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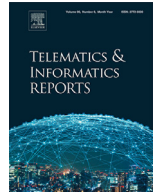
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The influencer sent me! Examining how social media influencers affect social media engagement, social self-efficacy, knowledge acquisition, and social interaction ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how exposure to social media influencer (SMI) content affects social media engagement (SME), knowledge acquisition, social self-efficacy (SSE), and social interaction. Structural equation analysis indicated that exposure to SMI content improves SME, perceptions of knowledge acquisition, and SSE. In turn, perceptions of knowledge acquisition improved SSE and improved both online and offline social interaction. Perceptions of knowledge acquisition positively mediated between exposure to SMI content and online social interaction, between SME and online social interaction, and between SME and SSE. The study concludes that following an SMI empowers users regarding perceptions of knowledge and SSE, and that these two then improve social interaction with others. These effects are important in the context of social media misinformation and the fact that SMI content is widely consumed and yet remains largely unvetted for accuracy and authenticity.

We encounter new developments in new media every so often, and the rise of social media influencers (SMIs) is one such. An SMI is exactly that; a person who influences others on social media. Generally, an influencer is a person who produces online content and shares it with followers for compensation [1,2]. By intensively using social media tools and deploying creative self-branding, influencers achieve opinion leadership status and recognition from a dedicated group of followers [3]. Even though many influencers become famous, they differ from traditional celebrities because they are self-made through personal branding and content creation, and they are not dependent on institutional media for recognition [4–6]. Also, unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs build intimate and trusting relationships with their followers by projecting authentic personas by sharing emotions as well as disclosing intimate details about their lives by "being real" [7,8]. This intimacy also allows them to build high credibility and trustworthiness perceptions among their followers [9,10].

Influencers come in many varieties depending on content, number of followers, or even the platform they primarily use (Ruiz- Gómez). For instance, Marques Brownlee (@mkbhd), a leading tech influencer with over 16 million followers, may be considered a mega YouTube influencer given the followership, content, and platform [11]. Regarding followership, micro influencers have less than 100,000 followers and macro influencers have 100,000–500,000 followers (Ruiz-Gómez). Content wise, political SMIs such as TikToker Imani Barbarin

(@Crutches&Spice) are those who create and share politically oriented content and social commentary, and they also act as digital opinion leaders to their followers [12–14]. Another popular content category includes fitness influencers. Examples include Anllela Sagra (@anllela_sagra) on Instagram with 16 million followers or micro influencer Latoya Shauntay Snell (@iamlshauntay), also on Instagram, with 79,000 followers [15].

Regardless of the demarcations of content, size of followership, and platform, common to all influencers is that they combine personal branding, skilled narration, and business acumen to build and maintain a cadre of followers over whom they wield considerable influence [16]. Their influence goes further than their interactivity with followers such that brands now use them as third-party endorsers for products and services as part of influencer marketing campaigns [1,17]. Some SMIs even impact national dialog on politics and public health [18,19]. As I discuss later, SMIs affect knowledge acquisition given that they are content creators. This makes them important stakeholders in contemporary communication because they now become information gatekeepers, a status once exclusive to the media elite and certain public figures [20]. This is important because social media platforms do not practice the type of fact-checking that institutional media agencies do, and this leaves room for the dissemination of misinformation. It is the uniqueness of their influence and their role in information-sharing that is the focus of this study. Using a mediated effects approach, this study examines

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whether following an SMI and engaging with their content affects the followers' knowledge and their social self-efficacy (SSE), and whether this ultimately affects how the followers socially interact with others online and offline.

Rationale

This study is meritorious in the following ways. First, as mentioned, SMIs are influential in contemporary communication. The emotional attachment they build with their followers is unique such that it may influence a follower's identification process as some followers strive to emulate the SMIs they follow [21,22]. Second, even though each influencer builds their own following, the collective effect of SMIs on social media users is large and growing. As of July 2021, UAE had the highest percentage of internet users in any country who follow SMIs (75%). Globally, nearly 43% of internet users follow an SMI [23]. Because SMIs are known for content creation, these numbers suggest that they are a rich repository of information and the effect on knowledge acquisition among their followers is an issue worth examining. Given that social media communication is interactive, it is also worth examining how this knowledge transfers from followers to others via social media engagement (SME), which refers to the user-content interactivity via sharing, commenting, retweeting, and reacting to content by liking, upvoting, and tagging, etc. [24–26].

Worth examining also is whether knowledge acquisition and SME via exposure to SMI content affects SSE and social interaction with others both online and offline. Social interaction is how people reciprocally influence each other during focused social encounters either face-to-face or virtually via mediated communication such as texting, messaging, or via social media use [27–29]. Self-efficacy generally, and SSE particularly, have been shown to affect a person's social interaction with others [30–32]. At the same time, research shows that social media and online knowledge acquisition affect a variety of behaviors both online and offline [33–35]. The confluence of the exposure to SMI content, the empowering effect of knowledge acquisition and the collective effect on SSE and social interaction is worthy of scholarly inquiry.

Lastly, this study uniquely adds to knowledge in the following manner. First, few scholars have examined how influencers affect SSE. Therefore, this study fills a gap in a largely unexplored area of SSE scholarship and specifically adds to scholarship that has examined SSE and social media. Second, given the newness of SMIs, the study adds to burgeoning research examining how influencers affect knowledge acquisition. Third, even though this study did not directly examine misinformation, it may inform future research on how SMIs affect the dissemination of and engagement with social media misinformation. This is important because possessing accurate knowledge reduces a person's susceptibility to misinformation and conspiracies [36,37]. This angle is even more important given that information-vetting and fact-checking are new developments on social media, and therefore, any examination of information dissemination on social media is advantageous. The study also adds to gatekeeping research. As mentioned, SMIs now compete with traditional media elites regarding information dissemination. It is worthwhile to examine how influencer communication is disrupting traditional gatekeeping processes.

Social media influencers and social media engagement

Like SMIs, SME is a relatively new phenomenon that arose with the advent of online media interactivity. The interactive aspect of online media allowed users to use content in ways they couldn't do with legacy media. Users could now create and co-create content, share it, react to it, and modify it [24]. Social media amplifies this interactivity via SME. In addition to the above-mentioned, social media users can comment, like, upvote, downvote, pin, recommend, use hashtags, edit content, and reuse other people's content and share it for further interactivity [25,26,38]. Users may also just choose to be part of someone's social

media milieu by following that person's account. This followership is the bottom-line for SMIs, and their clout is primarily based on such metrics [39].

Research shows that SME impacts political, civic, and health behavior. For instance, SME improves political engagement among young people [40,41], a demographic otherwise known to be politically apathetic [42]. SME also affects adults. Second screen use during political debates increases political engagement [43,44] as does sharing news articles with others online [45]. Merely engaging with politically minded users or engaging with others on activist social media sites improves one's political engagement and knowledge about related issues [46,47]. Regarding health behavior, SME is positively liked to smoking cessation [48], safe sex [49], stress management [50], and patient literacy [51]. On the contrary, SME is also linked to negative outcomes such as victimization [52], peer pressure [53], and tobacco and e-cigarette use among adolescents [54].

SMIs may also impact followers via SME. As mentioned, SMIs enjoy unique intimacy with their followers [4,5]. They achieve some of this intimacy via self-disclosure by "inviting" their followers into their private lives and sharing behind-the-scenes content, disclosing their real names, sharing emotions, and giving opinions on issues [4,55]. Followers also react favorably to SMIs who disclose product endorsements [10]. This interactivity builds high intimacy with the followers as well as improving perceptions of the SMI's credibility, which then boosts an SMI's persuasiveness [9,56–58]. This persuasiveness manifests myriad ways. Some followers may even emulate an SMI's behavior and habits via wishful identification [22]. Also, SMIs have been used for national smoking cessation campaigns as they positively impact public health messaging [59,60], they are highly trusted by tourists [61], and they drive nonpartisan political discourse [62].

On the contrary, SME via SMIs may influence followers negatively. With such persuasiveness, it comes as no surprise that only twelve SMIs drove most the disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines on social media. Dubbed the "Disinformation Dozen," this handful of influencers had a collective followership of over 59 million people among various platforms, and they shared over 500,000 Facebook posts and over 20,000 tweets in a two-month period [18]. Likewise, the pseudo-documentary "Plandemic" only went viral after SMIs linked to the QAnon conspiracy movement endorsed and promoted it [63]. "Film your Hospital," another COVID-19 disinformation campaign, also went viral similarly [64]. These campaigns and the resultant engagement among online users contributed to vaccine hesitancy, resistance to public health protocols, and undermined expert science ([65], para. 14; [66], para. 1, para. 5; [67]). Given that the research discussed above indicates a relationship between exposure to SMI content and SME, hypothesis one predicts the same.

H1: There is a positive association between exposure to SMI content and SME.

Social media and knowledge acquisition

Research indicates that social media use improves knowledge, even though this effect is not uniform across all types of information. For instance, social media use little improves political knowledge and may even reduce it some [68–70]. However, other studies show that social media has potential to improve political knowledge among users. SME via sharing, commenting on, and liking news articles increases cognitive elaboration about the content, even though this does not impact one's knowledge about current events [71]. Also, exposure to news via social media helps people recall the details of political stories more than details of nonpolitical stories, and political interest may moderate this process [72]. The caveat among these studies is that they focused mostly on two SNSs, Facebook and Twitter, and they did not account for the effect of SME on knowledge acquisition based on exposure to content produced by SMIs.

Regardless, other research shows that social media impacts the acquisition of other types of information. Simply interacting with others offline or online increases knowledge by virtue of social interaction influences. One way this occurs is via informational social influence, which is "an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality" ([73], p. 629). This refers to the likelihood of a person to believe that information from those they interact with is true and they may even comply to the dictates of that information. This dynamic has long been shown to a happen both offline and online [74,75; Zhang & Gong, 2019]. Other research shows that specifically, SME triggers information social influences [76,77].

Interacting with SMIs also impacts knowledge acquisition. Followers who deem an SMI's content to be of high value to them may spread this information to others via electronic word of mouth [21,78]. If they are involved early in the process, SMIs also help early adopters to learn new technologies [79]. Likewise, the popular unboxing videos by various SMIs have a social learning effect via the matching of product characteristics to a follower's purchase intent and also via meaning transfer between an SMI's review and a follower's attitude [80]. Research also shows that generally, political SMIs create awareness and improve knowledge about civic and political issues among followers [81,82], and such awareness leads to opinion change and action among some [83,84]. Likewise, some health-focused SMIs have raised awareness and increased knowledge on issues like cancer [85,86], compliance with COVID-19 hygiene protocols [87], and the flu vaccine [88]. Given that the literature discussed above indicates that SME and SMIs impact knowledge, I posit that following an SMI increases perceptions of knowledge acquisition about the content on the SMI's social media page(s) and that SME on that SMI's account also increases perceptions of knowledge acquisition.

H2: Exposure to SMI content increases the perception of knowledge acquisition.

H3: SME on an SMI's social media site increases the perception of knowledge acquisition.

Social self-efficacy and social media engagement

Psychologist Albert Bandura [89] proposed self-efficacy as a broad theoretical framework to explain how cognitive processes lead to behavioral changes. Self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" ([90], p. 3). This refers to someone's belief that they can use available information and experiences to attain a desired outcome if they behaved in one way or another. Social self-efficacy (SSE) refers to a narrower aspect of Bandura's self-efficacy framework and it focusses on social interaction [91]. SSE and its measurement scales have been modified since Sherer and Maddux separated them from Bandura's larger framework [92,93]. In their conceptualization of this phenomenon, Smith and Betz [94] defined SSE as "an individual's confidence in her/his ability to engage in the social interactional tasks necessary to initiate and maintain social relationships" (p. 29). As I discuss below, SSE applies not only to social media communication in general, but to SME and social interaction both online and offline.

Within offline social interaction, research shows that SSE is inversely related to aggressiveness towards others as well as to the likelihood of being bullied [32]. This suggests that those with low SSE are more likely to be aggressive during social interaction than those with high SSE, and this might be a result of negative past interaction such as bullying. Aggressiveness and bullying are also markers of toxic experiences during SME [95]. Indeed, data shows that social media users with low SSE are more likely to be bullied and victimized both offline and online [96]. SSE also moderates the relationship between agreeableness and a person's choice of conflict resolution strategies offline. Here, SSE is shown to inversely correlate with attacking during conflict situations, and to positively correlate with compromise during such situations [97]. This

suggests that those with high SSE are more likely to choose de-escalation tactics when in conflict.

In online conflict situations, SSE has been shown to improve the likelihood of social media users to step in and resolve cyberbullying and other aggressive behavior [30]. As discussed earlier, self-disclosure plays an important role in an SMI's relationship with followers [4,55]. Research shows that in both offline and online social interaction, self-disclosure and its antithesis, self-concealment, are moderated by SSE. Offline, the likelihood to self-conceal inversely correlates with a person's SSE [98]. Research on online interaction shows the same, with SSE affecting the association between personality traits (such as extroversion, openness, and openness) and online prosocial behaviors such sharing, mentoring, encouraging others [99].

In online social interaction, SSE is related to social capital, shyness, ostracism, and communication in general. All these issues affect social interaction. For instance, SME has a bigger effect on social bonding among those with low rather than those with high SSE [31]. Also, the need to communicate with others online positively impacts one's feelings of well-being when SSE is a mediator, just as SSE mediates a person's shyness about communicating with others online as well as their feelings of well-being [100]. This may explain why SSE accounts for more of a person's SME-based interaction than it accounts for their offline interaction, as some people socialize online more to compensate for their inadequacies during offline interaction [101]. Likewise, SSE mediates the relationship between ostracism and the addictive use of smart phones [102]. This is important to the current study because ostracism is an obstacle to social interaction, especially among those with low SSE [103].

Given the discussion above and in the previous section, I posit the following hypotheses, also illustrated in Fig. 1. First, the perception of knowledge acquisition due to exposure to SMI content is positively associated with SSE (H4). Second, SME with SMI content is positively associated with SSE (H5). Third, SSE positively impacts both online (H6a) and offline (H6b) social interaction. Likewise, the perception of knowledge positively impacts both online (H7a) and offline (H7b) social interaction. I also predict that online and offline interaction are positively associated (H8).

Regarding the mediation effects I predict that SSE mediates the relationship between SME and online and offline social interaction respectively (H9a and H9b) such that SSE will improve these interactions. I also predict that the perception of knowledge acquisition mediates the relationship between exposure to SMI content and online and offline social interaction respectively (H10a and H10b), and that this effect improves when knowledge acquisition perceptions are high rather than when they are low. The perception of knowledge acquisition also mediates the relationship between SME and online and offline social interaction respectively (H11a and H11b), and that this effect improves when knowledge is high rather than when it is low.

H4: The perception of knowledge acquisition is positively associated with SSE.

H5: SME is positively associated with SSE.

H6a: SSE positively impacts online social interaction.

H6b: SSE positively impacts offline social interaction.

H7a: The perception of knowledge acquisition positively impacts online social interaction.

H7b: The perception of knowledge acquisition positively impacts offline social interaction.

H8: Offline and online social interactions are positively related.

H9: The perception of knowledge acquisition positively mediates the relationship between SME and SSE.

H10a: SSE mediates the relationship between SME and online social interaction such that SSE will improve this interaction.

H10a: SSE mediates the relationship between SME and offline social interaction such that SSE will improve this interaction.
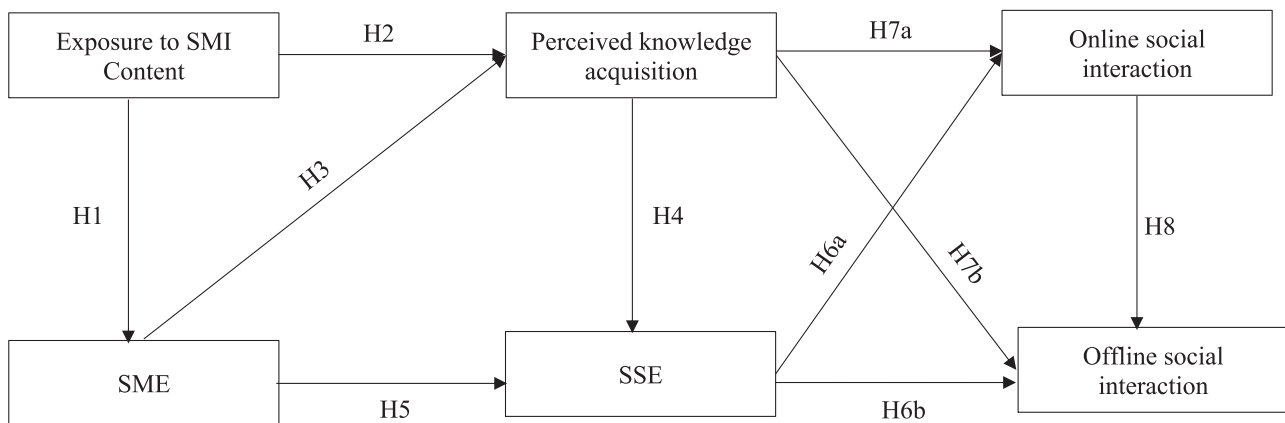
Fig. 1. Predicted model for SMI Content, SME, SSE, perception of knowledge, and social interaction.

H11a: The perception of knowledge acquisition mediates the relationship between exposure to SMI content and online social interaction such that this effect improves when the perception knowledge acquisition is high rather than when it is low.

H11b: The perception of knowledge acquisition mediates the relationship between exposure to SMI content and offline social interaction such that this effect improves when the perception knowledge acquisition is high rather than when it is low.

H12a: The perception of knowledge acquisition mediates the relationship between SME and online social interaction and this effect increases when the perception of knowledge acquisition is high rather than when it is low.

H12b: The perception of knowledge acquisition mediates the relationship between SME and offline social interaction and this effect increases when the perception of knowledge acquisition is high rather than when it is low.

Method

A Qualtrics survey was used to collect data from a random sample of U.S. social media users (*n* = 834). The sample was drawn from a Qualtrics panel, and it reflected U.S. Census demographics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and geographical region. Studies indicate that Qualtrics panels and similar approaches are suitable sampling methods [104–106]. The study was approved by the author's Institutional Review Board before data collection. Data were collected between August 19–August 25, 2022.

Measurement

Exposure to smi content

In order to determine social media users who also followed SMIs, subjects answered two screening questions. The first question asked subjects how often they used social media, and the choices were multiple times a day, once a day, often but not daily, or rarely or never. Those who used social media rarely or never were dropped from the study. The remaining subjects then answered a second dichotomous (yes/no) screening question on whether they followed influencers. First, they read a brief description of an SMI as shown below.

"The question below asks about your relationship with social media influencers. These are people on social media who have a reputation for their knowledge and expertise about certain topics. They regularly create and post content about those topics on their social media accounts, and they may have many followers who pay attention to that content."

Do you currently follow any social media influencer or influencers?

Those who answered "no" were dropped from the survey and those who answered "yes" were directed to a question that asked how often they read and viewed an SMI's content. This question was measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = rarely and 5 = very often. These subjects then proceeded to answer the rest of the survey.

Social media engagement

To measure this variable, subjects were asked how often they interacted with others on an SMI's social media page(s) by posting reactions such as likes, comments, replies, retweets, emojis, and sharing the content. The question was measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = never and 5 = very often and was based on measurement from previous studies [25,26].

Perception of knowledge acquisition

Two multi-item scales from previous studies were modified to measure this variable. The first was a seven-item scale gaging the perceived information value and the perceived influence of information by a message recipient [21,78]. An example of a question asking about perceived information value was, *"I acquire new information through the influencer(s) that I follow."* An example of a perceived influence question was, *"My perceptions often change when I receive information from the influencer (s) that I follow."* The second scale was adopted from the widely used susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale [74] used to measure informational social influence [73]. The questions were modified to suit online social interaction as done in previous studies [75,107]. A sample questions was, *"I frequently gather information from an SMI's social media page(s) about products, services, or other issues of interest to me."* Subjects responded to all questions based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree. A composite perception of knowledge score was then computed from the average of the responses (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91).

Social self-efficacy

Scales for this variable were adapted and modified from two widely used SSE scales, the Sherer and Maddux [91] SSE scale and the Smith and Betz [94] perceived SSE scale. The Sheerer and Maddux scale contains questions on social interaction such as, *"it is difficult for me to make new friends"* and is measured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree. Because some items in this scale use reverse scoring, these items were reverse coded before data analysis. The Smith and Betz scale contains questions measuring a person's confidence in a variety of social scenarios with questions like *"how confident are you to start a conversation with someone you don't know very well,"* and is measured on

Table 1

Means of variables and reliability alphas for multi-item scales.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Alpha[†]	Scale
Rate of SMI content consumption.	3.79	1.06	–	1 = never; 5 = very frequently.
SME on an SMI's page.	3.15	1.27	–	1 = never; 5 = very frequently.
Perception of knowledge acquisition.	3.51	0.82	.91 (11)	1= totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.
Online social interaction.	3.54	1.04	.84 (3)	1= totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.
Offline social interaction.	3.49	1.05	.87 (3)	1= totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.
Social self-efficacy.	3.27	0.8	.94 (31)	1= totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.[††]
				1 = no confidence at all and 5 = complete confidence.[†††]

[†] Refers to Cronbach's alpha. The number of items in the scale is shown in parentheses.
[††] Refers to the Sherer and Maddux [91] scale.
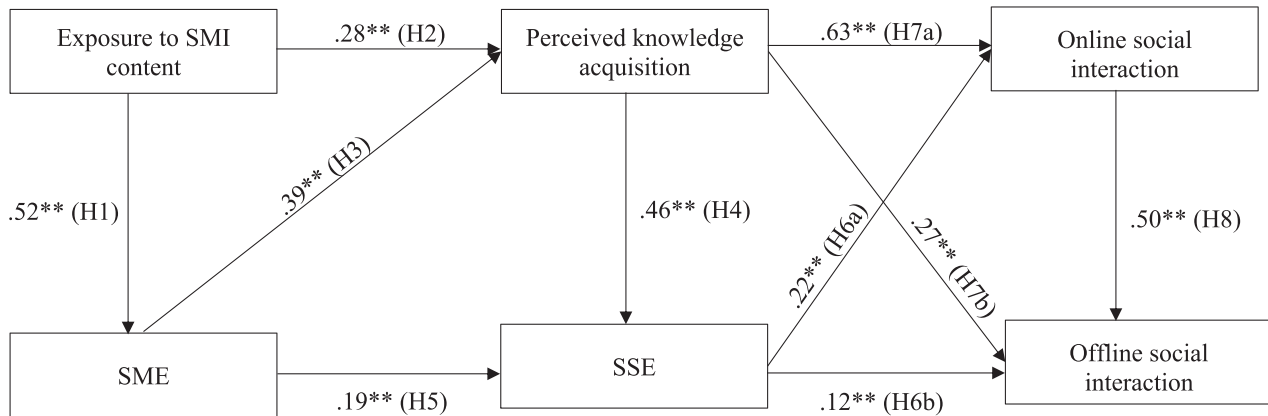[†††] Refers to the Smith and Betz [94] scale.

Fig. 2. SEM results for SMI Content, SME, SSE, perception of knowledge, and social interaction.

a 1–5 scale where 1 = no confidence at all and 5 = complete confidence. A composite SSE score was computed from the average of responses to both scales (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94).

Online and offline social interaction

To measure social interaction, this study used word-of-mouth (WOM) scales for offline interaction and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) scales for online social interaction. These scales are appropriate for this study given that they measure the likelihood of a person to recommend to others the knowledge they acquired from an SMI [21,78]. A three-item scale was derived and modified from the mentioned studies. One set of questions measured offline social interaction and the other measured online social interaction. For offline interaction, a sample statement was, *"I am likely to recommend or share the information suggested by the influencer(s) that I follow to other people I encounter face-to-face."* The online interaction version asked, *"I am likely to recommend or share the information suggested by the influencer(s) that I follow to other people I encounter on social media."* Subjects responded based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = not at all likely and 5 = very likely. Composite social interaction scores for online responses and offline social interaction responses respectively were computed from the average of all responses for each measure (Cronbach's alpha for online social interaction = 0.84; Cronbach's alpha for offline social interaction = 0.87).

Results

Of the 834 respondents, 52% were female and the average age was 45.82 years. The race and ethnicity demographics were: White Non-Hispanic = 60%; Black Non-Hispanic = 12.5%; Hispanic = 15.5%; Asian = 3.7%; AINAN = 2.8%; NHPI = 0.6%; Other = 2.8%; mixed race = 2.1%. Table 1 summarizes the means of the variables examined and their measurement scales. For data analysis, a maximum likelihood SEM model was run using SPSS Amos. The RMSEA (0.051, p = .42)

showed a good fit as did the CFI (0.97) and TLI (0.99). Although the chi-square [χ^2 = (d.f. = 5) 15.85; p < .001] was statistically significant, two factors are mitigating. The significance may be due to the large sample (McQuitty, 2004) and the chi-square per degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF = 3.17) was close to the accepted limit of 3.0 (Kline, 2004).

As shown in Fig. 2, all hypotheses were supported (at the p < .001 level of significance). First, exposure to SMI content increased SME (H1, β =0.52). Second, both exposure to SMI content (H2, β = 0.28) and SME based on that content (H3, β = 0.39) respectively improved the perception of knowledge acquisition. Likewise, the perception of knowledge acquisition increased SSE (H4, β = 0.46) as well as online (H7a, β = 0.63), and offline social interactions (H7b, β = 0.27). SME also increased the SSE (H5, β = 0.19), and in turn SSE increased both online (H6a, β = 0.22) and offline social interactions (H6b, β = 0.12). Lastly, online social interaction increased offline social interaction (H8 β =0.50). To get a better understanding of the data, I ran several mediation effects tests to examine the mediating effect of the perception of knowledge acquisition and SSE. Of the eight mediation tests, three indicated a significant effect. First, the perception of knowledge acquisition positively mediated the relationship between exposure to SMI content and online social interaction (H 10a, β =0.17). Second, the perception of knowledge acquisition positively mediated the relationship between SME and SSE (H9, β = 0.11) as well as the relationship between SME and online social interaction (H11a, β = 0.20). This means that the more a follower perceived that they had acquired knowledge by consuming an SMI's content and by engaging with others on the SMI's site, the more likely they were to share this knowledge with others online.

Discussion and implications

This paper examined the effect of following social media influencers regarding exposure to their content, SME with that content, and the collective effect of these two variables on the perception of knowledge acquisition, SSE, and online and offline social interaction. SMIs are a

relatively new phenomena and this study is among others to demonstrate that SMIs affect audiences. To this end, the study made several important findings. First, following an SMI has an empowering effect on followers. Not only does this encourage them to actively engage with the SMI content via SME, this exposure and the resultant engagement boosts a follower's sense of knowledge acquisition as well as their SSE. Second, this empowerment has indirect positive effects upon online and offline social interaction with other people. Third, the mediated effects show that following an SMI produces a chain reaction of effects. Here, the empowerment produced by improved perceptions of knowledge acquisition boosts the effect of exposure to SMI content on online social interaction, the effect of SME on online interaction, and the effect of SME on SSE. Additionally, online social interaction improved offline social interaction, suggesting online to offline effects.

These findings have practical implications. SMIs are generally known for content creation [2,12] and the ever-increasing number of followers shows that wide swathes of the social media sphere is exposed to this content [23]. This suggests implications regarding misinformation, information gatekeeping, and marketing. For one, research already shows that SMIs impact followers in a variety of ways, whether positively [81,82,85,86] or negatively ([65], para. 14; [66], para. 1, para. 5; [67]). This is important in the age of social media misinformation. It is proven that social media has a disinformation and misinformation problem, and some SMIs have played a role [18,63,64]. Because this study and prior research show that SMIs affect knowledge acquisition [80–82,85]; Zhang, Chitagunta, & Kalwani, 202), the quality and authenticity of SMI content becomes very important. It is important that future scholars examine how the quality and authenticity of SMI content affects SSE and related variables. Data from such studies will inform stakeholders on how to better combat social media misinformation.

SMIs continue to gain clout within contemporary communication as they disrupt traditional gatekeeping. SMIs now enjoy a role once exclusive to mainstream media figures and few others [20]. The difference is that mainstream media has a long tradition of fact-checking information before distribution ([108], para. 4; [109,110]). This is largely absent on social media or at the best still nascent ([111], para. 1; [112], para. 1; [113], para. 2). This implies that not only are users exposed to large volumes of unvetted information, but that the knowledge they acquire this way is largely unverified yet empowering regarding perceptions of knowledge acquisition and its effect on improved SSE. Data also suggested that this empowerment had a bigger effect on online social interaction, in addition to suggesting an effect on offline social interaction. This suggests that these newly empowered and "knowledgeable" users are spreading unvetted information further via online and offline social interaction with others, thus amplifying the SMI gatekeeping and information sharing capacity.

Not only have SMIs disrupted information gatekeeping, but they have also changed advertising and marketing dynamics as brands seek influencers and their followers [1,17]. Most SMIs now plug sponsored products and services within their content, and as this becomes common, lines are blurred between SMI content and marketing content [114,115]. Even though the FCC and various social media platforms have rules and regulations to regulate sponsored content [116,117], these regulations are easy to ignore and deceptive advertising among SMIs is still a problem, including among influencers who sell their own products [118]. This is important because the current study indicated that SMI content affects not only the knowledge acquisition among followers, but that this then affects follower's social interaction with others even if the others who were not exposed to SMI content. This suggests that the effect of deceptive advertising on followers may trickle down to those they socially interact with in online and offline contexts.

Limitations

Regardless of the findings reported above, this study naturally comes with certain limitations. For one, the study used self-reported responses

and these carry bias that may compromise the study's reliability and validity [119]. Also, the study used a broad definition of SMIs in the survey questions. It is hard to pin down an exact definition of an SMI given the proliferation of uniquely different social media figures across platforms. Additionally, the diversity of the content that SMIs share only makes this task harder [6,5]. For instance, a political SMI may influence their followers differently from a fitness influencer, who may influence their followers differently from a tech influencer. Lastly, the results are generalizable only to those who follow SMIs given that the sample consisted only of these types of users. Regardless of these limitations, the study gives important insights into society's newest purveyors information.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Ben Wasike reports financial support was provided by The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Ben Wasike reports a relationship with The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley that includes: employment and funding grants.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Further Reading

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