSR: PRISM survey

#### Item

#### Interest In

I look forward to seeing [NAME]'s content.  
 I like to see content that [NAME] has made.  
 I hope [NAME] achieves their goals.  
 I care about what happens to [NAME].  
 I am interested in [NAME].  
 I would follow [NAME] on another account if they create one on the same social media site that I already follow them on.  
 I like to see content that [NAME] is in that they did not make themselves.

#### Knowledge Of

I seek out information to learn more about [NAME].  
 Learning about [NAME] is important to me.  
 When I come across information about [NAME] I will search to learn more about them.  
 If I saw a story about [NAME], I would read it.  
 I am aware of the personal details of [NAME]'s life.

#### Identification With

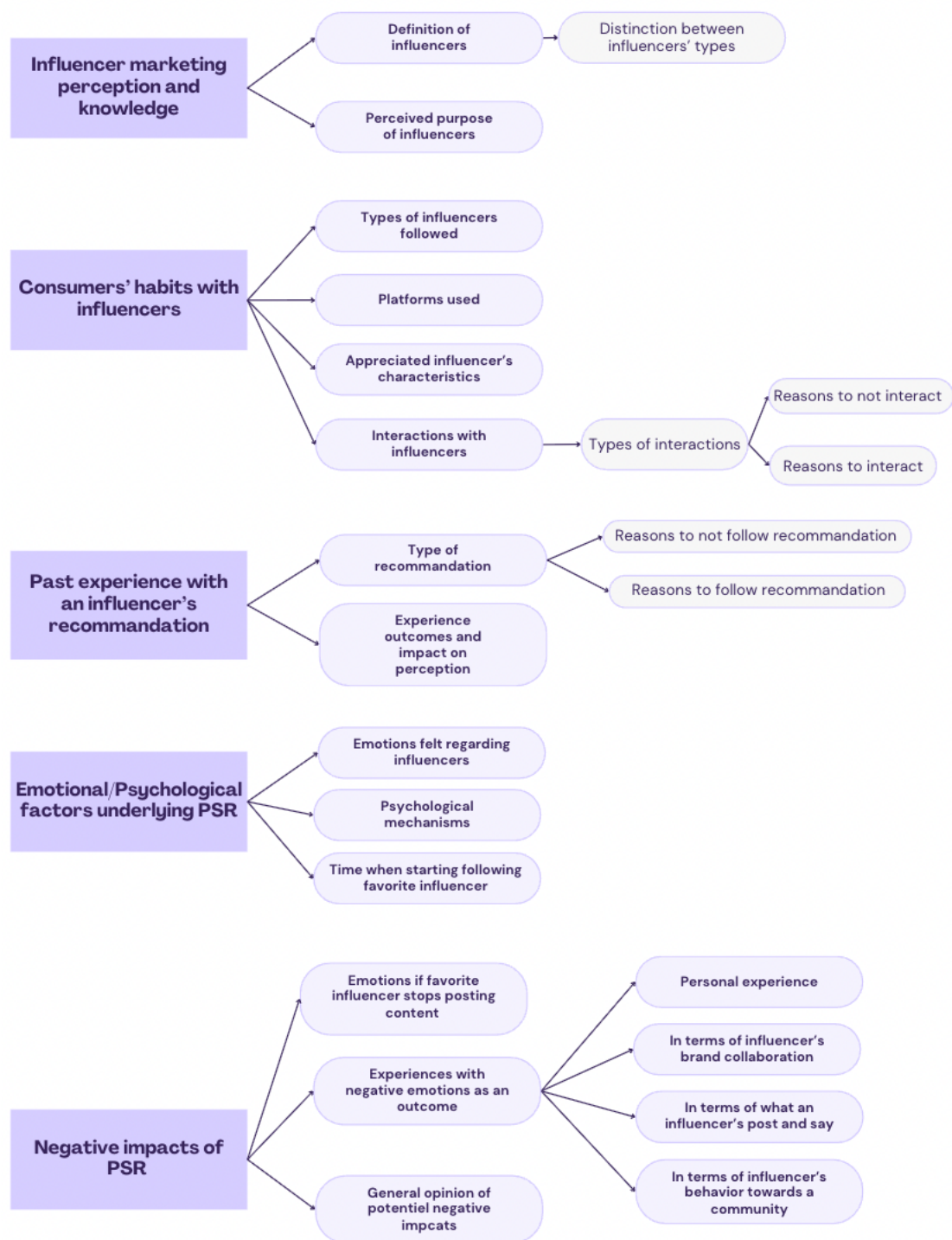
I have many of the same beliefs as [NAME].  
 I have many of the same opinions as [NAME].  
 I usually agree with [NAME].  
 I can relate to [NAME]'s attitudes.  
 I usually make the same choices as [NAME].  
 I like the way [NAME] handles problems.

#### Interaction With

[NAME] makes me feel as if I am with a friend.  
 I can imagine myself as [NAME]'s friend.  
 [NAME] keeps me company when viewing their content.  
 [NAME] understands the kinds of content I want to see.

(Boyd et al., 2024, p.7)

### Appendice 3 : Coding tree used for the qualitative analysis.





#### **Appendice 4 : Interview transcribe with respondent 11.**

**Interviewer : Avec vos propres mots, comment définiriez-vous un influenceur ?**

**Participant :** Je dirais que c'est quelqu'un d'actif sur une plateforme, un réseau social, et qui crée du contenu sous différents formats, souvent destiné à un type de public spécifique. Et grâce à ça, disons, via ces plateformes, ils peuvent mettre en avant des produits ou d'autres choses et être rémunérés pour ça. Les produits qu'ils présentent sont aussi adaptés au type de public qu'ils ciblent, dans le but de générer de l'argent.

**Interviewer : Selon vous, quel est le rôle principal ou l'objectif d'un influenceur ?**

**Participant :** Je dirais que c'est principalement de l'entertainment, avant tout. L'argent est plutôt une finalité, mais pas vraiment le but selon moi. Je pense que pour beaucoup, c'est d'abord une question de divertissement ou de partage de choses qu'ils aiment vraiment. Ensuite, à partir de là, ça peut leur permettre de gagner de l'argent.

**Interviewer : Quels types d'influenceurs suivez-vous sur les réseaux sociaux ?**

**Participant :** Je dirais que je suis un bon mélange de gaming, manga, anime, ce genre de choses. Et aussi pas mal de contenu beauté et mode, je dirais.

**Interviewer : Sur quelles plateformes ?**

**Participant :** TikTok, Instagram, YouTube. J'ai Twitch aussi, mais je l'utilise uniquement pour Squeezie.

**Interviewer : Si vous deviez penser à un influenceur que vous aimez, ce serait qui ?**

**Participant :** Le premier qui me vient à l'esprit, c'est Squeezie. Je le suis depuis vraiment longtemps. Depuis le début, je pense, vers 2013, quand il ne postait que des vidéos de gaming.

**Interviewer : Qu'est-ce que vous aimez chez cette personne ?**

**Participant :** Et je l'aime bien parce que c'est comme grandir avec quelqu'un ; tu t'attaches. J'aime aussi comment son contenu a évolué au fil des années, comment il a réussi à continuer à proposer des idées nouvelles et différentes. Et puis, il propose plusieurs types de contenus en même temps. Ce n'est pas juste un seul truc — il y a des vidéos historiques, des jeux, du gaming pur sur Twitch, et ses autres chaînes YouTube. Au niveau de la personnalité, il est drôle.

**Interviewer : Que ressentez-vous quand vous regardez son contenu ?**

**Participant :** Son contenu te fait oublier tes problèmes pendant un moment, ça permet de t'évader. C'est drôle, mais aussi intéressant. Donc quand je regarde ses vidéos, je me sens diverti et je passe un bon moment.

**Interviewer : Interagissez-vous avec des influenceurs ? Si oui, comment et à quelle fréquence ?**

**Sinon, pourquoi ?**

**Participant :** Oui, mais pas vraiment avec Squeezie. Je like ses posts mais je commente rarement. Les influenceurs avec qui j'interagis vraiment, ce sont surtout des petits créateurs sur TikTok, des gens avec qui j'ai déjà parlé ou que j'ai rencontrés en dehors des réseaux — en gros des amis, et je les soutiens sur TikTok. Je ne sais pas si ça compte vraiment. C'est plus mutuel, tu vois ?

**Interviewer : Avez-vous déjà suivi la recommandation d'un influenceur pour un achat, un changement de mode de vie, un abonnement, un voyage ou autre chose ? Si oui, pouvez-vous expliquer le contexte ? Comment cela s'est-il passé ? Si non, pourquoi ?**

**Participant :** Oui, j'ai déjà pris un abonnement NordVPN avec un code d'un influenceur. Je l'utilise toujours, et ça m'a été assez utile, surtout quand tu voyages, comme ça tu peux accéder à tes trucs

habituels de n'importe où. C'est aussi pratique pour naviguer sur certains sites quand tu veux changer de région pour voir du contenu différent. Donc oui, je dirais que je l'ai déjà fait. Et aussi, parfois je vois des influenceurs, même que je ne suis pas, parler de produits sur Snapchat, TikTok ou Instagram, et si je trouve ça intéressant, je peux finir par acheter.

**Interviewer : Comment cela influence-t-il votre perception actuelle ou future des recommandations d'influenceurs ?**

**Participant :** Je pense que j'ai vu pas mal d'influenceurs faire des trucs louches, des choses pas très normales voire pas légales, et ça m'a rendu un peu plus méfiant vis-à-vis de certains placements de produits. Donc je fais confiance à certains influenceurs, mais pas à tous : ça dépend de qui c'est. Même si je ne suis pas personnellement concerné par les arnaques, voir ce genre de contenu influence quand même la perception que j'ai des influenceurs en général. J'en viens à en voir certains comme des escrocs.

**Interviewer : Donc quand vous dites que vous ne faites pas confiance à certains à cause de leurs pratiques frauduleuses, est-ce que vous considérez ça comme une expérience négative, même si ce n'est pas personnel ? Comment vous sentez-vous face à ça ?**

**Participant :** Je pense que ce n'est clairement pas acceptable, et franchement injuste. Ils utilisent leur privilège et leur position médiatique pour cibler des gens qui n'ont pas forcément la conscience ou les connaissances nécessaires pour réaliser que ce qu'on leur vend, c'est une arnaque. Je pense souvent à tous ces trucs de trading qu'on voyait partout à un moment, surtout chez les influenceurs de télé-réalité. Même si ça a été dénoncé après, beaucoup de gens ont perdu de l'argent, et en général c'est des personnes qui n'en avaient déjà pas beaucoup. Je trouve ça vraiment abusé. Pareil pour le dropshipping ou d'autres business pas nets. Ces influenceurs ne prennent même pas la peine de vérifier les produits, ils reçoivent un message, reçoivent un colis, et ne contrôlent rien. Je trouve ça dégueulasse.

**Interviewer : En pensant à votre influenceur préféré, qu'est-ce qu'il ou elle pourrait faire/dire/etc. qui vous décevrait ou vous rendrait triste en termes de collaboration avec des marques ou de choix de produits ?**

**Participant :** Si Squeezie commençait à faire du dropshipping, du trading ou des arnaques, franchement, je serais déçu. De ce que je sais, il essaie justement d'être prudent, en partie pour son image, mais aussi parce qu'il ne veut pas arnaquer sa communauté. Mais s'il se mettait à promouvoir des produits dangereux ou de mauvaise qualité, je serais assez déçu pour arrêter de suivre son contenu.

**Interviewer : Et en ce qui concerne ce qu'il dit ou ce qu'il poste ?**

**Participant :** Clairement, tout ce qui serait raciste, sexiste, homophobe, etc. Ou même s'il soutenait un autre créateur de contenu qui aurait fait quelque chose de grave — je sais pas, un viol ou quelque chose dans ce genre — ce serait une énorme déception.

**Interviewer : En pensant à ton influenceur préféré, qu'est-ce qu'il pourrait dire, faire, ou adopter comme comportement envers sa communauté qui te rendrait déçu(e), triste, ou énervé(e) ?**

**Participant :** Je pense que si Squeezie commençait à manquer de respect à sa communauté, ce serait bizarre, parce que ça ne lui ressemble pas du tout. Par "manquer de respect", je veux dire insulter ses abonnés, ou même promouvoir des produits ou services douteux qui pourraient être dangereux pour les gens, comme je disais tout à l'heure, des arnaques ou des trucs dans le genre.

**Interviewer : Si votre influenceur préféré arrêterait soudainement de publier du contenu, que pensez-vous que vous ressentiriez ?**

**Participant :** Je serais triste, parce que je pense que c'est la personne que je suis depuis le plus

longtemps. Je me suis attaché à l'image qu'on a de lui. Mais je pense qu'il a déjà créé assez de contenu pour toute une vie, donc je ne serais pas dévasté. Par contre, s'il supprimait tout, je me sentirais presque abandonné. Mais si je peux toujours revoir ce qu'il a déjà fait, ça me va. Quand même, s'il arrêterait de poster, je serais un peu triste et j'essaierais de comprendre pourquoi, mais ça ne bouleverserait pas ma vie.

**Interviewer : Selon vous, quelles pourraient être les implications négatives pour une personne qui ressent un sentiment de connexion ou d'amitié avec un influenceur ?**

**Participant :** D'abord, il y a différents types de personnes. Tu as les jeunes, qui n'ont souvent pas la maturité pour comprendre que ce qu'ils voient, c'est juste une image, une version contrôlée d'une personne. Ce n'est pas qui ils sont vraiment ni tout ce qu'ils pensent réellement. Et donc, ils s'attachent beaucoup à cette image sans réaliser qu'ils ne connaissent pas vraiment cette personne, que cet influenceur n'est pas leur ami ou leur famille. Même si tu aimes bien le contenu de quelqu'un, tu dois garder ça en tête. Mais je pense que les plus jeunes ne l'ont pas forcément. Ensuite, il y a aussi des personnes qui ne sont pas mentalement stables, qui peuvent aller jusqu'à essayer de rencontrer l'influenceur, leur faire du mal, ou imaginer que la relation est réciproque alors que ce n'est pas le cas. Et je pense que ça a déjà touché pas mal d'influenceurs. Les gens les voient comme super sympas, drôles, et pensent que la relation est mutuelle, ce qui les pousse à aborder l'influenceur comme s'ils étaient proches. Ça peut être très inconfortable pour le créateur, mais c'est aussi un peu le risque du métier. Donc en résumé, ça peut créer une détresse psychologique chez les abonnés, qu'ils peuvent ensuite retourner contre l'influenceur, et ça, ça peut aussi avoir un impact négatif sur lui.

Et une dernière chose, ce type de relation peut aussi avoir un impact financier sur les abonnés. Si tu fais confiance à quelqu'un et que tu ressens une connexion forte, tu es plus susceptible d'écouter ce qu'il dit, d'acheter ce qu'il vend ou de suivre ses conseils. Du coup, parfois, les gens dépensent beaucoup trop juste pour se sentir plus proches.

Donc globalement, je dirais que ça peut engendrer de la détresse émotionnelle, physique et financière.





## Appendice 5 : Summary of mentioned favorite influencers and appreciated characteristics

<i><b>Favorite influencer</b></i>	<i><b>Platforms of activity</b></i>	<i><b>Appreciated characteristics</b></i>
Squeezie (@xsqueezie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 19,5M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 8,8M followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 5,3M followers</li> <li>- Twitch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Entertaining and diverse content (R11, R5)</li> <li>· Humor (R11, R12, R2):</li> <li>· Creativity / innovative video ideas (R11, R12)</li> <li>· Authenticity (R12, R2)</li> <li>· Friendliness / kindness (R2)</li> <li>· Energy (R12)</li> <li>· Loyalty over time (R11): Long-time attachment due to growing up with his content</li> </ul>
Gaëlle Garcia Diaz (@gaellegd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 2,04M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 1,6M followers</li> <li>- Tiktok - martine cosmetics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Diverse content (R7)</li> <li>· Interesting topics (R7)</li> <li>· Humor (past appreciation) (R9)</li> <li>· Quirky personality (past appreciation) (R9)</li> </ul>
Léna Situations (@lenamahfouf)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 2,99M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 4,8M followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 3,6M followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Inspiration journey (R10)</li> </ul>
Océane amsler (@oceaneamsler)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 1,91M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 1,2M followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 1,9M followers</li> <li>- Twitch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Style (R2)</li> <li>· Humor (R2)</li> <li>· Entertainment (R2)</li> </ul>
Stéphanie Andrea (@soulrichx)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 217K followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 104K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 172,9K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Style and attitude (R2)</li> <li>· Mindset (R2)</li> </ul>
Yanissa (@yanissaxoxo)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 1,01M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 1,4M followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 668,7K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Authenticity (R8)</li> </ul>
Fleur De Force (@fleurdeforce)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youtube : 1,31M followers</li> <li>- Instagram : 744K</li> <li>- Tiktok : 11,5K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Healthy recipes content – tips (R4)</li> </ul>
Kinda (@kindasamax)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram : 376K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 603,4K followers</li> <li>- Snapchat</li> <li>- Twiith</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Authenticity (R1)</li> <li>· Humor (R1)</li> <li>· Relatable / familiarity : Reminds respondent of a friend. (R1)</li> <li>· Entertainment / fun (R1)</li> </ul>
Luxleseul (@luxleseul)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram : 130K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 312,9K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Humor (R4)</li> </ul>
Shayna Heriquet (@shaynapropagandekub)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram : 114K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 255K followers</li> <li>- Youtube : 59,3K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Artistic vision (R6)</li> <li>· Inspirational (R6)</li> </ul>
Withaxie (@withaxie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram : 265K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 112,8K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Tips and ideas for activities (R3)</li> </ul>
Julie Bourges (@julie.bourges)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram : 650K followers</li> <li>- Tiktok : 342,4K followers</li> <li>- Youtube : 232K followers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Inspirational life story and resilience (R10)</li> <li>· Meaningful content (R10)</li> </ul>



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a market value estimated at \$32.5 billion and continuing to grow, influencer marketing is establishing itself as a dominant force in digital marketing strategies. Its rising importance is clearly reflected in consumer behavior as well, with statistics from 2023 showing that 45% of consumers are more likely to purchase a product recommended by an influencer. Social media influencers are able to guide consumers' thoughts, opinions, consumption, decisions, and behavior, and ultimately connect endorsed brands with their audience, because these individuals create emotional connections with their followers.

These emotional connections form parasocial relationships (PSRs) between audiences and influencers: a one-sided connection created on social media involving feelings of familiarity, intimacy, and affection. In a world where social media has reshaped communication, consumer behavior, and relationships between individuals, identifying the sources of PSRs is becoming essential to understand these dynamics.

The present thesis aims to explore the emotional and psychological factors that lead consumers to form PSR with influencers on social media, as well as the potential negative implications of such relationships. Using a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews, the study identified several psychological and emotional levers of PSRs, such as perceived similarity, familiarity, proximity, and authenticity, but also admiration, interest, and willingness to escape real-life situations, as key components fostering PSRs creation. Specific emotions involved in PSR creation were also found, such as feeling happy, entertained, reassured, relaxed, motivated, inspired, interested, amused, or envious. Additionally, two short questionnaires assessing Big Five personality traits and levels of PSRs were examined but did not provide evidence supporting the link between Big Five personality traits and PSRs level. Finally, the study identified several negative impacts associated with PSRs, including emotional dependency, isolation from the real world, financial risk, misbehavior mimicry, excessive comparison with self, and obsessional behaviors.

**KEYWORDS:** Influencer marketing ; Parasocial relationships ; Social media influencers ; Consumer behavior ; Social media ; Negative effects of social media

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