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Designing and Validating a Method to Measure Young People's Susceptibility to Social Media Influencers: the SUSIS Questionnaire

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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a phenomenon that has increased drastically in previous years, reaching a peak since the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of previous research done involving parasocial relationship theory and consumer trust theory has been done regarding celebrities, leaving a gap in understanding influence and one's susceptibility to influence in an SMI context. Here, a series of closed-ended questions was applied to a young student cohort (N=91), and its power was evaluated using structural equation modelling, which indicated that a series of 25 questions holds the ability to measure susceptibility to SMI influence. These questions form the SUSIS Questionnaire, thereby representing a confirmed tool to measure susceptibility to SMI influence. These findings respond to a gap in marketing literature involving SMIs, showing the potential power and usefulness they hold in marketing strategies, but also serve as an alert that SMIs influence youth, presumedly both positively and negatively.

Keywords: social media influencers, young people, Ireland, digital environment, structural equation modelling, questionnaire, marketing

1. Introduction

In recent years, many studies have been conducted to understand the Social Media Influencer (SMI) phenomenon (Dinh & Lee, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; Nafees *et al.,* 2021a; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Influencers are opinion leaders of modern society and have the power to influence their followers in various ways (Kim & Kim, 2021; Ryan, 2014). SMIs have become an important part of digital marketing strategies as a means for reaching a target audience (Kim & Kim, 2021). They bring a new set of digital and communication skills for building and managing trust between themselves and their followers. However, existing marketing literature does not offer a solid instrument able to measure the susceptibility of young people to SMI influence, from both positive and negative perspectives.

Previous research has focused on investigating how SMIs can influence young people, though this is nonetheless limited, given the overemphasis on marketing elements, such as purchase intention and consumer trust (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Dwidienawati *et al.,* 2020; Masuda *et al.,* 2022; Wang *et al.,* 2012). For this reason, the current literature possesses a gap regarding how relationships are developed and how the leverage of trust between influencers and followers is utilized (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Furthermore, there is still little research exploring how the audience perceives the figure of the influencer and how that perception can be used to one's advantage. According to Yuan and Lou (2020), there are three significant elements of parasocial relationship theory to help in understanding this perception: (1) the influencer's features, (2) the audience's features and (3) the process of interaction between them. Parasocial relationship is a concept pioneered by Horton and Wohl (1956), referring to a form of one-sided emotional relationship generated between an audience and media characters -- at that time, celebrities -- through initial or repeated interactions via media realities. These interactions then cause an illusory relationship or mimic an interpersonal relationship (Aw *et al.,* 2022). Empirical validations to understand if parasocial relationships can be used to influence the audience of an SMI are limited (Aw *et al.,* 2022; Breves *et al.,* 2021; Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Finally, even less research has focused on revealing the negative influences of SMIs on young people (Alves de Castro *et al.,* 2022). As such, the main objective of the present study is to present and analyse a new instrument able to assess the susceptibility of young people to be influenced by social media influencers.

This paper is academically urgent and important because it addresses a gap in marketing communications literature involving social media influencers (SMIs) and their influence on younger cohorts, especially since the COVID-19

pandemic. This gap is especially notable considering the vital role SMIs have come to play in contemporary marketing strategies, owing to their ability to sway their followers' behaviours and perceptions. The study's main objective is to present and analyse a new instrument—named the "SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social media influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire"—that can assess the susceptibility of young people to be influenced by SMIs, a measure previously lacking in research.

Social media influencers (SMIs) are individuals who have gained popularity and influence through their online presence on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter (Kim & Kim, 2021; Ryan, 2014). These individuals often have a considerable number of followers and are able to affect their audience's attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours. SMIs are characterized by their ability to form a parasocial relationship—a one-sided emotional relationship—between themselves and their followers, mimicking an interpersonal relationship. This is achieved through their digital and communication skills, as well as their ability to build and manage trust with their audience. The SMI phenomenon has become increasingly relevant as these influencers are incorporated into digital marketing strategies to reach a target audience. However, the extent of their influence, especially on younger individuals, can also carry potential negative impacts, necessitating tools like the SUSIS Questionnaire for measuring such susceptibility.

This study was conducted between 2020 and 2023 as part of a broader project titled "An investigation of the personality traits that could identify young people who will be susceptible to influence by social media influencers (SMIs): the case of Gen Zers in Ireland". The data was collected in Ireland between 2021 and 2022. The choice of Ireland as the case study location was due to the researcher's residence in the country, which provided accessibility and convenience for data collection. Moreover, no prior research focusing on the influence of SMIs on young people, from the specific context of Ireland, could be found at the time of the study, thereby adding a unique geographical perspective to the existing body of research on this subject.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 SUSIS Questionnaire

Questions and variables were defined according to literature reviews and were based on the main objective: understanding the susceptibility of a young cohort to be influenced by SMIs. The final questionnaire was aptly named the "SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social media influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire". Overall, the questions were formulated to fill gaps in the current literature, as discussed in the introduction.

Drawing from established, validated sources, questions were thoughtfully adapted for use in the SUSIS questionnaire, ensuring their applicability and reliability (Vagias, 2006; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Yuan and Lou, 2020; Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021). Such adapted questions have the potential to increase or assess the method's reliability (Saunders *et al.,* 2019). In contrast, questions elaborated by the researcher were reviewed and checked in order to meet the research's objective (Bryman, 2004). A key element in the questionnaire is the Likert scale to assess respondent attitudes, behaviours and opinions, by which respondents rate their level of agreement with a given statement (De Vaus, 2014). Employing Likert scales in this study adds a degree of granularity to specific questions. The typology of questions was chosen according to their functionality and suitability.

In the process of validating the SUSIS questionnaire, an exhaustive and rigorous statistical method was employed. To begin with, a comprehensive factor analysis using SPSS was carried out on the original questionnaire which encompassed 112 indicators. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used to ascertain the suitability of data for factor analysis. The KMO index ranges from 0 to 1 and Tabachnick & Fidell (1996) recommend that a reading around .6 as a minimum value for a good factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity should be significant ($p < .05$). Items that did not reach these values were eliminated and only good items remained. Thereafter, the Principal Component Analysis was employed, scrutinizing the commonalities values of the items. It was found that the commonalities values of the remaining items were notably high. Furthermore, the total variance value was inspected meticulously to ensure that only items with results proximate to .70 were retained in the study. Subsequent to the factor analysis, the SUSIS questionnaire was significantly reduced from 112 to 25 indicators. These condensed indicators were then subjected to a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to reinforce the validity and reliability of the newly streamlined SUSIS questionnaire.

Two constructs formed the nucleus of the conceptual model (Figure 1): Social Perception and Perception Towards Harmful Content. Social Perception is composed of three elements: Perception Towards Influencers, Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Trust. In turn, Perception Towards Harmful Content is composed of 28 types of harmful content posted online which were categorised in a previous critical review analysis (Alves de Castro *et al.,* 2022).

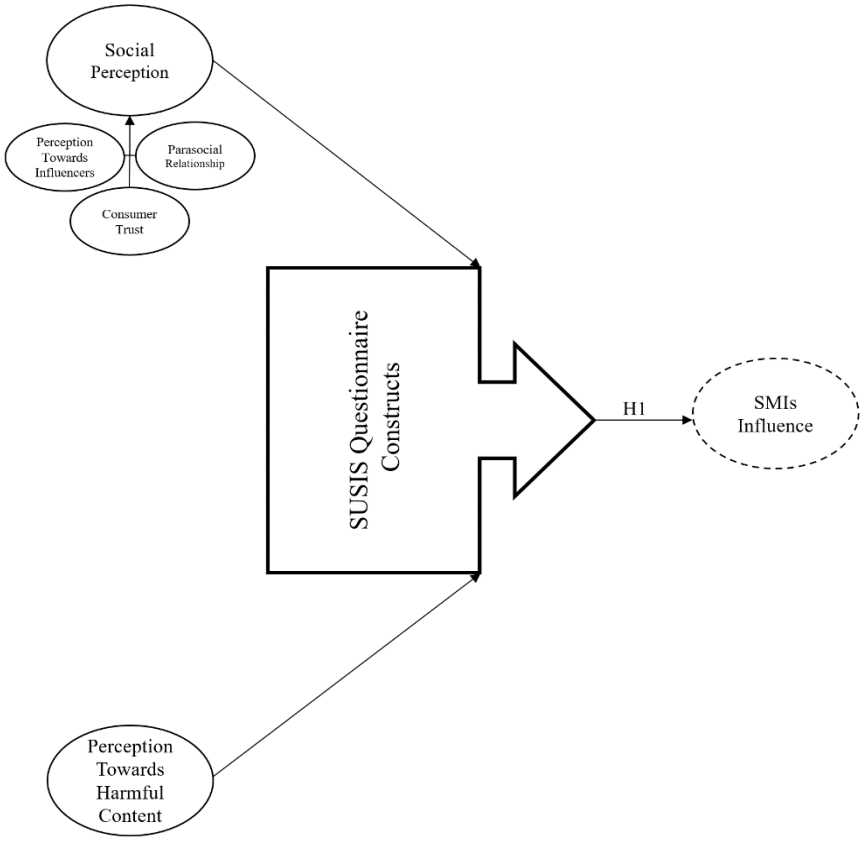

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the SUSIS Questionnaire and its contributing constructs

2.2 Study Participants

Generation Z, or Gen Zers, refers to the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials, typically aged 16-26 years old. They are characterized by their digital fluency, having grown up in an era of rapid technological advancements and ubiquitous internet access. This generation is exceptionally connected, with many having had access to smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices from a young age. They are continually engaging with social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which makes them an excellent subject for researching the influence of social media influencers. This constant access and exposure to social media, combined with their developmental stage, could potentially make Gen Zers more susceptible to the influence of SMIs. The unique geographical perspective of Ireland adds further depth to this study, filling a gap in the existing body of research on this subject.

Participants were asked to respond to a specific set of questions in a predetermined order through a written questionnaire (De Vaus, 2014). This type of data collection is one of the most widely used methods within the survey strategy, efficiently and cheaply collecting responses from a sample prior to quantitative analysis (Bryman, 2004). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), questionnaires tend to be used primarily in explanatory research, enabling a researcher to examine and explain relationships between variables. A critical literature review analysis technique was used to construct the scales of the questionnaire, which allowed for an empirical corroboration of factors that influence young people to be influenced by SMIs. This method was thereby selected to execute a quantitative study with the aim of determining the degree of evidence of susceptibility to being influenced by social media influencers.

The questionnaire was printed, hand-delivered in educational institution classrooms and self-completed by participants. The researcher physically met subjects and delivered the forms, a choice made based on the characteristics of the sample population (De Vaus, 2014). Young people aged 16 to 26 years old do not have fully developed brains and some youth can be easily distracted in class and may not concentrate well (Dumontheil *et al.,* 2010). A face-to-face interaction with the researcher and a paper questionnaire might increase focus, with the added benefit of being able to ensure that the questionnaire was completely filled out, increasing reliability and completeness of the data (Therapy, Speech and Language Department NHS, 2020). The length and complexity of the questionnaire was also a determining factor, since Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) suggest that long questionnaires with more detailed questions are best-delivered face-to-face when compared to collection methods online or by phone.

The sample population consisted of students recruited from two educational institutions in Ireland: a secondary school and a private higher education institution. Both educational institutions were contacted and agreed to participate in this study. Written consent was obtained from subjects, as well as their legal guardians when under 18 years of age. All participants were volunteers, and no incentives were offered to participate in the study. The sample was selected utilising a homogeneous, purposeful sampling scheme, with the size being set according to purposeful sampling theory "based on the premise that seeking out the best cases for the study produces the best data, and research results are a direct result of the cases sampled" (Leavy, 2017, p.79). Demographics of the total sample population (*N=91*) are found in Table 1. All participants lived in Ireland at the time of the study.

Table 1. Sample demographics

General Features	(N=91)	%
Sex		
Female	57	62.6
Male	34	37.4
Age range		
16 - 20 years old	65	71.4
21 - 25 years old	20	22.0
26 years or older	6	6.6
Current Education		
Secondary School	59	64.8
Private Higher Education Institution	32	35.2

2.3 Data Analysis

Reviewing previous literature on the subject, the phenomenon under investigation is still underdeveloped. One reason for this is that social media platforms have grown over the past decades, reaching their current peak levels in 2020, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, correlations have been seen among the perception of influencers (related to their credibility and trustworthiness), the impacts of social media content (either beneficial or harmful to followers), parasocial relationships (with closer relationships increasing the probability of susceptibility) and trust (especially of the social media influencer, but sometimes of an advertised brand) (Aw *et al.,* 2022; Breves *et al.,* 2021; Chung & Cho, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017a, 2017b; Kim & Kim, 2021; Leite *et al.,* 2022; Lou & Kim, 2019; Nafees *et al.,* 2021a, 2021b; Westerman *et al.,* 2014; Yuan *et al.,* 2016; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Despite specific types of harmful messages on social media being well documented to have negative impacts on young people, surprisingly little quantitative research has focused on this area (Kuehn *et al.,* 2019; Shafer, 2017). Due to the interconnectedness of parasocial relationships, perceptions towards influencers and consumer trust, these elements form the foundation of the Social Perception construct in the conceptual framework of SMI influence. In turn, 28 types of potentially harmful content form the Perception Towards Harmful Content in this framework. Despite these categorical classifications, it is important to keep in mind that there are multiple concepts under discussion, many of which are interdependent and must be considered together to present a fluid line of thought.

By a critical review analysis, the following first hypothesis was created and tested: "The set of constructs formed by the SUSIS questionnaire sufficiently represents SMI influence". Connections between the variables of concern was validated using a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique was employed, a method that is generally employed to test relationships among variables in a complex theoretical model, as it is the case of this research (Henseler *et al.,* 2015; Ringle *et al.,* 2014). SEM falls in the category of multivariate analysis, combining aspects of regression analysis, factor analysis and path analysis (Henseler *et al.,* 2015; Ringle *et al.,* 2014). Furthermore, SEM enabled the examination of the relationships between latent (unobserved) variables and observed variables, and to test the fit of the conceptual model to the data (Hair *et al.,* 2022; Hair *et al.,* 2017, 2019; Maciel *et al.,* 2014; Mueller, 1997).

SPSS and SmartPLS (Partial Least Square – Path Modelling) were used for statistical analyses; Excel was used in descriptive statistics and data organisation and visualisation (Excel, 2022; IBM-SPSS, 2022; SmartPLS, 2022). The reliability test was conducted to determine the level of accuracy necessary to obtain dependable results in the calculation of Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020). A Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient between 0.6

and 0.7 is considered acceptable for evaluating the scales, provided that the other validation indicators for the model are satisfactory. High construct reliability indicates that the measurements are consistent with the same construct (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

2.4 Evaluation of the Sample

The inverse square root method was created by Kock and Hadaya (2018). This method assumes a normal distribution and is suitable for models with continuous variables.

The formula used to calculate the minimum sample size is:

$N > (Z\alpha/2 + Z\beta)2 / \Delta 2$

In this case, I used a confidence interval of 95%, which means that $Z\alpha/2 = 1.96$, and a power level of 80%, which means that $Z\beta = 0.84$.

$N > (1.96 + 0.84)2 / \Delta 2$

I used a previously calculated value for Δ, which is 0.377. This value is likely based on prior research that suggests this is a meaningful effect size to detect in the context of the Structural Equation Model (Kock & Hadaya, 2018).

Considering CI95%, the sample size was calculated to ensure a sufficient *N* for the correlations made using the formula by Kock and Hadaya (2018) below. No missing data points were present so no corrections for missing values were necessary. The Structural Equation Model was analysed considering 4 aspects: Reliability, Internal Consistency, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity (Kock & Hadaya, 2018).

$N > (2.486/0.377)^2$
$N > (6.594)^2$

$N > 43.4$ ∴ 44 (sample size)

Therefore, the minimum sample size of 44 is to ensure adequate power for the analyses based on the chosen confidence interval, power level, and effect size. The sample size in this research is 91.

3. Results

3.1 Factors, Indicators and Variables

A structural equation model (SEM) was developed to represent SMI influence using the SUSIS questionnaire. The questions that compose SUSIS were evaluated to create a model composed of 25 indicators and 2 convergence areas, below. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Principal Component Analysis (PCA) filtered out 38 factors (Table 2). Factors were eliminated if Factor Loadings < 0.3000 (by EFA) or if the presence of the indicator explained < 70% of the variance of the dependent variable.

Convergence Area: **SOCIAL_PERCEPTION**

- **CT1**_Perception;
- **CT3**_Parasocial;
- **CT4**_Trust.

Convergence Area: **HARMFUL**

- **CT2**_Harm_1_Addictive and Vicious Content;
- **CT2**_Harm_2_Wrongful and Unreasonable Content;
- **CT2**_Harm_3_Fraudulent and Hazardous Content;
- **CT2**_Harm_4_Noxious Content;
- **CT2**_Harm_5_Delusory Content.

Table 2. List of indicator constructs, their question source, the number of indicators and which were eliminated or kept after filter criteria

		Indicators		
Indicator Constructs	Source	Total	Eliminated	Remaining
CT1_Perception	Q2	17	3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	1, 2, 6
CT2_Harm_1_Addictive	Q3	5	11	2, 9, 10, 12
CT2_Harm_2_Wrongful /Unreasonable	Q3	11	13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25	15, 16, 24
CT2_Harm_3_ Fraudulent	Q3	4	27	22, 23, 26
CT2_Harm_4_ Noxious	Q3	5	4, 28	3, 7, 8
CT2_Harm_5_ Delusory	Q3	3	N/A	1, 5, 6
CT3_Parasocial	Q7	11	16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26	18, 19, 24
CT4_Trust	Q7	9	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 39	36, 37, 38

The SEM was initially composed of 11 constructs: Perception, Harm_1_Addictive, Harm_2_Wrongful, Harm_3_Fraudulent, Harm_4_Noxious, Harm_5_Delusory, Parasocial, Trust, SOCIAL_PERCEPTION, HARMFUL and INFLUENCE_SMI. A discriminant validity assessment was performed, considering a criterion by Hulland (1999), by which an indicator is acceptable with a factor loading ≥ 0.708. Hair *et al.* (2022) suggest removing all indicators below this cut-off from the model, whereupon 25 indicators remained to compose the SEM.

The model that represents SMI influence was thus composed of 11 constructs and 25 observable variables (Table 3). Exogenous latent variables are explained by previously calculated values, external to the model, and are therefore explainable through observable variables. In turn, endogenous variables are explained through exogenous variables. The 25 observable variables (SUSIS) used in the model are of the ordinal, qualitative type (representing 5 levels) and the latent variables are of the continuous, quantitative type.

Table 3. Organisation of latent variables and the number of constituent indicators for each construct

Constructs			
Endogenous Latent Variables		Exogenous Latent Variables	Number of Indicators
INFLUENCE_SMIs	SOCIAL_ PERCEPTION	C1_Perception	3
		C3_Parasocial	3
		C4_Trust	3
	HARMFUL	H_Addictive	4
		H_Wrongful	3
		H_Fraudulent	3
		H_Noxious	3
		H_Delusory	3

3.2 Reliability, Internal Consistency, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity

The reliability of the indicators measures the strength of the dependence of the latent variable on the observable variables. It is strong when the factor loading is ≥ 0.708 (Hulland, 1999). The 25 indicators that passed the filter criteria and their factor loadings can be found in Table 4, sorted by their constituent construct.

The internal consistency of the constructs refers to how the indicators of the construct are interrelated; the reliability criterion states that the reliability is acceptable when RhoC is between 0.6 and 0.95 and Cronbach's α is > 0.7 (Diamantopoulos *et al.,* 2012). The convergent validity of a construct correlates to how much said construct converges to explain the variance of the indicators. This is measured by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and is defined as the

square of the average of the factor loadings associated to the construct. AVE is considered acceptable when > 0.5 (Hair *et al.,* 2022).

Discriminant validation assesses if a variable is sufficiently distinct from other variables. The test is performed by comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to the correlation between the constructs, with the former expected to be higher than the latter. The discriminant validity of the construct correlates to the relationship between a heterotrait (HT) and monotrait (MT), acceptable when HT/MT < 0.9 (Henseler *et al.,* 2015). The heterotrait-monotrait ratio is the average of all indicator correlations among constructs that measure different constructs (heterotrait-heteromethod correlations) in relation to the geometric average of the average correlations of the indicators that measure the same construct (monotrait-heteromethod correlations).

The values of RhoC, Cronbach's α, AVE and HT/MT ratio (when applicable) for each construct can be found in Table 5.

Table 4. Indicators that passed filter criteria and their factor loadings, indicating reliability. All factor loadings were considered strong (≥ 0.708) unless otherwise noted

Construct	Indicators (Factor Loadings)
C1_Perception	Q2_1 (0.843)
	Q2_2 (0.919)
	Q2_6 (0.675; weak)
C3_Parasocial	Q7_18 (0.850)
	Q7_19 (0.861)
	Q7_24 (0.776)
C4_Trust	Q7_36 (0.933)
	Q7_37 (0.937)
	Q7_38 (0.909)
H_ADDICTIVE	Q3_2 (0.689)
	Q3_10 (0.878)
	Q3_9 (0.940)
	Q3_12 (0.706)
H_WRONGFUL	Q3_15 (0.854)
	Q3_16 (0.880)
	Q3_24 (0.858)
H_FRAUDULENT	Q3_22 (0.881)
	Q3_23 (0.946)
	Q3_26 (0.761)
H_NOXIOUS	Q3_3 (0.765)
	Q3_7 (0.884)
	Q3_8 (0.872)
H_DELUSORY	Q3_1 (0.795)
	Q3_5 (0.864)
	Q3_6 (0.879)

Table 5. Rho C values and Cronbach's α for each construct (internal consistency), average variance extracted (AVE; convergent validity) and heterotrait/monotrait ratios (HT/MT; discriminant validity) of the constructs. All internal consistency data were in an acceptable range

Construct	Rho C	Cronbach's α	AVE	HT/MT
C1_Perception	0.761	0.743	0.670 (acceptable)	
C3_Parasocial	0.794	0.776	0.689 (acceptable)	
C4_Trust	0.920	0.918	0.859 (acceptable)	
H_ADDICTIVE	0.966	0.948	0.906 (acceptable)	
H_WRONGFUL	0.832	0.831	0.747 (acceptable)	
H_FRAUDULENT	0.852	0.830	0.750 (acceptable)	
H_NOXIOUS	0.815	0.795	0.709 (acceptable)	
H_DELUSORY	0.803	0.802	0.717 (acceptable)	
SOCIAL_PERCEPTION	0.837	0.829	0.429 (low)	0.879 (acceptable)
HARMFUL	0.913	0.907	0.407 (low)	1.013(above acceptable)
INFLUENCE_SMIs	0.920	0.912	0.311 (low)	0.528 (acceptable)

3.3 Overview of the Structural Equation Model (SEM)

Correspondence between SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL in relation to INFLUENCE_SMIs can be interpreted as: The path coefficient of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION in relation to INFLUENCE_SMIs is 0.377 and the path coefficient of HARMFUL in relation to INFLUENCE_SMIs is 0.771.

The relationship among the variables of interest was established as seen in Figure 2. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) identified the relationships among the factors used in the modelling method (LISREL), which was composed of Covariance Analysis of Structure, Latent Variable Analysis, Confirmatory Factorial Analysis and Path Analysis. The SEM employed a series of simultaneous dependency relations, which is especially useful when a dependent variable becomes independent in subsequent dependency relations (Mueller, 1997; Maciel *et al.,* 2014).

The exogenous (independent) and endogenous (dependent) variables are the constructs, forming the final SUSIS questionnaire (Table 6). Considering all evaluations, the final SUSIS questionnaire should be composed of 25 indicators and 2 convergence areas (Figure 2). The theories and concepts proposed in the conceptual framework, are sufficiently represented by the SUSIS questionnaire, and tested via SEM.

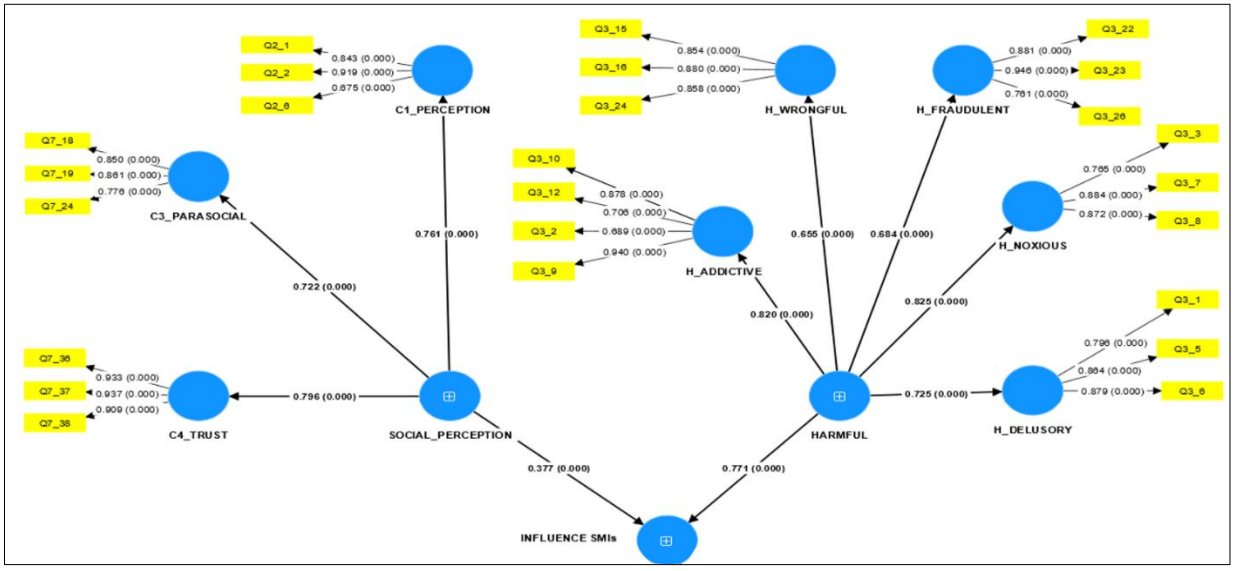

Figure 2. Overview of the SEM, with path coefficients and p-values

Note (Figure 2): P-values in parentheses were generated by SmartPLS, and for all constructs were <0.0005, being visualized in this figure as 0.000.

All indicators were measured using the Likert scale (1-5) with the following instructions: “Please read the scale carefully and then circle the most appropriate answer on the 1-5 scale.” Endogenous latent variables are found along the left of the table, while the constructs represent the exogenous latent variables.

Table 6. Description of Final Constructs and the Respective Items

	Constructs	Indicators	Item
SOCIAL_PERCEPTION	C1_Perception	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **I follow many social media influencers**	Q2_1
	C1_Perception	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **I enjoy following influencers online**	Q2_2
	C1_Perception	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **The influencers that I follow suggest helpful products or brands to me**	Q2_6
HARMFUL	CT2_Harm_1_ Addictive/Vicious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting violent content**	Q3_2
	CT2_Harm_1_Addictive/Vicious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting cigarette products or brands**	Q3_9
	CT2_Harm_1_Addictive/Vicious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting cigarette smoking**	Q3_10
	CT2_Harm_1_Addictive/Vicious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting sexual or pornographic content**	Q3_12
	CT2_Harm_2_Wrongful /Unreasonable	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting any type of bullying**	Q3_15
	CT2_Harm_2_Wrongful /Unreasonable	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting any type of abusive forms of marketing**	Q3_16
	CT2_Harm_2_Wrongful /Unreasonable	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting any kind of discrimination**	Q3_24
	CT2_Harm_3_ Fraudulent	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting fake news about politics**	Q3_22
	CT2_Harm_3_ Fraudulent	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting fake news**	Q3_23
	CT2_Harm_3_ Fraudulent	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting dangerous games**	Q3_26
	CT2_Harm_4_ Noxious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting unhealthy food**	Q3_3
	CT2_Harm_4_ Noxious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting alcohol products or brands**	Q3_7
	CT2_Harm_4_ Noxious	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting alcohol intake**	Q3_8
	CT2_Harm_5_ Delusory	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting products or brands**	Q3_1
	CT2_Harm_5_ Delusory	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting an ideal body image**	Q3_5
	CT2_Harm_5_ Delusory	Please indicate how regularly you see or receive the following kind of content from social media influencers that you follow? **Promoting an unrealistic lifestyle**	Q3_6
SOCIAL_PERCEPTION	CT3_Parasocial	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **If influencers that I follow start another social media channel, I will also follow them there**	Q7_18
	CT3_Parasocial	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **Influencers seem to understand the kinds of thing I want to know**	Q7_19

	CT3_Parasocial	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **Influencers that I follow are the kind of person I would like to play or hang out with**	Q7_24
	CT4_Trust	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **I would purchase a brand based on the advice I am given by the influencers that I follow**	Q7_36
	CT4_Trust	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **I would follow brand recommendations from the influencers that I follow**	Q7_37
	CT4_Trust	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? **In the future, I will purchase the products of brands recommended by the influencers that I follow**	Q7_38

4. Discussion

The hypothesis to be tested in this study was if the set of constructs formed by the SUSIS questionnaire sufficiently represents SMI influence. First, SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and INFLUENCE_SMIs have a confirmed relationship, as indicated by path coefficient = 0.377 and p = 0.000. Second, HARMFUL and INFLUENCE_SMIs are related, as indicated by path coefficient = 0.771 and p = 0.000. Therefore, two constructs, SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, composed of twenty-five questions on the SUSIS questionnaire, significantly represent SMI influence.

The SEM presented in this article validates the suppositions presented in the literature. There was a need to include these constructs in the theories of parasocial relationship, consumer trust and susceptibility to be influenced by Social Media Influencers (SMIs). The SEM (Figure 2) demonstrates that the two constructs SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, composed of twenty-five questions on the SUSIS questionnaire, significantly represent SMI influence. A final SUSIS Questionnaire can be seen in the supplementary material. The subsequent analysis confirmed that the SUSIS questionnaire is an efficient instrument to measure susceptibility to be influenced by SMIs.

Examination of the final criteria indicates that the measurement model was appropriate for establishing the validity and reliability of the constructs presented in this study, as well as for developing the presented structural model. The young sample who participated in this study were therefore found to be susceptible to be influenced by SMIs from different perspectives, both arguably positive and negative. By extension, the sample population who participated in this research might be influenceable by different types of harmful content posted by SMIs, as demonstrated in the SEM model, thereby confirming that SMI content might have both positive and negative influences on this young cohort. Nonetheless, such classifications may be at times subjective. Even so, this study confirms that there is an association of potential types of harmful content posted by SMIs (Table 6) and this young sample's responses in the SUSIS questionnaire.

Marketing often overfocuses on several transactional outcomes, such as followers' attitudes, perceptions and behavioural intentions (Kim & Kim, 2021). As mentioned in the literature, SMIs deliver messages to their followers by leveraging a pre-established relationship (parasocial relationship) and the trust that they have cultivated with their followers (Yuan & Lou, 2020). According to Eyal (2008), trust is vital in influencer marketing. This study confirms that parasocial relationship and trust are indeed effective indicators to measure the SMI susceptibility. This particular sample further proves this susceptibility after exhibiting some level of parasocial relationship and consumer trust, as confirmed by SEM.

From a marketing perspective, many indicators (Table 6) are directly related to SMIs' suggestions for certain products and brands, which means that these youth are influenced by SMI advice and suggestions to buy products and brands. This confirms that SMIs are important players for marketing communication strategies nowadays, mainly when the influencer is credible and trustworthy (Coco & Eckert, 2020; de Veirman *et al.,* 2017; Ki *et al.,* 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021; Pradhan *et al.,* 2022).

An interplay of between a brand and an SMI is also important, since a particular brand can play a role in the credibility and trustworthiness of an SMI when the brand is perceived as coherent with the influencer's image (Breves *et al.,* 2021; Breves *et al.,* 2019). This also falls under findings by Chung and Cho (2017), who demonstrated that parasocial relationships can lead to higher purchase intentions, as well as to a greater trust towards both the brand and the celebrity endorser. By extension, this may be applicable to SMIs, not just celebrities; however, it would depend on the SMI's reach, number of followers and level of engagement.

In light of the increasing prevalence of social media influencers (SMIs) and their potential impact on young cohorts, particularly Generation Z, it is of immediate academic urgency to understand and quantify this influence. The significance of this paper is underscored by its focus on Ireland, an under-researched context in existing literature, and its targeted exploration of Gen Zers - a demographic noted for their continual engagement with social media platforms and potential susceptibility to SMI influence. The SUSIS questionnaire, introduced in this paper, provides a novel and effective tool to measure this influence, serving as a key development in the field.

In my findings, I unearthed complex, multi-faceted relationships between SMIs and their young followers. Beyond the mere descriptive statistics, our data points towards a nuanced interplay between factors like SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL influence, indicating that the influence of SMIs isn't binary but operates on a spectrum. Moreover, these relationships are mediated by the parasocial relationships and trust established between the influencers and followers, thereby highlighting the complexity of this phenomenon.

The effects of SMI influence extend beyond mere marketing implications, touching on critical aspects of youth identity formation, socialization, and consumer habits. Given the pervasive presence of SMIs in the daily lives of Gen Zers and their potential for both positive and negative influence, the need for a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon is not just academically urgent, but also crucial from a societal perspective. By offering a robust tool to measure SMI influence and revealing the multi-dimensional nature of this influence, my study takes a significant step towards addressing this urgency.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenon of susceptibility to be influenced by SMIs previously represented a gap in the literature, especially from a marketing perspective. No research could be found at the time of this study with an Irish context to understand the impact of SMIs on young people or trying to understand this phenomenon from different perspectives in Ireland. Another notable gap concerned parasocial relationship theory and consumer trust theory, generally associated with celebrities, lacking associations with SMIs. The present study filled these gaps and moreover demonstrated that the cohort under investigation is indeed susceptible to be influenced by SMIs. In reviewing previous literature, I noted a call to researchers to study the influence of SMIs, as well as carry research about the impact of SMIs.

Through the SUSIS Questionnaire, a certain degree of parasocial relationship, consumer trust and perception towards influencers from a susceptibility perspective in this young sample could be confirmed. Moreover, the questionnaire confirmed that these factors can be used to measure the influence of SMIs on young people. Such a confirmation of the relationships among these variables, used to test and confirm the conceptual and SEM model of this study is unique and new to the literature, especially from an Irish context.

Parasocial relationships can be formed with social media influencers, enhancing the knowledge within this theory that has traditionally investigated relationships with celebrities. Consumer trust is also confirmed, and SMIs are therefore recommended in this study as key players for digital marketing campaigns through their advice and tips regarding products and brands.

The structural equation model (SEM) analysis (Figure 2) demonstrated that a model composed of two constructs -- SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL -- and 25 questions, representing the SUSIS questionnaire, can represent SMIs' influence in this young sample. The SEM technique was effective in examining the causal relationships between the constructs, suggesting consistency between the literature and the final model proposed in this research. Consequently, it should be possible to reproduce the instrument in other samples. The final SUSIS Questionnaire is available in the supplementary material section.

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Ethics Statement

This research complies with research ethics. Ensuring research ethics is a fundamental responsibility of researchers to protect the rights and welfare of study participants and maintain the integrity of the research findings.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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