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## **Investigating the mechanism through which consumers are “inspired by” social media influencers and “inspired to” adopt influencers’ exemplars as social defaults**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

*“That top-funnel, inspiration, awareness—those are what influencers are really great at, and they’re talking to their audience multiple times a day.”—Jade Broadus*

The social media influencer (SMI) phenomenon is attracting increasing attention both from academic researchers and marketing practitioners. In a simple sense, a SMI refers to an individual who has influence over others on social media platforms (Ki & Kim, 2019). In a stricter sense, a SMI is defined as a social media user who has developed a sizable network of followers by sharing his/her daily life and creating online content that inspires followers, which in turn, allows the SMI to influence those followers (Ki, Cho, et al., 2020). Because of this potential influence SMIs possess, an increasing number of brands are asking them to generate branded content that includes product placements or brand recommendations. This practice is referred to as *influencer marketing* (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing has become an integral part of companies’ brand marketing campaigns because they believe this new marketing strategy enhances consumers’ interest in the companies’ goods and services and directs traffic to their online stores (Ki, Cuevas, et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2020). In fact, consumers are following SMIs as sources of inspiration and turning to them increasingly for advice and recommendations about purchase decisions (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018; Grieb et al., 2019). For example, when consumers want guidance on the way to put an outfit together best or which fashion label to buy, they follow a SMI who portrays the lifestyle or look to which they aspire (Pastore, 2020). As influencer marketing’s popularity continues to grow, its value worldwide reached US\$ 4.6 billion in 2018 and is expected to grow by more than 25% annually from 2019 to 2025 (Feeley, 2020).

With influencer marketing’s exponential growth and its wide adoption on the part of marketing practitioners, academic researchers have also given much attention to this topic with the goal to identify

SMIs' roles, and its causes and effects. In doing so, much of the former research has treated SMIs' branded content as online advertisements and identified their role as that of a brand endorser (Kim & Kim, 2020; Thomas & Fowler, 2020). For example, Schouten et al. (2020) viewed SMIs as product endorsers who are more effective in product placements and recommendations than are traditional celebrities. Shan et al. (2020) also treated them as brand endorsers and indicated that the congruence between SMIs and their audience is an important factor that affects the audience's attitudes and behavior toward the SMIs' endorsements.

While some researchers have defined SMIs as brand endorsers, relatively little is known about their role from a more holistic and interpersonal perspective (Ki, Cuevas, et al., 2020). Given that social media were designed originally to create and share inspiring and informative content by building virtual networks, we were motivated to understand the SMI phenomenon primarily within the context of social dynamics. In response, we built on customer inspiration theory (Böttger et al., 2017) and social defaults theory (Huh et al., 2014) to investigate whether SMIs play a greater role than simply as brand endorsers, i.e., whether they serve as a source of inspiration for consumers, in such a way that consumers are "inspired by" SMIs and "inspired to" follow not only the SMIs' opinions and product recommendations, but also their lifestyle and aesthetic standards, and thus, adopt the SMIs as their own "social defaults". A *social default* refers to a standard (default) option that emerges when consumers are uncertain about their own preferences and thereby observe the choice (e.g., exemplar) that another person in their surroundings has made and adopt it as their own default option (Huh et al., 2014). Just as face-to-face interpersonal contexts motivate people to form social defaults by observing others' choices, we investigated whether a social media context also induces people to feel "inspired by" SMIs and, by extension, feel "inspired to" adopt the SMIs' exemplars (e.g., lifestyle, style, and recommendations) as defaults that are socially desirable to like and follow.

With the goal to understand the mechanism by which consumers are "inspired by" SMIs and "inspired to" adopt the SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults, we investigated its causal factors

in the context of social dynamics as well. While previous research has documented certain causal factors that affect consumers' attitudes toward SMIs, such as the number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017) and sponsorship disclosure (e.g., "SP," "Sponsored," and "Paid Ad") (Evans et al., 2017), these traits do not explain the way SMIs amass followers and exert influence in the beginning. To identify the principal traits that affect the mechanism by which SMIs are able to inspire their followers, we sought to identify the causal factors both with respect to SMIs' personality-determined traits (e.g., interpersonally close and interacting personalities) and their ability to create content (e.g., attractive and credible content creation skills).

With respect to identifying the SMI phenomenon's consequences, much of the prior research has used purchase intention as the criterion variable. For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) identified the effect of SMI-generated content's value (i.e., informative value) on consumers' purchase intentions, and Lim et al. (2017) found that SMI-product congruency affected purchase intentions. However, purchase intention does not translate necessarily into purchase behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). This illustrates the need to examine consumers' actual purchase behavior rather than simply their intention alone. Thus, we investigated whether consumers actually purchased the same products/services or brands that SMIs showcased on social media, referred to hereinafter as *choice imitation*.

Lastly, as much as SMIs' characteristics (i.e., the inspiration source) affect the inspiration mechanism between them and their followers, we believe that the characteristics of consumers themselves (i.e., the inspiration recipients) affect the extent to which they are "inspired by" SMIs and "inspired to" adopt the SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults as well. Thus, we investigated whether the inspiration mechanism between SMIs and their followers remains constant or differs across consumers' personal characteristics. In doing so, we posited that gender is an important moderator, as the literature indicates that gender generates a significant difference in individuals' motivational state (e.g., inspiration) (Druskat, 1994; Vick et al., 2008).

In brief, this study investigated:

1. Whether consumers are “inspired by” SMIs and “inspired to” adopt the SMIs’ exemplars (e.g., lifestyles, styles, and recommendations) as their own social defaults, which provide desirable standards to like and follow, and if so,
2. What are the key causal factors (i.e., SMIs’ personality- and content-determined traits) and consequences (i.e., choice imitation and social glue) of this inspiration mechanism, and
3. Whether the mechanism by which SMIs trigger consumer inspiration differs between male and female consumers

We review the literature on SMIs in more detail in the next section to gain a clearer understanding of the way influencer marketing is distinct from traditional celebrity endorsement, which informed the need to treat a SMI not simply as a brand endorser, but rather a valuable source of inspiration whose exemplars develop into social defaults.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Influencer Marketing versus Celebrity Endorsement**

Many previous studies have treated SMIs’ branded content as advertisements, particularly endorsements (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Shan et al., 2020). Endorsement refers to a way of advertising a product or service that employs well-known personalities (i.e., endorsers) who command a high degree of recognition (Abimbola et al., 2010). From this perspective, the literature on SMIs is largely consistent with the endorsement literature with two particular foci. One line of research focused on identifying the role of SMIs as brand endorsers and investigating the traits that affect their endorsement effectiveness significantly (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Shan et al., 2020). For example, Freberg et al. (2011) defined a SMI as “... a new type of independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90). Campbell and Farrell (2020) described a SMI, regardless of the size of his/her following, as an established endorser persona. Anchored by the assumption that SMIs serve as brand endorsers, academic researchers documented further several factors that predict their endorsements’ effectiveness, such as the type of sponsorship disclosure (e.g.,

“SP,” “Sponsored,” and “Paid Ad”) (Evans et al., 2017), consumers’ awareness of a paid endorsement (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), the congruence between the SMI and the product being endorsed (Kim & Kim, 2020), and the congruence between the image of a SMI and the consumer’s ideal self-image (Shan et al., 2020). The other line of research focused on comparing the effectiveness of influencer versus celebrity endorsements (Jin et al., 2019; Ozgen & Mahmoudian, 2021; Zeren & Gökdağlı, 2020). For instance, Schouten et al. (2020) investigated whether endorser type (i.e., a SMI versus celebrity) leads to significant differences in consumers’ perceptions [e.g., wishful identification (i.e., the desire to be or act like the endorser), similarity, and trustworthiness], and in turn, in endorsement effectiveness (e.g., attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intention). Their findings indicated that consumers show a desire to be more like SMIs (than celebrities) and perceive that SMIs are more similar to them and more trustworthy than celebrities, all of which help SMIs achieve greater marketing effectiveness than celebrity endorsers.

Despite the knowledge gained from previous studies, we identified two shortcomings. First, while the literature provides insights into what factors cause more people to be influenced by SMIs’ (versus celebrities’) endorsements, their theoretical contributions are limited in that many of them have overlooked the fact that SMIs serve as more than simple brand endorsers (e.g., celebrities). Celebrities are those who have gained fame and success, particularly in areas of entertainment, such as films, music, and sports. They become famous primarily because people admire their talent and work in traditional media (e.g., television) (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). In this sense, when brand marketers use celebrity endorsements, they do so to take advantage of the popularity or positive image of a celebrity endorser in an attempt to increase the awareness of the brand’s products or services (Rahman, 2018). In contrast, SMIs are those who have amassed both followers and influence by creating quality content on social media in a particular area (e.g., beauty, fashion, health, etc.) (Audrezet et al., 2020). SMIs gain fame by producing new and creative ideas and by turning those ideas into online content that inspires their social media audience (Ki & Kim, 2019). Thus, when marketers use influencer marketing,

they rely not only on SMIs' popularity, but on their ability to create content as well (Enke & Borchers, 2019). SMIs infuse a brand's product or service into their own online content in such a way that they show the way they use the product or service authentically in their own voice, which resonates with their social media audience (Mir & Ur Rehman, 2013; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Thus, while accounting for the fact that both SMIs and celebrities share common characteristics (e.g., popularity) that allow them to become potential brand endorsers, we believe that SMIs should be treated more fundamentally as content creators, rather than simple brand endorsers, who *inspire* their social media audience (Jin et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Second, compared to celebrity endorsers whom consumers find socially aloof, SMIs are deemed more accessible (Schouten et al., 2020). Unlike celebrities, who are perceived to be out of reach because they present personas that have been constructed and managed carefully to win the public's admiration, SMIs present themselves as they are (Audrezet et al., 2020; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). They do not feel the need to create a different persona to impress their audience, as they achieve their influence by being themselves and authentic (Jun & Yi, 2020; Senft, 2008). Given that unlike celebrities, SMIs are those who have built virtual social networks by sharing their personal daily lives, we believe that it is important to understand the influencer marketing phenomenon from a more *social and interpersonal* perspective.

Thus, in the next sections, we review the customer inspiration theory and social defaults theory upon which this study is based. First, we discuss the customer inspiration theory to gain a clearer understanding of the way customers are inspired in response to marketing stimuli, e.g., influencer marketing. Then, we describe social defaults theory to understand the way consumers' indirect social interactions with SMIs could lead them to adopt the qualities that the SMIs exemplify as social defaults, which subsequently motivate them to imitate the influencers' choices.

## **2.2. Customer Inspiration Theory**

### ***2.2.1. Customer inspiration: A dualistic concept***

Customer inspiration has become an important topic in the marketing field, as consumers are seeking something or someone inspiring increasingly so that they can actualize their ideal self and the lifestyle to which they aspire (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). With reference to this new consumer demand, Böttger et al. (2017) developed customer inspiration theory and conceptualized inspiration in the marketing context. The theory views customers as “recipients of inspiration” and defines customer inspiration as “... a customer’s temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal” (Böttger et al., 2017, p. 117). Specifically, the theory proposes that customer inspiration is a dualistic concept that can be decomposed into two components, a cognitive component of being “inspired by” something/someone and a motivational component of being “inspired to” engage in a certain behavior (Boettger, 2019). Stated another way, customer inspiration is conceptualized as the transition from the state of being “inspired by” an external factor, which is a psychological state that results from a source of inspiration, to the state of being “inspired to” actualize a new idea, which is an intention state that motivates the inspiration’s recipient to engage in a particular behavior (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020).

The first “inspired by” state involves the appreciation of, and accommodation to, a source of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2004, p. 958). In this state, customers learn about something new or better than their usual interest through external sources (Boettger, 2019). For example, the inspired-by state can be evoked when consumers are exposed to a trigger stimulus, whether it is a creative idea or a person in the external environment (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Past studies have indicated that nature, music, literature, or even watching others’ exemplars can elicit inspiration (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2000). In the marketing domain, marketing stimuli that provide customers with new ideas or product insights inspire them (Böttger et al., 2017). For example, influencer marketing stimuli through which SMIs collaborate with brands and showcase new fashion ideas with the brand’s product can evoke a state of (fashion) inspiration.

This inspiration an external marketing stimulus triggers leads customers to feel “inspired to” do something (Böttger, 2015). Past studies have indicated that customers in the “inspired to” state are motivated to actualize, emulate, or act on the qualities an inspiration source exemplifies, whether it is a marketing stimulus or a SMI (Böttger et al., 2017; Milyavskaya et al., 2012). For example, the more a marketing stimulus, such as a brand’s mobile AR app (e.g., a Lego AR Playgrounds app), inspires customers psychologically, the more they are likely to feel the urge to adopt and use the app to make virtual creations (e.g., virtual Lego characters or blocks), which in turn, may motivate them to purchase the real Lego blocks (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). In a similar vein, the more a conscious lifestyle influencer, e.g., Kathleen, shares her knowledge about, and experience with, ethical and sustainable fashion on Instagram and inspires her audience, the more her followers will feel inspired to adopt Kathleen’s stylish and conscious lifestyle as their own social defaults and take meaningful action. We discuss the concept of social defaults in more detail in section 2.3.

### ***2.2.2. Antecedents and consequences of customer inspiration***

In proposing the mechanism by which customer inspiration takes place through the transition in these two causally related states (i.e., “inspired by” and “inspired to”), the theory suggests further certain factors that may affect, or be affected by, consumers’ inspiration. With respect to the antecedents, the theory proposes that the inspiration source’s (e.g., SMIs’) characteristics may have a critical effect on customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017; Thrash et al., 2014). The inspiration source’s content that appeals to consumers’ imagination, such as the content that SMIs produce, may also elicit customer inspiration (Izogo & Mpinganjira, 2020). By contrast, with respect to the consequences, the theory proposes that customer inspiration leads to behavioral and emotional consequences (Böttger et al., 2017). From a behavioral perspective, the behavioral outcome of customers’ inspiration may be their exploration or unplanned purchase of products or services (Brodie et al., 2011; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Rook & Fisher, 1995). For instance, consumers’ inspiration that influencer marketing sparks may lead them to buy the same product/brand the SMI endorses, i.e.,



*choice imitation*. From an emotional perspective, the state of inspiration may induce positive emotional responses, such as a positive emotional bond (i.e., social glue) between the source (e.g., a SMI) and recipient of the inspiration (e.g., consumers) (Böttger et al., 2017; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). As such, customer inspiration theory specifies the specific mechanism by which marketers can identify the factors that influence customer inspiration and its consequences.

To understand the way in which this inspiration occurs socially, we discuss the social defaults theory (Huh et al., 2014) below. Social defaults theory proposes that merely seeing another person's exemplars (e.g., a SMI's lifestyle, style, and recommendations) can inspire the viewer and evoke the social default effect, in which the viewer adopts the lifestyle, style, and recommendations that the inspiration source exemplifies as his/her own defaults and is motivated to actualize them by imitating the exemplars. In this way, the social defaults theory adds to our understanding of the way social interactions influence and inspire people.

### **2.3. Social Defaults Theory**

Social defaults theory (Huh et al., 2014) draws from three distinct research topics, *default effects*, *social influence*, and *behavioral imitation* research. In integrating the three, the theory operates on the assumption that default effects can be implied by social contexts in such a way that observing another consumer's choice develops into a *social default*, which in turn engenders *choice imitation*. In this respect, the theory proposes two key concepts, social default and choice imitation. A default refers to the option that a consumer considers his/her first standard (reference) option and adopts as the status quo before considering other options (Park et al., 2000). A social default is formed when consumers are uncertain about their own preferences, and thus adopt the option that another consumer has made (i.e., observed choice) as their own standard option. When a consumer is unable or unwilling to engage in effortful deliberation before making a choice, seeing the choice of another in his/her social context also can inspire the viewer such that the choice observed develops into a social default (Huh et al., 2014; Ki & Kim, 2019).

The notion that social contexts have potent and unique influences on individuals' perceptions and behaviors is hardly uncommon (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). The mechanism by which others in their social surroundings inspire and influence individuals has been proposed by other traditional marketing theories, including social influence theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Kelman, 1958) and social proof theory (Cialdini et al., 1999). The theories of social influence (Cialdini, 2007; Kelman, 1958) and social defaults (Huh et al., 2014) build on a common premise that witnessing others' actions can have a strong influence on one's own behavior. Social influence refers to the process by which people adapt or change their opinions, beliefs, or behaviors as a result of social interactions with others (Kelman, 1958). According to Deutsch and Gerard (1955), social influence can be classified into two types—i.e., informational (also referred to as “social proof”) and normative—depending upon the individual's motivation to conform. Informational social influence describes a situation in which people are unsure of the correct way to behave and thus look to others for clues (or proofs) about the way to act, think, or feel about the correct behavior (Kelley, 1967). For example, if a person is visiting a fine dining restaurant for the first time, s/he may observe and emulate others' behaviors in an attempt to obtain guidance for his/her own actions. This type of conformity that derives from an individual's desire to be correct is referred to as informational social influence (or social proof) (Cialdini, 2007; Kaplan & Miller, 1987). In contrast, normative social influence describes a situation wherein an individual changes his/her behaviour to be liked, accepted, or fit in with a particular group (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). This type of behavioral change (i.e., conformity) stems from the need for a positive relationship with other people or from the desire to enhance a sense of social identity (i.e., an individual's sense of who s/he is based upon his/her group membership) (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). A common example of normative social influence is peer pressure (Vollmer et al., 2018). Many ill-advised behaviors, including drinking and smoking, can be seen as conformity behaviors in response to normative social influence, which is caused primarily by one's motive to avoid social rejection or to feel socially rewarded.

In these classic illustrations, social influence has been regarded to take place when individuals have clear goals and are confronted with direct social forces that are well within their conscious awareness. However, in recent years, scholars have begun to examine the social influence phenomena that are more subtle, indirect, and unconscious (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Consistent with this latter approach, Huh et al. (2014) theory of social defaults proposes that social influence does not necessarily involve deliberate processing. Rather, they indicated that people are often unaware of the presence or effect of the social influence (i.e., social default) on their decisions. For example, seeing the snack another person at a party chooses, even when no direct interaction necessarily takes place, elicits the social default effect, and motivates the viewer to imitate the other's snack choice (Tanner et al., 2007). This subtle, indirect, and unconscious nature of social defaults is distinct from the deliberate process of informational or normative social influence.

Indeed, seeing another consumer's choice can inspire the viewer to adopt the choice observed (i.e., social default), which elicits subsequent choice imitation (a term that encompasses both mimicry and conformity without reference to unconscious or deliberate processes), unless the viewer perceives that the default is inappropriate to follow or has other motivations sufficient to diverge from it (Huh et al., 2014). In this way, the "inspired to" state in the customer inspiration theory reflects the social default effect, in which customers feel inspired to adopt the qualities the inspiration source exemplifies as defaults. Applying this process to the social media context, we believe that even virtual, indirect social interactions can have default effects, in that the SMIs' exemplars observed (e.g., their lifestyles, styles, and recommendations) will become their audience's social defaults, which subsequently motivates the audience to imitate their choices.

### **3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

We integrate social defaults theory into customer inspiration theory to develop a conceptual model and test empirically whether, and in what way, SMIs evoke consumers' inspiration. Specifically, we examined 1) whether the SMIs' (i.e., the inspiration source's) characteristics, both with respect to

their content (i.e., attractiveness and credibility) and the SMIs themselves (i.e., closeness and interactivity), lead consumers to feel “inspired by” SMIs; 2) whether this “inspired by” state leads consumers to feel “inspired to” adopt the SMIs’ exemplars as their own social defaults, and 3) whether the “inspired to” state leads consumers to show favorable behavioral (i.e., choice imitation) and emotional responses (i.e., social glue). Lastly, given that the inspiration recipient’s own characteristics are also important in eliciting inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), we examined gender’s moderating role in the inspiration mechanism because the literature has indicated that it is a crucial factor to consider in the discussion of individuals’ motivational states (e.g., inspiration) (Vick et al., 2008).

### **3.1. Antecedents of Consumers’ “Inspired-by” State**

#### ***3.1.1. SMIs’ content-determined traits (attractiveness and credibility) affect consumers’ “inspired-by” state***

A SMI, unlike a traditional celebrity or brand endorser, is first and foremost a content creator. Vishal Jain, a SMI who has millions of followers, agrees that a true influencer should understand what his/her audience likes and create attractive social media content that inspires the audience (Forbes, 2020). Argo and Main (2008) conceptualized attractiveness as the extent to which something (or someone) is viewed as visually pleasing, and measured it by asking how attractive, appealing, or good-looking something (or someone) is. Adopting this conceptualization and operational definition of attractiveness in our SMI context, we define attractiveness as the degree to which a consumer finds a SMI’s online content attractive, appealing, or good-looking. Just as a person’s physical attractiveness influences consumers’ awareness, the extent to which a SMI’s content is visually appealing does so as well (Ki, Cuevas, et al., 2020). Aljukhadar et al. (2020) documented the significant role that social media content’s visual attractiveness plays in inspiring customers. Their interview findings showed that consumers use social media primarily to seek inspiration. In particular, the majority of the interviewees indicated that a social media post’s visual attractiveness (e.g., visually aesthetic image) inspired the way they wear clothes. In this way, consumers associated inspiration with the visual

attractiveness of social media content. Chan and Prendergast (2008) also found that the more pleasing a SMI's content looks, the more s/he inspires and captures his/her audience's attention. McQuarrie et al. (2012) indicated further that a SMI whose content is visually pleasing, particularly with respect to aesthetic taste and lifestyle, is likely to inspire consumers to aspire to the aesthetic taste and lifestyle the SMI showcases. Taken above, we believe that the more SMIs generate visually pleasing content, the more they will inspire their audience. This leads us to propose:

**H1:** The more consumers perceive that SMIs' content is attractive, the more they feel "inspired by" the SMIs.

As the influencer marketing business continues to grow and SMIs' content abounds, influencer fraud has become an important issue. As a consequence, more consumers demand that SMIs' content is accurate and transparent. Thus, credibility, which refers to the extent to which an individual views that an advertisement is believable and realistic (Williams & Drolet, 2005), is becoming more and more critical in influencer marketing. Previously, people relied on brand-generated sources to inform their consumption judgments (King et al., 2014). Lately, however, people have been found to depend upon user-generated content to a greater extent. In particular, consumers are adopting SMIs' branded content increasingly as their primary source of information (Ayeh et al., 2013), because they believe the content SMIs produce is non-commercial in nature and more authentic and trustworthy than are marketer-generated sources (Scott, 2011). Indeed, SMIs' tips and advice attract consumers because they derive from SMIs' actual experiences and help consumers reduce the risk associated with making a decision, particularly when they have little knowledge about the specific styles, trends, products, or brands (Smith et al., 2005). Nonetheless, the extent to which these SMIs inspire consumers may depend upon their subjective feeling about whether the SMIs' content is believable, credible, and authentic (Smith et al., 2007). Many previous studies have documented the significant effect consumers' credibility perceptions have on their attitude formation (De Veirman et al., 2017; Raggatt et al., 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Tormala & Petty, 2004). For example, De Veirman et al. (2017) showed that

consumers regard a SMI as a reliable opinion leader or tastemaker in a particular niche. This trustworthiness was an important factor that affected consumers' attitude toward SMIs and led them to evaluate the SMIs as inspiring and influential (Jin et al., 2019). Similarly, Raggatt et al. (2018) found that people are inspired more by the information a SMI communicates, compared to that of a celebrity, primarily because of its greater perceived authenticity and credibility. Thus, we posit that a SMI whose content is perceived to be credible is likely to inspire his/her audience. This leads us to propose:

**H2:** The more consumers perceive that SMIs' content is credible, the more they feel "inspired by" the SMIs.

### ***3.1.2. SMIs' personality-determined traits (closeness and interactivity) affect consumers' "inspired-by" state***

As much as the content SMIs create inspires consumers, the degree of engagement SMIs generate with their audience is also critical in eliciting consumers' inspiration (Lufkin, 2019; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). Engagement is described often as being interpersonally close with another during a social interaction (Banks, 2013). Interpersonal closeness refers to the affective ties, such as intimacy and connectedness, that an individual feels with another (Smith et al., 2005). In a consumption context, people use others as a source of inspiration, particularly those to whom they feel closest, to determine their own beliefs about styles, trends, and products (Wang et al., 2012). Even in an online shopping context, people base their judgment of an online recommendation's trustworthiness on their feelings of closeness with the recommender (Simons et al., 1970). Indeed, people have a tendency to follow a frame of reference (i.e., an inspiration source) recommended by those with whom they feel intimate, or by those whom they believe belong to the same group that they do (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Thus, we expect that SMIs who develop a greater sense of closeness with their audience will inspire them more effectively. This leads us to propose:

**H3:** The more consumers perceive that SMIs are interpersonally close, the more they feel "inspired by" the SMIs.

Interactivity, which refers to the degree to which an individual perceives that s/he is engaged in an interaction with a SMI (Burgoon et al., 1999), is arguably another important quality that elicits consumer inspiration. The online environment has created a new culture among people, which allows them to find, network, and interact with one another easily. Because the online context encourages such interactive communications, consumers also expect their communications in the online medium to be bilateral and responsive (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). It is through this interaction that social media users stimulate and inspire one another (Oh et al., 2017). Karatsoli and Nathanail (2020) also showed that the shared content on social media serves as a valuable source of inspiration and influence among consumers. They described the way a small and indirect, virtual interaction on social media can evoke consumer inspiration, indicating that a consumer's interaction on social media (e.g., shared reviews, photos, and videos) can affect his/her travel choice (e.g., whether to visit a place or attend an event) or shopping preference (e.g., whether to buy a product). Taken above, we posit that SMIs who provide a greater level of interactivity will increase their audience's propensity to perceive that the influencers are more inspiring. This leads us to propose:

**H4:** The more consumers perceive that SMIs are interactive, the more they feel “inspired by” the SMIs.

### **3.2. The “Inspired by” State Affects the “Inspired to” State**

Building on the theories of social defaults and customer inspiration, we suggest that consumers who are “inspired by” SMIs will be “inspired to” adopt the SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults. Specifically, we believe that the more consumers are “inspired by” a SMI who showcases new consumption-related ideas (e.g., inspiring lifestyles or useful tips and recommendations), the more the former are “inspired to” follow the SMI's exemplar observed as their own social default. Rauschnabel et al.'s (2019) work provided empirical evidence that the “inspired by” state indeed affects the “inspired to” state in the context of a brand's AR marketing. Their findings indicated that a

brand's virtual products an AR app simulates inspire consumers, which, in turn, influences them to try the new product showcased in the AR app (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). In a similar vein, we propose:

**H5:** The more SMIs inspire consumers, the more likely they are to adopt the SMIs' exemplars (e.g., lifestyles, styles, and opinions) as their own social defaults.

### **3.3. Consequences of the “Inspired to” State**

#### **3.3.1. Behavioral consequence: The “inspired to” state affects choice imitation**

Individuals' peers (e.g., SMIs), who serve as people's important references, influence their decisions about which behaviors are appropriate to demonstrate in a given social context (Martin & Bush, 2000). Lueg and Finney (2007) illustrated that the more a consumer translates a reference's choice options into social defaults, the more those defaults elicit choice imitation (e.g., shopping in the same store or buying the same brand). Similarly, Ki and Kim (2019) demonstrated that when consumers follow and observe a SMI whose taste and opinions are inspiring, they exhibit a strong desire to imitate the SMI. Thus, we posit that the more consumers are “inspired to” adopt a SMI's exemplars and choices as their own social defaults, the greater their propensity to imitate the SMI's choices. To derive a more specific finding from this social default effect, we identified this relation further on two levels: A relatively micro *product* or *service* level and a relatively macro *brand* level. This leads us to propose:

**H6:** The more consumers are “inspired to” adopt SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults, the more it elicits choice imitation, both with respect to a product/service level (H6a: CIP) and brand level (H6b: CIB).

#### **3.3.2. Emotional consequence: The “inspired to” state affects social glue**

The literature defines social glue as an empathic understanding and strong emotional bond between people (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). When individuals identify a SMI as a source of inspiration, they not only imitate the SMI's choices, but also develop shared feelings of emotional affiliation with him/her (Ki, Cuevas, et al., 2020). Landis et al. (2009) also showed that if an individual is inspired,



s/he is likely to act in some pro-social or pro-relational way. For example, the more individuals are “inspired by” social media content, the greater their propensity to engage in pro-social activities (e.g., sharing knowledge or giving feedback) (Izogo & Mpiganjira, 2020). Another study showed that when consumers are “inspired to” adopt the exemplars of a SMI’s shared lifestyle, style, tips, and recommendations as their own social defaults, they develop a feeling of attachment to the SMI (Ki, Cuevas, et al., 2020). Given the above, we posit that the more consumers experience the “inspired to” state in response to a SMI, the more likely they are to show favorable emotional responses, i.e., to develop an emotional bond with the SMI. This leads us to propose:

**H7:** The more consumers are “inspired to” adopt SMIs’ exemplars as social defaults, the more they develop feelings of social glue with the SMIs.

### **3.4. Inspiration Recipients’ Personal Characteristic (i.e., Gender) as a Moderator**

Customer inspiration theory indicates that an inspiration recipient’s personal characteristics affect the mechanism by which s/he is inspired (Böttger et al., 2017; Izogo & Mpiganjira, 2020). In particular, gender, which is one of the most important personal characteristics, has been found to generate a significant difference in the way online information influences and inspires people to use it to make their decisions (Correa et al., 2010; Druskat, 1994; Lin & Wang, 2020). Many former studies have sought to address whether men and women differ in their use of information and communications technologies (i.e., ICT: any media applications or services that allow users to create, share, or exchange information in a digital form), including social media (Aparicio-Martínez et al., 2020; Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020; Lin & Lu, 2011). For example, Thelwall (2008) indicated that women associate the use of social media more with building friendships and social affiliation, while men are more likely to use social media to communicate about a hobby or interest (Smith, 2011), learn about events (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), gain access to general information (Krasnova et al., 2017), or for educational purposes (Hall et al., 2013). In another study, hedonic needs, such as personal enjoyment or self-presentation, determined women’s motives for using social media more, while men’s motives were

related more to seeking information (Haferkamp et al., 2012). Several studies have explored further whether there are gender differences in the way using online information affects consumers' purchase decisions. According to Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), although men and women were equally likely to use online media for both personal and commercial purposes, men were more likely than women to be influenced by the online information others shared and base their own purchase decisions on it. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) showed that unlike women, men were more likely to attend to social media's online content to help them shop online. In contrast, women showed a tendency to view social media as a people-oriented platform in which they can interact with others (Eagly et al., 2000). These differences in the way genders are portrayed with respect to social media use and purchase decisions offer interesting insights into the way men and women may differ in the inspiration mechanism between SMIs and consumers as well. However, no studies have yet investigated the way gender affects the mechanism by which consumers feel "inspired by" SMIs and "inspired to" adopt their exemplars as social defaults. Thus, while we predict that gender will moderate the relations we hypothesize (i.e., H1-H7), we will not formulate a hypothesis with a specific direction for the proposed moderation effects, but identify their effects' directions and sizes empirically. Figure 1 illustrates our research model.

----- Figure 1 about here -----

#### 4. METHODS

We developed an online survey questionnaire and administered it via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). In developing the questionnaire, we invited two social media research experts at a major Southeastern university in the U.S. to evaluate the questions' clarity and relevance to the constructs. The measurement items were adapted from scales validated previously. The items for *attractiveness* were adapted from Argo and Main (2008), *credibility* from Williams and Drolet (2005), *closeness* from Joo et al. (2017), *interactivity* from Ki and Kim (2019), "*inspired by*" from Hinsch et al. (2020), "*inspired to*" from Kwon and Boger (2021) and Ki and Kim (2019), *choice imitation* from Yoo and

Donthu (2001), and *social glue* from Jebarajakirthy and Yoganthan (2014). We invested additional effort when we adapted the questions about *choice imitation* by inviting another academic expert in psychology to ensure that we asked about respondents' choice imitation that took place after SMIs' postings.

Based upon the experts' feedback, minor revisions were made in the questionnaire. For example, the scale items for the "inspired by" state were adopted from the scales used in Hinsch et al.'s (2020) study, which was designed to measure the extent to which consumers feel "inspired by" a mobile app. The original scale items of their study included "Using this app was inspiring," "Using this app stimulated my imagination," and "Using this app spontaneously gave me new and unexpected ideas." In our study, these items were revised to "[SMI] is an inspiration to me," "[SMI] is very motivational," and "[SMI] inspired me to get new ideas unexpectedly and spontaneously." As for the "inspired to" state, the original scale item "I felt a desire to do something" was revised in our study to "'inspired by' [SMI], I want to have a lifestyle more like him/her." With respect to the scale items of "social glue", we revised the original item in Jebarajakirthy and Yoganthan (2014) "I feel like there is a 'bond' between the staff and myself" to "There is a bond between [SMI] and me". The academic expert in psychology reviewed and confirmed all of the adapted items to ensure their face validity before the online survey was distributed.

The final questionnaire was distributed to MTurk masters who lived in the U.S. and had a HIT approval rate greater than 97. To ensure our data's quality further, we limited the survey participants to those between the ages of 18 and 49 who accessed social media regularly. In addition, we limited the participants to Instagram or YouTube users, as Instagram (89%) and YouTube (70%) were cited as the top two most strategically important social media venues for influencer marketing, followed by Facebook (45%) (Mediakix, 2019). Before answering the questions, respondents were asked to read the definition and examples of SMIs carefully. After they read our study's context, they were asked to name one of their favorite SMIs on Instagram or YouTube and state which specific area (e.g., beauty,

health, fashion, food, etc.) in which the SMI specialized. The names of the SMIs the respondents provided were embedded automatically in the remaining sections of the questionnaire. The items for *choice imitation* were measured on a nominal scale (i.e., “yes” or “no”), while other items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

## 5. ANALYSES AND RESULTS

A dataset of 455 responses was collected for analysis. A prior statistical power analysis was computed using G\*Power v. 3.1. According to the *F* tests results, a minimum sample size of 242 was required for a regression model with 25 predictors to achieve 95% power (> the recommended threshold 80%) in detecting a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ) at a significance level of  $\alpha = .05$  (Cohen, 2013). Thus, our sample size was deemed to have sufficient power for further analyses.

The descriptive analysis showed that approximately 52.3% of our respondents were male, while 47.7% were female. The majority of the respondents was between 26 and 36 years (53.4%), Caucasian (64.8%), and single (56.7%). Most held a bachelor’s degree (48.4%) and earned an annual household income of less than \$20,000–\$59,999 (50.0%). Approximately 33.4% indicated that they spent more than one hour on Instagram or YouTube on a typical day. The respondents’ selected SMIs’ areas of specialty were beauty (22.2%), followed by health (11.6%), fashion (9%), food (5.7%), family (4.4%), travel (3.3%), home (1.5%), and others (e.g., technology, music, etc.).

### 5.1. Measurement Model Results

We conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation to verify our factors’ internal consistency (Abdi & Williams, 2010). According to the results, all of the items adopted for each factor loaded dominantly on a single component with satisfactory factor scores, which validated that our constructs’ structure was organized well. Further, we evaluated our measurement model using SEM analysis, which indicated a satisfactory model fit:  $\chi^2_{741} = 1629.93$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.20$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .93, NFI = .90, and RMSEA = .04. In addition, we tested the scales’ convergent and

discriminant validity. As shown in Table 1, our instrument demonstrated convergent validity, as all factor loadings exceeded the .50 threshold value, all constructs' average variances extracted (AVEs) were greater than .50, and all composite reliabilities exceeded .70. As shown in Table 2, the instrument also demonstrated discriminant validity, as the correlations between all possible pairs of constructs were lower than the square root AVE values. Although the correlation between “inspired by” and “inspired to” was larger than the square root AVE of “inspired to,” this was not problematic, as their correlation was below the .85 threshold (Kenny, 2012). The instrument's discriminant validity was tested further using a Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) approach. As shown in Table 3, the HTMT ratio of the correlations between all possible pairs of constructs was less than the threshold value of .85 recommended, and hence, confirmed discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

----- Tables 1, 2 and 3 about here -----

## 5.2. Structural Equation Model Results

The structural model's fit was also satisfactory:  $\chi^2_{786} = 2177.85$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.77$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .90, NFI = .87, and RMSEA = .04. As shown in Table 4, our results demonstrated that SMIs' content that was attractive (H1:  $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and credible (H2:  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) affected consumers' “inspired by” state positively. SMIs whose personal characteristics demonstrated closeness (H3:  $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and interactivity (H4:  $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) also elicited the “inspired by” state significantly and positively. The “inspired by” state's effect on the “inspired to” state (H5:  $\beta = .82$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significant as well. Further, the effect of the “inspired to” state on choice imitation (H6:  $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significant, both with respect to product/service (H6a:  $\beta = .39$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and brand (H6b:  $\beta = .39$ ,  $p < .01$ ) imitation. Lastly, the “inspired to” state's effect on social glue (H7:  $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significant as well.

----- Table 4 about here -----

## 5.3. Robustness Tests Using Probit Regression Models

We tested our hypotheses further with ordinal and binary probit regression models for the following three reasons. First, when survey questions are designed to rank respondents' level of agreement, the variables should not be treated as cardinal, but ordinal, because the values of ordered response variables are rather arbitrary. When ordinal variables are estimated using linear regression, it violates the linear regression model's fundamental assumption of the error term's normality, which results in a biased estimator (Winship & Mare, 1984). To avoid this problem, we conducted the probit version of the ordinal regression model to reflect the ordinal ranking of our 7-point-Likert scale responses. Second, for the survey questions that included binary measures (i.e., choice imitation: "yes" or "no"), we adopted a binary probit model that is a popular specification for a binary response model. Third, when a questionnaire includes respondents' demographic information, omitting these variables from the analysis results in biased slope estimates and larger errors. The probit regression model can address simultaneous evaluations of equations that involve both latent and observed variables. Thus, the ordered probit model and the binary probit model were deemed appropriate to test our hypotheses' robustness.

The equations in the probit regression models are presented in Table 5, where respondents' social media use, which includes the time they spent on social media per day and the platform they use (i.e., Instagram and YouTube), were included as control variables. The number of followers that the respondents' favorite SMIs have and the topic of the SMIs they follow (e.g., beauty, family, fashion, etc.) were also included as control variables in the probit models. Lastly, the respondents' demographic information—gender, ethnicity, marital status, education level, and total household income—were included in the equations also.

----- Table 5 about here -----

According to the test results of our ordinal and binary probit regression models (see Table 6), H1 to H6 were not only significant, but positive, indicating the hypotheses' robustness. However, in contrast to our SEM result, H7 was insignificant when we conducted the ordinal probit regression

analysis with both the explanatory variables (e.g., *attractiveness*, *credibility*, *closeness*, *interactivity*, and *inspired by*) and control variables included.

----- Table 6 about here -----

#### **5.4. Results of the Moderating Effect of Gender**

To test gender's moderating effect on the proposed relations, we divided the respondents into male ( $n = 238$ ) and female ( $n = 217$ ) groups. Table 7 presents the results of our group analysis. According to the results, the model held true for both groups, except that the effect of closeness on the "inspired by" state ( $\Delta\beta = .20$ ) and the effect of the "inspired by" state on the "inspired to" state ( $\Delta\beta = .16$ ) were significantly greater for male than female consumers.

----- Table 7 about here -----

### **6. DISCUSSION**

Guided by customer inspiration and social defaults theories, our study draws new attention to the SMI phenomenon by investigating whether and in what way consumers are "inspired by" SMIs and "inspired to" adopt the SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults. In doing so, we obtained a novel set of findings. The details of our study's theoretical and managerial implications are described below.

#### **6.1. Theoretical and Managerial Implications**

Our research contributes to academic knowledge about the SMI phenomenon in several respects. First, while the current literature has accumulated knowledge about the phenomenon, the majority of past studies has viewed SMIs narrowly by either defining them as brand endorsers (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) or online opinion leaders (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). However, our research shows that SMIs play a greater role than simply as brand endorsers, in that they serve as a source of inspiration for consumers. Living in a time when people are looking for ideas and inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), we found that SMIs satisfy consumers' need for inspiration by providing them with new ideas, some of which they may not have been aware or may find surprising. These findings imply that brand

marketers may benefit from influencer marketing if they collaborate with SMIs who are able to showcase new ideas and inspirational online content to their audience well.

Our research provides further insights into this aspect by showing that SMIs inspire consumers through the transition in two causally related states: from the “inspired by” state to the “inspired to” state. In particular, the results from both our SEM analysis and the probit regression models showed that the more consumers are “inspired by” SMIs, the greater their propensity to be “inspired to” adopt the exemplars the SMIs shared, including their lifestyle, style, tips, and recommendations, as social defaults. These findings extend the scope of the application of the social defaults theory from the face-to-face social context to the social media context. Just as face-to-face interpersonal interactions motivate people to form social default options by observing others’ choices, the social media context induced people similarly to feel “inspired to” adopt a SMI’s exemplars as their own social defaults by observing the SMI’s content online. These findings imply that SMIs exert a wider influence than do endorsers or opinion leaders, because they inspire consumers not only by providing word-of-mouth recommendations about certain products or brands, but also by suggesting which lifestyles and styles are socially desirable to like and imitate. Thus, marketers should recognize that consumers follow not only SMIs’ opinions or recommendations, but also model the lifestyle and aesthetic standards they set and lead.

Third, our findings show that both SMIs’ content and personalities (i.e., characteristics of the inspiration source) affect consumers’ inspiration in a social media context. Specifically, we found that the more consumers perceive that SMIs’ social media content is visually *appealing* and *credible*, the more they are “inspired by” the SMIs. Further, the more they perceive that SMIs are *interpersonally close* and *interactive*, the greater the audience’s propensity to identify these SMIs as a source of inspiration. While previous studies have pinpointed various factors that confer SMIs’ influence, such as the number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017), followees (De Veirman et al., 2017), shares (Bakshy et al., 2011), and post frequency (Freberg et al., 2011), our findings show that the fundamental



traits that inspire consumers are SMIs' personality- and content-determined characteristics, which ultimately allow SMIs to exert an influence on their followers. Thus, to maximize consumer inspiration's appeal, we recommend that marketers partner with SMIs whose personalities are friendly and interactive, and whose online content is visually appealing and authentic.

Our study provides additional insights for the literature by measuring influencer marketing's effect on consumers' choice imitation and social glue. While prior studies have estimated its effect on social media advertising recognition (De Veirman et al., 2017), brand attitude (Evans et al., 2017), or purchase intention (Evans et al., 2017), none has estimated the audience's actual choice imitation in response to SMIs' posts. By using individuals' choice imitation experiences (i.e., having bought one of the same products, services, or brands SMIs posted on their social media) as one of the crucial dependent variables in our study, we find that the more consumers feel "inspired to adopt SMIs' exemplars as social defaults", the greater the former's propensity to imitate the SMIs' choices both at the product/service and brand levels. Therefore, brand marketers should note that the inspiration SMIs provide indeed appeals to consumers significantly and encourages them to buy the marketers' products and brands. As for the "inspired to" state's emotional consequence, our findings supported in part the "inspired to adopt SMIs' exemplars as social defaults" state's significant effect on social glue. While our SEM analysis confirmed the significant effect of the "inspired to" state on social glue, the same relation was insignificant when the probit regression model was used. This implies that the influence of the "inspired to" state on social glue should be interpreted with caution.

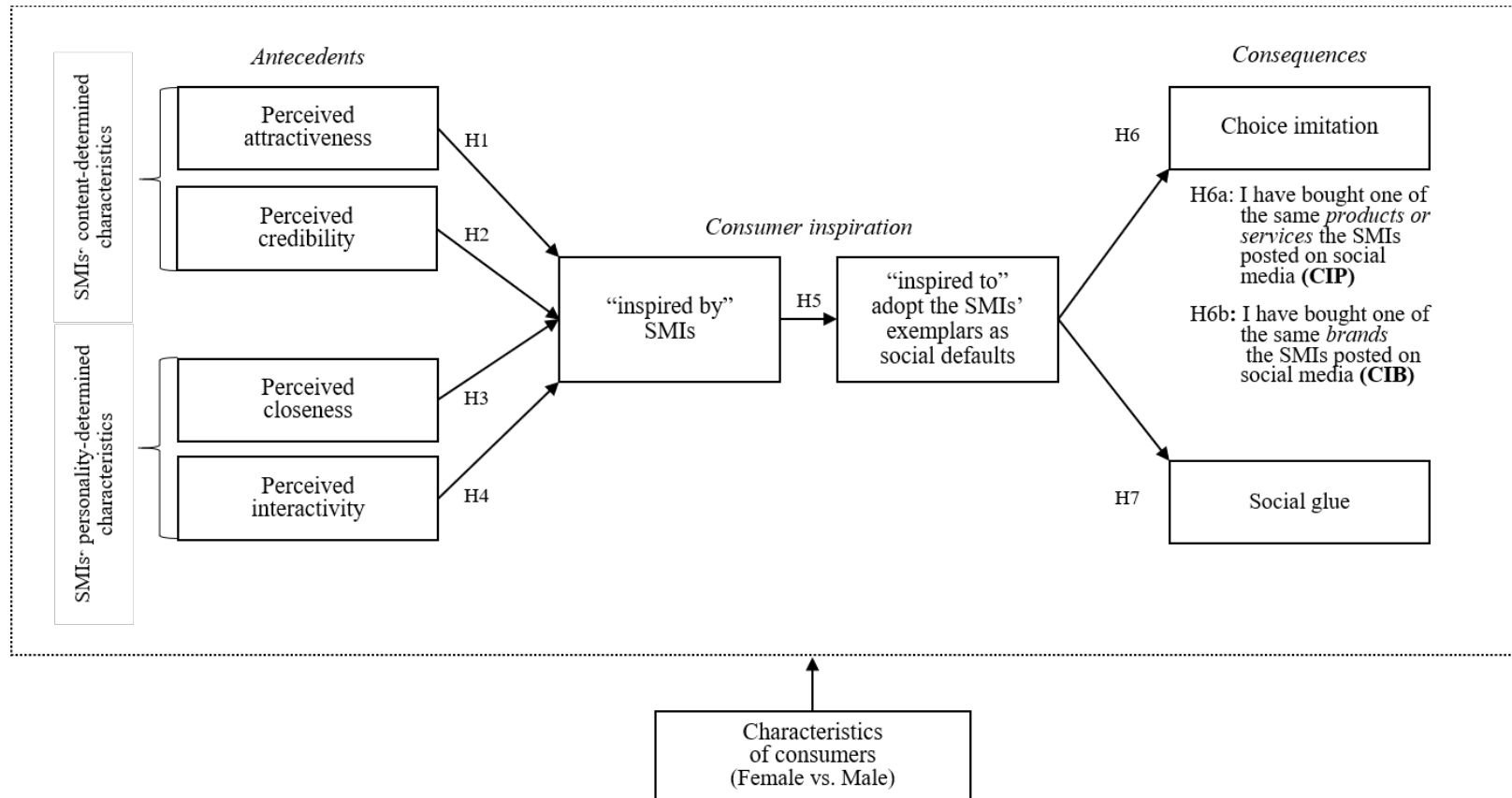
Lastly, our findings provide insights for the SMI literature by investigating whether and the way in which the inspiration mechanism between SMIs and consumers differs by consumers' gender. We found that the relations in our research model held true for both female and male consumers, except in two paths. The influence that closeness had on the "inspired by" state and that the "inspired by" state had on the "inspired to" state was relatively greater among male than female consumers. Similar to the way male consumers are more likely than female consumers to use social media to find information

(Krasnova et al., 2017) and are influenced relatively more by the online information when they make their purchase decisions Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), our findings imply that male consumers are more likely than females to adopt the exemplars of SMIs they observe as their own defaults. Given these findings, practitioners whose target consumers are predominantly male could benefit by adding new or informational ideas related to a product or brand in the online content of SMIs whom male consumers feel more “inspired to” like and follow than female consumers do. Further, it is notable that the closeness trait is particularly important in eliciting male consumers’ “inspired by” state compared to female consumers. Therefore, when marketers design influencer marketing that targets male consumers, they may wish to collaborate with SMIs whose personality features a high level of closeness. For example, by partnering with SMIs who have hobbies or interests similar to their target consumers, marketers may be able to maximize the closeness appeal and thus increase their influencer marketing campaigns’ effectiveness.

## **6.2. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

Although our study provides new insights into influencer marketing by investigating the inspiration mechanism between SMIs and their followers, it has some contextual limitations. First, our data were based on respondents who reside in the U.S. and were largely between the ages of 26 and 36. Therefore, our research findings should be generalized with caution. Second, a future study could investigate whether our proposed model—indicating that social closeness and interactivity are critical in eliciting consumer inspiration—is also applicable in a luxury product or brand context, which generally employs socially distant and/or idealized models in its marketing tactics. Finally, as several control variables were found to be significant in some of our hypothesized relations, future researchers may want to examine their direct effects on consumers’ behavioral or emotional responses as a consequence of influencer marketing. For example, our probit regression model results showed that compared to consumers of other ethnicities, Caucasians were less likely to feel “inspired-by” SMIs. By contrast, compared to their counterparts, married consumers were more likely to feel “inspired to”

adopt SMIs' exemplars as their own social defaults and develop social glue with SMIs. In addition, the higher the consumers' education level, the more likely they were to imitate SMIs' choices. Taking note of the above, we hope that our findings will motivate future researchers to investigate other potential elements that affect consumers' inspirational states in the context of influencer marketing across a wider range of brand contexts (e.g., luxury brands), and overcome this study's methodological and contextual limitations.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

**Table 1.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results ( $n = 455$ )

Measurement	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
<i>Attractiveness</i>		.70	.87
I find [SMI's name]'s content good-looking.	.84		
I find [SMI]'s content attractive.	.83		
I find [SMI]'s content visually appealing.	.85		
<i>Credibility</i>		.69	.87
I find that [SMI]'s content is believable.	.81		
I find that [SMI]'s content is credible.	.88		
I find that [SMI]'s content is authentic.	.80		
<i>Closeness</i>		.68	.86
When looking at [SMI]'s social media, I feel close to him/her.	.78		
When looking at [SMI]'s social media, I feel that s/he could be a friend of mine.	.86		
When looking at [SMI]'s social media, I feel that I could belong to the same group as s/he.	.83		
<i>Interactivity</i>		.78	.93
I feel that [SMI] would reply to me if I send a private message.	.89		
I feel that [SMI] would reply to me if I post a comment.	.92		
I feel that [SMI] would respond to me quickly and efficiently if I post a comment.	.91		
I feel that [SMI] would allow me to communicate directly with him/her.	.81		
<i>"Inspired by" SMIs</i>		.67	.86
[SMI] is an inspiration to me.	.89		
[SMI] is very motivational.	.83		
[SMI] inspired me to get new ideas unexpectedly and spontaneously.	.72		
<i>"Inspired to" adopt SMIs' exemplars as social defaults</i>		.58	.84
"Inspired by" [SMI], I want to be as stylish as him/her.	.61		
"Inspired by" [SMI], I want to have a lifestyle more like him/her.	.67		
"Inspired by" [SMI], I want to try some of [SMI]'s tips or advice.	.87		
"Inspired by" [SMI], I want to try some of [SMI]'s suggestions or recommendations.	.86		
<i>Choice imitation (No = 0, Yes = 1)</i>		.76	.86
After seeing [SMI]'s posts, have you ever bought one of the same products or services that s/he posted on his/her social media? (choice imitation-product level: CIP)	.87		
After seeing [SMI]'s posts, have you ever bought one of the same brands that s/he posted on his/her social media? (choice imitation-brand level: CIB)	.87		
<i>Social glue</i>		.76	.91
A close relationship has developed between [SMI] and I.	.91		
[SMI] created a feeling of warmth in our influencer-follower relationship.	.76		
There is a bond between [SMI] and me.	.94		

**Table 2.** Correlations and Discriminant Validity ( $n = 455$ )

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attractiveness	<b>.84<sup>a</sup></b>							
2. Credibility	.55	<b>.83<sup>a</sup></b>						
3. Closeness	.25	.39	<b>.82<sup>a</sup></b>					
4. Interactivity	.03	.22	.57	<b>.88<sup>a</sup></b>				
5. “inspired by”	.35	.43	.64	.51	<b>.82<sup>a</sup></b>			
6. “inspired to”	.46	.43	.54	.38	.77	<b>.76<sup>a</sup></b>		
7. Choice imitation	.10	.13	.33	.29	.35	.37	<b>.87<sup>a</sup></b>	
8. Social glue	.07	.12	.66	.63	.54	.41	.37	<b>.87<sup>a</sup></b>

Note: <sup>a</sup> Square root of average variance extracted (AVE) value by construct

**Table 3.** Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio of Correlations ( $n = 455$ )

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attractiveness	---							
2. Credibility	.55	---						
3. Closeness	.25	.41	---					
4. Interactivity	.03	.19	.47	---				
5. “inspired by”	.34	.43	.68	.43	---			
6. “inspired to”	.41	.34	.48	.28	.67	---		
7. Choice imitation	.14	.19	.49	.32	.53	.44	---	
8. Social glue	.10	.16	.70	.53	.58	.42	.55	---

**Table 4.** Structural Equation Model Results ( $n = 455$ )

Hypothesis	Structural path		$\beta$	t-value	Result
	Independent variable	Dependent variable			
H1	Attractiveness	“Inspired by”	.22***	4.29	Supported
H2	Credibility	“Inspired by”	.11**	2.01	Supported
H3	Closeness	“Inspired by”	.42***	7.26	Supported
H4	Interactivity	“Inspired by”	.25***	5.05	Supported
H5	“Inspired by”	“Inspired to”	.82***	12.64	Supported
H6	“Inspired to”	Choice Imitation	.40***	6.84	Supported
H6a	“Inspired to”	CIP (product level)	.39***	7.52	Supported
H6b	“Inspired to”	CIB (brand level)	.39***	7.50	Supported
H7	“Inspired to”	Social Glue	.48***	8.68	Supported
Fit Statistics					
$\chi^2_{(df)}$	$\chi^2_{(786)} = 2177.85$				
CFI	.91				
TLI	.90				
NFI	.87				
RMSEA	.04				
Note: * $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$					

**Table 5.** Probit Analysis: Regression Equations and Empirical Models

Regression	Hypothesis	Equations: Dependent variable = Independent and control variables
Ordered probit	H1 to H4	$INS - BY_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ATTR_i + \beta_2 CRED_i + \beta_3 CLOSE_i + \beta_4 INTER_i + \beta_5 USAGE_i + \beta_6 FOLLOWER_i + \beta_7 YOUTUBE_i + \beta_8 BEAUTY_i + \beta_9 FAMILY_i + \beta_{10} FASHION_i + \beta_{11} FOOD_i + \beta_{12} HEALTH_i + \beta_{13} HOME_i + \beta_{14} TRAVEL_i + \beta_{15} AA_i + \beta_{16} CAU_i + \beta_{17} NA_i + \beta_{18} API_i + \beta_{19} HIS_i + \beta_{20} MAR_i + \beta_{21} SIN_i + \beta_{22} OTHER_i + \beta_{23} EDU_i + \beta_{24} INC_i + \varepsilon_i$
	H5	$INS - TO_i = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 INS - BY_i + \gamma_2 USAGE_i + \gamma_3 FOLLOWER_i + \gamma_4 YOUTUBE_i + \gamma_5 BEAUTY_i + \gamma_6 FAMILY_i + \gamma_7 FASHION_i + \gamma_8 FOOD_i + \gamma_9 HEALTH_i + \gamma_{10} HOME_i + \gamma_{11} TRAVEL_i + \gamma_{12} AA_i + \gamma_{13} CAU_i + \gamma_{14} NA_i + \gamma_{15} API_i + \gamma_{16} HIS_i + \gamma_{17} MAR_i + \gamma_{18} SIN_i + \gamma_{19} OTHER_i + \gamma_{20} EDU_i + \gamma_{21} INC_i + \eta_i$
Binary probit	H6a	$CIP_i = \tau_0 + \tau_1 INS - TO_i + \tau_2 INS - BY_i + \tau_3 ATTR_i + \tau_4 CRED_i + \tau_5 CLOSE_i + \tau_6 INTER_i + \tau_7 USAGE_i + \tau_8 FOLLOWER_i + \tau_9 YOUTUBE_i + \tau_{10} BEAUTY_i + \tau_{11} FAMILY_i + \tau_{12} FASHION_i + \tau_{13} FOOD_i + \tau_{14} HEALTH_i + \tau_{15} HOME_i + \tau_{16} TRAVEL_i + \tau_{17} AA_i + \tau_{18} CAU_i + \tau_{19} NA_i + \tau_{20} API_i + \tau_{21} HIS_i + \tau_{22} MAR_i + \tau_{23} SIN_i + \tau_{24} OTHER_i + \tau_{25} EDU_i + \tau_{26} INC_i + \nu_i$
	H6b	$CIB_i = \tau_0 + \tau_1 INS - TO_i + \tau_2 INS - BY_i + \tau_3 ATTR_i + \tau_4 CRED_i + \tau_5 CLOSE_i + \tau_6 INTER_i + \tau_7 USAGE_i + \tau_8 FOLLOWER_i + \tau_9 YOUTUBE_i + \tau_{10} BEAUTY_i + \tau_{11} FAMILY_i + \tau_{12} FASHION_i + \tau_{13} FOOD_i + \tau_{14} HEALTH_i + \tau_{15} HOME_i + \tau_{16} TRAVEL_i + \tau_{17} AA_i + \tau_{18} CAU_i + \tau_{19} NA_i + \tau_{20} API_i + \tau_{21} HIS_i + \tau_{22} MAR_i + \tau_{23} SIN_i + \tau_{24} OTHER_i + \tau_{25} EDU_i + \tau_{26} INC_i + \nu_i$
Ordered probit	H7	$SG_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 INS - TO_i + \alpha_2 INS - BY_i + \alpha_3 ATTR_i + \alpha_4 CRED_i + \alpha_5 CLOSE_i + \alpha_6 INTER_i + \alpha_7 USAGE_i + \alpha_8 FOLLOWER_i + \alpha_9 YOUTUBE_i + \alpha_{10} BEAUTY_i + \alpha_{11} FAMILY_i + \alpha_{12} FASHION_i + \alpha_{13} FOOD_i + \alpha_{14} HEALTH_i + \alpha_{15} HOME_i + \alpha_{16} TRAVEL_i + \alpha_{17} AA_i + \alpha_{18} CAU_i + \alpha_{19} NA_i + \alpha_{20} API_i + \alpha_{21} HIS_i + \alpha_{22} MAR_i + \alpha_{23} SIN_i + \alpha_{24} OTHER_i + \alpha_{25} EDU_i + \alpha_{26} INC_i + \zeta_i$

Notes:

1. Dependent variables: INS-BY (“inspired by” SMIs); INS-TO (“inspired to” adopt SMIs as social defaults); CIP (Choice Imitation: Products/services); CIB (Choice Imitation: Brands), and SG (Social Glue)
2. Independent variables: ATTR (Perceived attractiveness); CRED (Perceived credibility); CLOSE (Perceived closeness), and INTER (Perceived interactivity)
3. Control variables: USE (time spent on social media per day); FOLLOWER (number of followers); YOUTUBE (= 1 if YouTube users; = 0 if Instagram users); BEAUTY (=1 if topic is beauty ); FAMILY (=1 if topic is family); FASHION (=1 if topic is fashion); FOOD (=1 if topic is food); HEALTH (=1 if topic is health); HOME (=1 if topic is home); TRAVEL (=1 if topic is travel); AA (= 1 if African-American; 0 otherwise); CAU (= 1 if Caucasian; 0 otherwise); NA (= 1 if Native American; 0 otherwise); API (= 1 if Asian or Pacific Islander; 0 otherwise); HIS (= 1 if Hispanic; 0 otherwise); MAR (= 1 if Married; 0 otherwise); SIN (= 1 if single; 0 otherwise); OTHER (= 1 if Other marital status; 0 otherwise); EDU (Education level) and INC (Total household income)



**Table 6.** Robustness Test Results using Probit Regression Models

Variables	Dependent Variables: INS-BY				INS-TO	CIP	CIB	SG
	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6a	H6b	H7
Attractiveness	.34*** (0.08)					-0.07 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.08)
Credibility		.19*** (0.07)				0.02 (0.09)	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.23*** (0.07)
Closeness			.34*** (0.05)			0.09 (0.07)	0.13** (0.07)	0.40*** (0.05)
Interactivity				.18*** (0.04)		0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.34*** (0.04)
INS-BY					0.77*** (0.06)	0.14* (0.08)	0.13 (0.08)	0.23*** (0.06)
INS-TO						0.19** (0.09)	0.23*** (0.09)	0.08 (0.07)
Use	0.11** (0.05)	0.11** (0.05)	0.11** (0.05)	0.11** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.06 (0.06)	0.14** (0.06)	-0.05 (0.05)
Follower	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.02 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	0.12** (0.06)
YouTube (reference = Instagram)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	0.11 (0.12)	0.31** (0.15)	0.17 (0.00)	0.17 (0.11)
Topic (reference = others)								
Beauty	0.19 (0.14)	0.19 (0.14)	0.19 (0.14)	0.19 (0.14)	0.42*** (0.14)	0.23 (0.17)	0.45** (0.18)	0.04 (0.14)
Family	0.21 (0.27)	0.21 (0.27)	0.21 (0.27)	0.21 (0.27)	0.42 (0.27)	-0.32 (0.33)	-0.11 (0.33)	-0.35 (0.26)
Fashion	0.08 (0.20)	0.08 (0.20)	0.08 (0.20)	0.08 (0.20)	0.54*** (0.20)	0.27 (0.25)	0.30 (0.25)	-0.13 (0.19)
Food	-0.25 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.23)	0.07 (0.23)	0.15 (0.29)	0.29 (0.29)	-0.16 (0.23)
Health	0.79*** (0.18)	0.79*** (0.18)	0.79*** (0.18)	0.79*** (0.18)	-0.03 (0.18)	-0.41* (0.22)	-0.33 (0.22)	-0.21 (0.17)
Home	-0.29 (0.42)	-0.29 (0.42)	-0.29 (0.42)	-0.29 (0.42)	0.06 (0.42)	0.12 (0.53)	0.04 (0.52)	-0.42 (0.41)
Travel	0.36 (0.31)	0.36 (0.31)	0.36 (0.31)	0.36 (0.31)	-0.05 (0.30)	-0.15 (0.37)	0.29 (0.38)	-0.08 (0.29)
Ethnicity (reference = others)								
African-American	-0.77 (0.52)	-0.77 (0.52)	-0.77 (0.52)	-0.77 (0.52)	0.10 (0.52)	-0.28 (0.63)	-0.08 (0.63)	0.54 (0.50)
Caucasian	-0.94* (0.51)	-0.94* (0.51)	-0.94* (0.51)	-0.94* (0.51)	-0.11 (0.50)	-0.09 (0.62)	-0.11 (0.61)	0.45 (0.49)
Native American	-0.79 (0.61)	-0.79 (0.61)	-0.79 (0.61)	-0.79 (0.61)	-0.28 (0.60)	0.07 (0.74)	-0.67 (0.74)	0.86 (0.59)
Asian or Pacific Islander	-0.83 (0.53)	-0.83 (0.53)	-0.83 (0.53)	-0.83 (0.53)	0.11 (0.52)	0.17 (0.64)	0.03 (0.63)	0.66 (0.50)
Hispanic	-0.67 (0.54)	-0.67 (0.54)	-0.67 (0.54)	-0.67 (0.54)	-0.26 (0.54)	0.53 (0.67)	0.20 (0.66)	0.46 (0.52)
Marital status (reference = separated, divorced, widowed)								
Married	0.16 (0.21)	0.16 (0.21)	0.16 (0.21)	0.16 (0.21)	0.38* (0.21)	0.20 (0.26)	-0.18 (0.27)	0.53*** (0.21)

Single	-0.03 (0.20)	-0.03 (0.20)	-0.03 (0.20)	-0.03 (0.20)	0.20 (0.20)	-0.06 (0.25)	-0.43* (0.25)	0.20 (5.64)
Other marital status	4.32 (116.23)	4.32 (116.23)	4.32 (116.23)	4.32 (116.23)	5.21 (113.21)	-	-	108.53 (0.00)
Education level	0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.16** (0.07)	0.15** (0.07)	-0.03 (0.06)
Household income	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Constant	1.78** (0.80)	1.78** (0.80)	1.78** (0.80)	1.78** (0.80)	0.39 (0.76)	-2.84*** (0.95)	-1.85* (0.95)	2.38*** (0.76)
Goodness of fit	$\chi^2_{(24)}$ =269.49	$\chi^2_{(24)}$ =269.49	$\chi^2_{(24)}$ =269.49	$\chi^2_{(24)}$ =269.49	$\chi^2_{(21)}$ =284.17	$\chi^2_{(25)}$ =93.36	$\chi^2_{(25)}$ =94.42	$\chi^2_{(26)}$ =355.24
	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00	Prob > $\chi^2$ =.00
	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.19	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.19	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.19	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.19	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.21	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.15	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.15	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> =.21

**Note.** INS-BY (“inspired by” SMIs); INS-TO (“inspired to” adopt SMIs as social defaults); CIP (Choice Imitation: Products/services); CIB (Choice Imitation: Brands); SG (Social Glue); Use (time spent on social media per day); Follower (number of followers).

**Table 7.** Multiple-Group Moderation Analyses by Gender

Structural path			Male ( <i>n</i> = 238)		Female ( <i>n</i> = 217)		$\chi^2$ differences <sup>a</sup>
Independent variable	Dependent variable		$\beta$	<i>t</i> -value	$\beta$	<i>t</i> -value	
H1	Attractiveness	“Inspired by”	.16**	2.46	.29***	3.81	0.81
H2	Credibility	“Inspired by”	.06	0.90	.12	1.53	0.27
H3	Closeness	“Inspired by”	.54***	6.19	.34***	4.51	2.97*
H4	Interactivity	“Inspired by”	.21***	2.83	.29***	4.26	1.10
H5	“Inspired by”	“Inspired to”	.90***	10.47	.74***	7.58	3.96**
H6	“Inspired to”	Choice Imitation	.44***	5.30	.32***	3.96	0.00
H7	“Inspired to”	Social Glue	.64***	8.35	.35***	4.50	0.81

**Note.** \**p* < .10 \*\**p* < .05 \*\*\**p* < .01; <sup>a</sup> the difference in parameter between the two groups is inferred from the difference in model fit between the unconstrained model and the equal path model; <sup>b</sup> unstandardized path coefficients and *t*-values in parentheses.

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