

Examining the role of social media influencers in service failure and recovery strategies: an empirical investigation of millennials' views

Role of SMIs
in SFR
strategies

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Received 14 May 2022
Revised 23 November 2022
17 February 2023
14 April 2023
Accepted 4 June 2023

Abstract

Purpose – Prior research has advanced several explanations for social media influencers' (SMIs') success in the burgeoning computer-mediated marketing environments but leaves one key topic unexplored: the moderating role of SMIs in service failure and recovery strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on a social constructivist perspective and an inductive approach, 59 in-depth interviews were conducted with millennials from three European countries (Italy, France and the United Kingdom). Building on social influence theory and commitment-trust theory, this study conceptualises four distinct pathways unifying SMIs' efforts in the service failure recovery process.

Findings – The emergent model illustrates how source credibility and message content moderate service failure severity and speed of recovery. The insights gained from this study model contribute to research on the pivotal uniqueness of SMIs in service failure recovery processes and offer practical explanations of variations in the implementation of influencer marketing. This study examines a perspective of SMIs that considers the cycle of their influence on customers through service failure and recovery.

Originality/value – The study suggests that negative reactions towards service failure and recovery are reduced if customers have a relationship with influencers prior to the service failure and recovery compared with the reactions of customers who do not have a relationship with the influencer.

Keywords Social media influencers, Millennials, Service failure, Recovery strategies, Social media, Social constructivist perspective

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The study of social media influencers (SMIs) is central to contemporary research in information systems and marketing. It includes various empirical studies and theory development from multidisciplinary perspectives (De Jans and Hudders, 2020; Khamis *et al.*, 2017; Freberg *et al.*, 2011). According to a Mintel report, real-time content such as live streams, from brands and retail outlets, is desired by one in four (28%) of consumers; influencers are crucial in maintaining the perceived authenticity of this content and consumers' confidence in it (McGrath, 2021). Similarly, a large-scale practitioner study by Olapic reported that 72% of



millennials are more likely to take advice about buying a product from SMIs than from traditional media personalities because SMIs seem more relatable (Olapic, 2022). Recent research in this area has augmented our understanding of the ways in which SMIs are an effective, popular form of marketing for companies to communicate their brand messages to consumers (Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Voorveld, 2019). Given the importance of the consumer–brand dyadic relationship, a great deal of empirical and theoretical work has been conducted to understand its nature and consequences. Research efforts have shown convincingly that SMIs target markets that align with their specific characteristics, such as personal tastes and lifestyle; this makes them arguably more similar to other social media users than to celebrities, which leads other users to perceive them as more credible and authentic in their decision making (Voorveld, 2019; Audrezet *et al.*, 2018).

Interest in influencer marketing research has grown dramatically over the last decade, with several studies examining the antecedents and outcomes of influencers' involvement and loyalty-based promotions of brands (Coates *et al.*, 2019; Zhao *et al.*, 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Studies have uncovered several antecedents of social media influence, including social interaction, brand awareness, product endorsement and consumer–brand engagement. Although these findings are compelling, it is fair to note that they remain limited in demonstrating the powerful role of SMIs in service failure recovery (SFR). This is particularly surprising given the prominent role played by SMIs in customers' information processing (Porter, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2021) and the increased recognition of their crucial role as a moderator in consumer–brand relationships (Shan *et al.*, 2020a). Any exploration of SMIs' connections to SFR, however, implies broader linkages. Stubb and Colliander (2019), for instance, found that SMIs have a strong impact on persuasion outcomes, and consumers perceive SMIs' information as unbiased, believable, true or factual.

To our knowledge, there is no extant study investigating the connections between SMIs and SFR strategies. Hughes *et al.* (2019) provided some valuable insights into SMIs and brand engagement. Drawing on the elaboration likelihood model and building on Pansari and Kumar's (2017) study, Hughes *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that SMIs' characteristics and platform engagement affect consumers' ability and motivation to engage in effortful processing. A central idea of Hughes *et al.*'s (2019) study is that various characteristics of SMIs motivate consumers to process information deeply and to engage with influencers' information and content, and that trial campaigns are positively and more effectively received.

Although Hughes *et al.* (2019) provided fresh insights into the moderating role of SMIs' characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and personality), they necessarily tended to emphasise unidimensional, orthodox marketing practice and to de-emphasise other potentially important aspects. Specifically, the study's characterisations do not seem to capture the richness of different users' experiences and tend to aggregate different demographic cohorts' consumption experiences within the same network density. Customers with a high level of consumption opinions are more likely to have a significant relationship with SMIs. In a service failure situation, customers may be motivated to express their emotions through influencers. Previous studies have noted that customers who share their negative service experience by creating user-generated content (UGC) in social media can be segmented according to their motivation and their network density (Presi *et al.*, 2014; Arsenovic *et al.*, 2019). Given the recent emergence of SMIs (Lee and De Fortuny, 2022), studies on how they shape and influence SFR processes are largely absent, and the need to understand how SMIs shape consumer–brand relationships has never been greater.

The above shortcomings not only inhibit theoretical advancement and knowledge building in the fields of information systems and marketing but also deprive organisations of much needed practical guidance essential to a more meaningful and effective implementation of influencer marketing in the recovery of service failures. The current study attempts to bridge this gap by examining how effortful processing of social media content created by

SMIs could potentially be used as an early interventional service failure strategy. Against this backdrop, our research focuses on the effects of SMIs on consumer–brand relationships during SFR. We address the following research question: Do the messages and content generated by SMIs shape consumer–brand relationships in a SFR process? To answer this question, this paper builds on the line of reasoning proposed by [Hughes *et al.* \(2019\)](#) and examines the relationship between SMIs and SFR, employing the perspectives of social influence theory (SIT) and commitment-trust theory (CTT). Specifically, the paper seeks to examine the role of SMIs in service recovery processes and offers practical explanations of certain variations in the implementation of influencer marketing. The current study adds to the growing literature on influencer marketing and service failure ([Agnihotri *et al.*, 2022](#); [Kim and Kim, 2020](#); [2021](#)), employing a social constructivist perspective, and shows that SMIs have an impact on SFR processes. Finally, the paper provides substantive insight into how SMIs can enhance consumer–brand relationships during SFR processes.

The paper is structured as follows. The second section summarises a review of the literature and the theoretical framework related to SMIs and service failure and recovery. In [Section 3](#), we describe our paradigm of inquiry, and methods of data collection and analysis. The results and discussion are presented in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively. In [Section 6](#) we present a conclusion. The theoretical implications, the managerial implications, and future directions and limitations are discussed in [Sections 7, 8 and 9](#), respectively.

2. Conceptual underpinnings and relevant literature

2.1 The role of SMIs

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the role of SMIs in consumer–brand engagement ([Audrezet *et al.*, 2018](#); [Ki and Kim, 2019](#); [Stubbs and Colliander, 2019](#)). Research has identified key factors that impact customers' reactions to content shared by SMIs, including their level of trust in brand-sponsored and non-sponsored content ([Boerman *et al.*, 2017](#); [Kim and Kim, 2021](#); [Singh *et al.*, 2020](#)) and the influencer's expressed attitude with regard to endorsing a brand ([Audrezet *et al.*, 2018](#)), which attracts both positive and negative reactions from different customers. Existing studies have demonstrated that SMIs' ability to build an online status and a large network of followers has caused them to be perceived as being similar to celebrity endorsers. Conversely, a growing body of research has identified that SMIs, despite having characteristics similar to celebrities' and professional experts', potentially have a different impact on customers' perceptions compared to other types of endorsers ([Voorveld, 2019](#); [Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017](#)). For instance, [Djafarova and Rushworth \(2017\)](#) found that non-traditional celebrities, including bloggers and Instafamous individuals, are more powerful, in terms of source credibility and impact on customers' purchasing decisions, than traditional celebrities, as followers perceive them to be more reliable and trustworthy. Though SMIs have fewer followers than celebrity endorsers, ranging from 10,000 to 150,000, some perhaps generating 500,000 followers ([Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019](#)), they are considered to be more accessible and relatable to their audience compared to celebrity endorsers or company-created sites.

A study by [You and Joshi \(2020\)](#) found that although traditional media is important for customer retention, UGC has a stronger effect on customer acquisition. UGC typically involves interactions between peers, which can be more persuasive than mass media communication due to the source credibility of the messengers ([Chari *et al.*, 2016](#); [Naeem and Ozuem, 2022](#); [Pornpitakpan, 2004](#); [Shan *et al.*, 2020b](#); [Wang *et al.*, 2012](#)). SMIs are involved in sharing UGC; content related to a brand voluntarily created by SMIs may be perceived as non-commercially motivated. Other studies have found that customers' evaluations of content perceived to be an advertisement or sponsored by companies were more negative than for UGC because customers had developed defensive mechanisms against attempts at

persuasive messages (Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Vijayalakshmi *et al.*, 2020; Wojdyski and Evans, 2016). Followers of influencers are drawn to content that originates from other customers, who are believed to have non-commercial intentions; thus, followers perceive customer-generated content to be more genuine and trustworthy (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010). Several streams of prior literature exist in the field of SMIs; these streams are briefly outlined and their relevance to our research is highlighted in Table 1.

2.2 Service failure and SMIs

Service failure occurs when customers' expectations of a delivered service are not met, which can prompt them to share their negative experiences through social media. A study conducted by Verhagen *et al.* (2013) found that negative word of mouth (WOM) can demotivate customers' repatronage intentions towards a brand's services causing them to switch to competitors. Research findings on dissatisfied customers suggest that customers have higher trust in negative WOM than in positive WOM when evaluating a brand; this is because customers perceive positive information to be more aligned with the sender's personal interest than being beneficial to others and that dissatisfied customers might spread negative information out of an obligation to alert others (Jin and Phua, 2014; Laczniak *et al.*, 2001; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). In the event that consumers experience a service failure and recovery process online, Agnihotri *et al.* (2022) found a significant positive correlation between customer retaliation and negative electronic WOM (eWOM). Agnihotri *et al.* (2022) showed that co-created recovery efforts lead consumers to perceive companies' efforts towards recovery positively, thus reducing consumers' severe negative eWOM.

Several studies focusing explicitly on the effects of SMIs' involvement indicate both a benefit and a threat to service providers; the unlimited control influencers have in content posting as well as their influence over other customers is beneficial if their content favours the brand, but less so if the messages are negative (Schaefers and Schamari, 2016). Customers who are socially connected to individuals who defect from a service provider are very likely to defect from the service provider themselves (Haenlein, 2013). This outcome frequently occurs following a celebrity's recommendation through social media to select or defect from a certain brand; the celebrity's social status is a key moderating influence on their followers' decisions (Jin and Phua, 2014). This supports the view that influencers' endorsements may be perceived as beneficial to customers but not necessarily favourable towards the brand; thus, they intensify the perceived severity of service failures.

Studies have revealed that SMIs typically establish their identity based on a specific theme or subject in which they specialise (Kim and Kim, 2021; McQuarrie *et al.*, 2013); thus, the information they deliver is likely to be for a specialised audience, causing responses to their messages to vary between individual customers. However, whether they are seeking to benefit others or themselves is an important factor to consider when making distinctions between SMIs who may be beneficial for firms during service failures. Lee and Eastin (2021) argued that consumers assign credibility to SMIs based on multiple constructs, particularly on the SMI's sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise and uniqueness. Sincerity was the most dominant construct in facilitating positive parasocial relationships between SMIs and consumers; SMIs who were perceived as having low sincerity decreased the potential positive behaviours and perspectives of consumers (Lee and Eastin, 2021) and may reduce the positive effect of other predictors of consumers' trust and commitment to SMIs. Supporting this, Gamage and Ashill (2023) argued that if consumers perceive SMIs' content to have a commercial intention, then their motivation to search for information and trust SMIs' endorsements is reduced.

The mindset of SMIs can impact the messages they deliver, which may not benefit the brand image. Audrezet *et al.* (2018) found that a sponsored influencer's authenticity can decrease if they do not express any intrinsic passion for the brand, which can result in a

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Research stream	Context	Supporting studies	Salient findings
Psychologically related influences on consumers	Consumers' psychological processing is stimulated when exposed to SMIs who influence behaviour and attitudes. Key psychological factors include pseudo-friendships between consumers and SMIs, perceived fit between SMI, brand and product, and the level of a SMI's social presence through digital channels	Lee and Watkins (2016) Hwang and Zhang (2018) Gong and Li (2017) Shan <i>et al.</i> (2020a, b) Escalas and Bettman (2017) Jin and Phua (2014) Kim and Kim (2021) Kim and Kim (2020) Kapitan and Silvera (2016) Martínez-López <i>et al.</i> (2020) Torres <i>et al.</i> (2019) Xu and Pratt (2018) Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) Jacobson <i>et al.</i> (2022) Men <i>et al.</i> (2018)	<p>Customers may develop pseudo-friendships with digital influencers, which has a positive effect on brand perceptions and purchase intentions</p> <p>High endorser–brand–product fit influences positive attitude towards advertisement, products, brands and purchase intentions</p>
Qualities of SMIs' content	SMIs seek to build audiences through the content they create and share through digital channels. Key content qualities include the perceived expertise, appeal, reputation and emotions SMIs signal	Audrezet <i>et al.</i> (2018) Biswas <i>et al.</i> (2006) Hughes <i>et al.</i> (2019) Ki and Kim (2019) Lou and Yuan (2019) Martínez-López <i>et al.</i> (2020) Stubb and Colliander (2019) Chang <i>et al.</i> (2019) Hughes <i>et al.</i> (2019) Jacobson <i>et al.</i> (2022) Li <i>et al.</i> (2017) Men <i>et al.</i> (2018) De Jans <i>et al.</i> (2020)	<p>SMIs' high level of perceived social presence has positive effect on brand perceptions and endorsements</p> <p>Content can display field expertise, visual appeal and encourage interactivity building SMIs' positive reputation</p>
SMIs' brand endorsements sponsored by companies	Companies sponsor SMIs' activity with intentions to promote products, messaging and raise brand awareness. In turn, SMIs receive recognition, self-presentation benefits and additional monetary benefits. SMIs' brand endorsements sponsored by companies can have positive or negative effects on consumers' responses	Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) Lu <i>et al.</i> (2014) Audrezet <i>et al.</i> (2018) Boerman <i>et al.</i> (2017) Kim and Kim (2021) Singh <i>et al.</i> (2020) Stubb and Colliander (2019) Zhou <i>et al.</i> (2021)	<p>Emotions expressed by SMIs through content contribute to generating significant volumes of viewership and followers</p> <p>SMIs can increase the likeability of a brand when they post an endorsement. Additionally, consumers with strong brand awareness have a higher positive attitude towards sponsored endorsement posts made by SMIs improving purchasing intentions</p> <p>Consumers can develop distrust in SMIs' authenticity if sponsored content is perceived to be commercially oriented and self-oriented</p>

Note(s): SMI, social media influencer
Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Table 1.
Research streams on social media influencers

failure to generate enthusiasm among their social media followers. This can be linked to an SMI's lack of attitudinal loyalty towards a brand. Attitudinal loyalty can positively impact an individual's long-term commitment to brands (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2006), preventing them from considering other competing brands regardless of marketing efforts (Thomson, 2006; Umashankar *et al.*, 2017). Table 2 provides an overview of categories of service failure in a social media context.

2.3 SMIs, customer engagement and the recovery process

SMIs build their online social status by generating awareness of brand products and services (Carrillat and Ilicic, 2019) upon which their credibility and popularity increase as they gradually build collective relationships with their followers (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). As customers are able to share service failure experiences without restrictions, it is vitally important for brands to deliver a virtual presence through social media. Virtual presence can enhance the effects of recovery success, and the involvement of experts in the recovery process in these environments can contribute to maintaining customers' confidence in the firm (Schaefer and Schamari, 2016). Current studies on negative eWOM highlight vital issues providers may encounter in relation to online influencers and social media. Research also highlights the positive impact that the presence of SMIs can have on consumers' perceptions (Kim and Kim, 2021; Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Voorveld, 2019). A recent study by Agnihotri *et al.* (2023) demonstrated that SMI's authenticity has a significant impact on customer's purchase behaviour. The collective relationship between customers and SMIs can be beneficial for providers when their customers encounter a service failure. Arsenovic *et al.* (2019) emphasised that the collaborative experience of service recovery strategies where multiple actors (e.g. customers, influencers, the provider) interact across the recovery process, sharing and integrating knowledge, makes the experience more favourable to customers. This supports the view that knowledge sharing in service recovery strategies is not restricted to organisational actors, like employees, but also includes non-institutional actors (de Kervenoael *et al.*, 2015; Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000), such as SMIs.

Engagement is an important part of customers' purchasing experience and can influence their assessment of a provider's service quality (Rezaei and Valaei, 2017), prompting firms to enable individuals' direct involvement in online communication channels to maintain positive attitudes (Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola, 2018). Customers are encouraged to adopt self-recovery strategies following service failure (Zhu *et al.*, 2013); one way to self-recover is by accessing online information shared by others, a key online activity that SMIs regularly initiate, which can enhance customers' understanding of events or issues (Hara and Hew, 2007). The informational support users receive from online channels can impact their reflections regarding the provider's service quality (Li *et al.*, 2017; Patten *et al.*, 2020; Tan and Yan, 2020), which can potentially motivate them to continue using the online communication channels (Sharma and Khadka, 2019) and disclose information online themselves (Lin *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, individuals who rely on collaboration and social support from existing social relationships are likely to accept brand endorsements from their social networks, whom they perceive to be less driven by ulterior commercial motives. This effect increases the provider's advertising credibility (Errmann *et al.*, 2019), including the service recovery procedures they deliver to their customers.

Prior to service failures, SMIs may cultivate followers' positive brand attitude through ingratiation. Ingratiation is a technique in which an individual attracts others through positive attributes that make them likeable to their targets (Gordon, 1996, p. 54). Brown and Billings (2013) found that heavy usage of ingratiation messages between an organisation and its fans is likely to encourage the fans to post supportive statements and unite with other fans. Followers' earlier exposure to positive brand-related messages from SMIs can lead to the development of

Service failure category	Context of failure	Supporting references	Social media context	Supporting references
Process and outcome failure	These are two separate but connected failures. Outcome failure refers to situations where firms fail to deliver the expected results or consumers do not receive the outcome they expected. Process failure is when inconsistencies and ineffectiveness are perceived to occur during the delivering process of the service. Both failures can provoke negative emotions, but these will occur at different times. For outcome failure these will probably emerge after service delivery, whereas for process failure these could emerge through multiple service stages	Bitner <i>et al.</i> (1990) Halbheer <i>et al.</i> (2018) Hoffman <i>et al.</i> (1995) Smith <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Social media has an immediate effect on consumers' response to process and outcome failures given the ease of creating and sharing posts, tweets, pages, links, blogs, videos and other user-generated content. This can appease consumers' negative emotions, including frustration and the desire for revenge in response to the perceived losses they experienced following their purchase and consumption of services.	Azemi <i>et al.</i> (2020) Obeidat <i>et al.</i> (2017) Su and Teng (2018)
Advertising and promotion failure	These refer to advertisements and promotions delivered through social media channels. Two main situations can be associated with this failure. The first is when advertised information fails to generate the appropriate response from customers leading to psychological processing and behaviours that do not benefit the firm. The second is when offered promotions attract customers' negative eWOM due to the type of the promotion, how it was promoted and whether customers could access the promotion	Campbell (1995) Ozuem <i>et al.</i> (2021a) Rosenmayer <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Customers may take to social media to report their dissatisfaction with advertisements or promotion offers. Some customers consider whether firms used social media tools, including SMI, as manipulation attempts through their social media channels to convince consumers to conduct purchases or to overlook previously discovered brand transgressions	Audrezet <i>et al.</i> (2018) Rosenmayer <i>et al.</i> (2018) Singh <i>et al.</i> (2020)

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Table 2.
Overview of service failure categories in a social media context

(continued)

Service failure category	Context of failure	Supporting references	Social media context	Supporting references
Social failure	This failure is a consequence of actions or attitudes expressed by firms. Firms may fail to uphold existing values or social norms or fail to engage in philanthropic activities. While firms may not have caused a societal factor, failure to engage or take an initiative in response to it impacts their positive brand image and the psychological benefits for their customers. This failure can potentially negatively affect consumers' attitude towards the brand and the firm's short-term marketing activity conducted within the time period of social failures	Ferrell et al. (2019) Klein and Dawar (2004)	Social media is the common tool used to reveal and cause social failures for firms. Individuals share reported information, or take initiative to report a firm's failure to engage or support the prevention of a social injustice. Social media platforms are used to generate firestorms in which individuals' eWOM related to social incidences are collected and distributed, potentially reaching consumers whose brand perception may be affected	Hansen et al. (2018) Rosenmayer et al. (2018) Triantafillidou and Yannas (2020)
Communication failure	This failure can be linked to any of the three previous service failure categories. In some situations, firms may fail to update or support customers with relevant and important information, causing a dissatisfaction with the process or outcome of a service. Other situations may align with social failures, where firms signal or communicate inappropriate messages. If firms fail to communicate effectively in response to either situation, this can cause negative customer emotions	Du et al. (2011) Fouroudi et al. (2020) Gelbrich (2010) Hansen et al. (2018)	Customer usage of social media to direct enquiries to firms can affect service expectations. Social media allows the immediate sharing of information which can impact customers' expectations of the response speed of the communication firms practice. Ineffective time and response management for enquiries and complaints posted on social media will impact customers' perceptions of a firm's service quality and processes	Istanbulluoglu (2017) Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) Ozuem et al. (2021a) Wang et al. (2021)

Note(s): eWOM, electronic word of mouth, SMI, social media influencer

Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Table 2.

positive reputational perceptions, which reduce the likelihood of followers' negatively reacting to service failures, thus maintaining a positive reaction to recovery strategies.

The nature of an SMI's message during service recovery can impact a customer's reception of the service procedures (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). If their message is not focused on sale motives, customers are more likely to respond positively despite the negative circumstances surrounding the message (DeCarlo, 2005). However, SMIs' involvement in a service recovery procedure can also lead to negative as well as positive reactions from customers. Research shows that customers mentally resist brand communication efforts, including those supported by SMIs (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Singh *et al.*, 2020), due to a suspicion that an influencer's support of the brand is driven by commercial benefits (Singh *et al.*, 2020) and because celebrity endorsers tend to distance themselves from brands responsible for negative events as well as from the severity of a brand's failures (Thomas and Fowler, 2016). Individuals independent of the influence of community influencers, including friends and social influencers, may assume others, external to the organisation, have commercial intentions when they are involved in influencing decisions, causing independent individuals to resist persuasive messages (Errmann *et al.*, 2019; Singh *et al.*, 2020).

Some organisations choose to offer refunds or discounts on future orders instead of apologies, in an effort to encourage customers to use the service again. However, monetary-related recovery strategies risk causing customers to suspect the brand is profit-seeking rather than value driven, causing them to respond negatively to influencers who endorse the brand's communicated messages. In contrast, if the influencer's communication is perceived to be value driven and not influenced by ulterior motives, then customers may perceive the SMI as honest, competent and compassionate (Singh *et al.*, 2020), resulting in a more positive reaction to the service recovery procedures they may encounter later. Table 3 summarises recovery solutions and SMIs' potential involvement.

2.4 Social influence theory and commitment-trust theory

Social influence theory (Kelman, 1958) has become increasingly popular among scholars in the field of SFR (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a). Social influence theory identifies three main levels and types of social influence: compliance, identification and internalisation. Compliance influence occurs when individuals adapt to peers and normative expectations in the hope of obtaining acceptance from peers (Kelman, 1958). Identification influence reveals individuals' motivation to adapt beliefs and behaviours to produce a self-defining relationship with social peers whom they perceive to be reference group representatives (Kelman, 1958). Internalisation influence occurs when information communicated from peers is internalised by individuals and shapes their beliefs and behaviours towards encounters and signalled messages (Kelman, 1958). Hwang (2016) pointed out that these social influence factors change an individual's belief structure, causing an individual to respond to possible social status gain.

SMIs apply social influence and are able to motivate the behaviours of others and extend the reach of marketing messages (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). SMIs in online environments are unable to have tangible verbal or physical interactions with potential customers; however, they are able to conduct social influence through indirect engagement and shared social experiences without having direct social exchanges with customers (Argo and Dahl, 2020). Social influence has emerged through a diverse set of new technologies that influence individuals' psychological states (Zhang *et al.*, 2017).

Commitment-trust theory proposes that trust is fundamental to establishing long-term relationships between transacting parties (Lin *et al.*, 2023). This can be initiated by marketers who deliver relationship and loyalty programmes in an effort to build and maintain customers' psychological commitment (Sheikh *et al.*, 2019). In online communities,

	Recovery solution	Supporting references	SIMs' potential involvement	Supporting references
<div>Table 3.</div> <div>Recovery solutions and social media influencers' potential involvement</div>	Discount, coupons, free giveaways or alternative goods offers	Albrecht et al. (2019) Hoffman et al. (1995) Goodwin and Ross (1992) Tax et al. (1998)	SIMs' involvement in promoting products, services and brands could potentially be useful in promoting monetary compensation offers to customers as a form of online engagement and relationship recovery strategy. However, issues may arise concerning the SIM's commercial intervention and the customer's perceived feelings of injustice and unfairness about the gap between the failure and the compensation strategy	Audrezet et al. (2018) Biswas et al. (2006) Goldsmith et al. (2000) Ki and Kim (2019) Leban et al. (2021) Ye et al. (2021)
	Direct and indirect assistance	Hartline et al. (2000) Ozuem et al. (2021a)	Part of SIMs' online activity is to display or demonstrate their usage or consumption of brands' products and services to their audiences. Additionally, they may engage in entrepreneurial activities or develop business-like experience through brand collaborations that inform them of specific transaction procedures. Marketers could take the opportunity to utilise SIMs to engage and give assurance to customers who encounter service failures. However, SIMs as external stakeholders are not responsible for solving service failures and may receive negative eWOM from dissatisfied customers	Chaker et al. (2022) Jacobson and Harrison (2021) Hung et al. (2022)
	Brand advocate responses	Hogreve et al. (2019) Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017)	For service failures that negatively affect a brand's image, firms can employ SIMs as their brand advocates to create or endorse positive messages of the brand. However, this will be dependent on whether the SIM is willing to positively advocate for the brand. SIMs may diverge from a brand and exit from online engagement when failures of the brand emerge, or when transgressions occur on the part of the SIM or the brand	Hudders et al. (2021) Kim et al. (2021) Reinikainen et al. (2021) Singh et al. (2020) Yang et al. (2021)
		Note(s): eWOM, electronic word of mouth, SIM, social media influencer Source(s): Author's own creation/work		

performance and satisfaction with the environment are important antecedents that can motivate customers' commitment to remain with the online community ([Ozuem et al., 2021b](#); [Powell et al., 2006](#)). However, in online environments where parties are distant, and information can be predominantly vague, trust is essential to motivating long-term commitment. Customers' trust in an acting party can manifest as their willingness to commit to a company and consume information from online sources, as opposed to relying on offline sources ([Sheikh et al., 2019](#)). This supports the view that commitment and trust are inseparable ([Morgan and Hunt, 1994](#)) and are important in evaluating SIMs' role in online service failure and recovery situations.

Within the influencer marketing context, previous studies have demonstrated that customers' confidence in a third-party influences and promotes their commitment to continually share positive information, which leads to trusting relationships and reduces dissatisfaction. Confidence plays a dynamic role in explaining how relationships evolve during SFR efforts. SMIs can build mutually rewarding relationships between customers and brands, where the established relationship leads to increased commitment to the SFR process. Commitment is a multidimensional construct. Existing studies categorised commitment into three sub-themes: affective, normative and continuance (Hashim and Tan, 2015; Meyer and Allen, 1991). However, the current study focuses on affective commitment in which a person is willing to rely on others in whom they have confidence. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust exists when an individual has confidence in others' reliability and integrity. Various researchers have suggested that commitment is an important mediating factor that influences relationship reliability, and strong commitment can decrease high turnover and establish stable relationships in the SFR process (Goo and Huang, 2008; Yen, 2009).

As humans we can never be certain how those we interact with may respond to our activities. Indeed, often the success or failure of anything we wish to undertake is determined by the reactions of others. However, even though there is uncertainty and risk, activity is required to satisfy and realise needs and objectives. Fundamentally, humans are required to gamble on the reactions of others. When we gamble on how others will react or act in certain situations, we deploy a notion of trust (Sztompka, 1996). Activity that involves an investment of trust in others is based on estimations of trustworthiness and the extent to which people will act as rational agents or as they have acted in the past. Consideration of an individual's reputation, past performance or appearance determines the extent to which a person will trust that individual. Even though trust involves an understanding and dissection of rational estimates, the level of trust that individuals are willing to deploy and the amount of risk they are ready to take on are not exclusively dependent on the qualities of the other; they also depend on individuals' subjective predilections to trust others in relation to objective judgements relating to those others to be trusted. Commitment-trust theory reflects a process that leads to the development of a relationship between customers and providers, with commitment and trust between the two parties as the mediators of this relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

3. Methodology

In this section we discuss the philosophical paradigm that underlies our methodological orientation, the data collection method and our approach to data analysis. Since the current study is qualitative, we cannot claim a universalistic approach; nevertheless, we feel that this information provides some insights into our approach.

3.1 *Paradigm of inquiry*

Social constructivism proposes that understanding and knowledge are developed and embedded through social interactions and interpretations of what existence entails or incorporates. Comprehensions of reality depend on social being, processes and engagement rather than objective positivistic observations. This understanding provides the basis for a comprehension of social media in a digital age and the idea of the influencer in relation to this. The influencer is not detached but a social entity in a historical process, which is now dominated by social media; an influencer builds their online social status and generates awareness of products and services through which their credibility and popularity develop and are constructed as collective relationships with their followers (Carrillat and Ilicic, 2019; Cocker and Cronin, 2017). In the context of this research, we explore the construction of a reality in terms of online interaction through a hermeneutical analysis of qualitative data.

Hermeneutics identifies interaction between social structures and a conscious entity in relation to the meaning of a text which is continually interpreted in relation to historical and cultural transition (Howell, 2013). This allows interpretation of data through contextual situations. Understanding and interpretation are not isolated human activities, but the very basis of our existence. We have preunderstanding of everything and take this to every social situation and research project (Gadamer, 1970). Consequently, bias is recognised as part of the research process and theoretical sampling, which enables development of the research programme as it progresses.

In the current study, to facilitate the use of social constructivism and hermeneutics as well as to develop SIT and CTT, we employed a grounded theory sampling technique that encompassed preunderstanding; theoretical sampling allows for transformations in findings through interactive involvement in the research process. Indeed, theoretical sampling enables the generation of theory and inclusion of dialectical transformation as well as researcher autonomy in the development of data collection processes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Consequently, when one samples theoretically, the research involves preunderstanding or pre-existing judgements as it progresses in an evolutionary fashion. The researcher and researched (subject and object) are inextricably linked and the findings are developed through a constructivist process involving hermeneutical interpretation and reinterpretation of the evolving, emerging data.

3.2 Data collection

Using theoretical sampling procedures, empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were adopted to obtain answers reflecting spontaneous perspectives (Schmidt, 2010) on how SMIs impact consumers' responses to service failures in the fashion industry. The main questions asked in the data collection process concerned interviewees' narration of their experiences of online purchasing, their description of the SMIs they most visited over time and their explanation of the impact of SMIs on their reactions to service failures.

The interviewees were millennials aged between 18 and 39 years, a generation significantly influenced by SMIs (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017) yet equally critical of SMIs' influence on marketing and society (Statista, 2020). Millennials are prone to self-categorisation; they hold the characteristics that define their unique identity in high regard (Helal *et al.*, 2018) and will critically reflect on whether the identity and characteristics of SMIs align with their self-categorisation. If an influencer's content does not reflect a millennial customer's beliefs and values or even align with their identity, or if service performance does not reflect the influencer's review, then millennial customers are likely to react negatively to the influencer.

In line with the theoretical sampling process a total of 120 millennials were invited to participate, 59 of whom agreed to be interviewed (the participants' socio-demographic information is summarised in Table 4). These millennials were recruited from, and interviewed in, each of the researchers' countries: France, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK). Upon consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually using platforms available to both the researchers and participants. The researchers engaged with their university network, particularly of current or former students, and through these networks they started snowball or chain referral sampling (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). Millennials referred other participants to the study when the researchers were unable to reach them. Participants influenced by SMIs and who had experienced service failures as a result of online shopping played a role in the recruitment of units in the qualitative sample. The open-ended questions prepared for the interviews acted as a guide when conducting the interviews, though conversation led to the rearranging of the order or the wording of the questions to

				Role of SMIs in SFR strategies
Country	Gender	Occupation	Age	
France	F	Luxury hospitality manager	25	<hr/>
	F	MBA Global Fashion student	23	
	F	Fashion product manager	22	
	F	Fashion event manager	24	
	F	Luxury hospitality and event specialist	24	
	F	Luxury event specialist	24	
	M	Luxury fashion customer experience specialist	23	
	F	MBA Global Luxury Fashion Management student	23	
	M	MBA Global Luxury Fashion Management student	24	
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	23	
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	23	
	M	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24	
	M	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24	
	M	Creative designer	27	
	F	MBA Global Fashion and Luxury Management student	25	
	F	MSc Global Client Service Management student	23	
	F	Fashion store associate	25	
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24	
	M	Fashion store associate	27	
Italy	F	Marketing assistant	25	
	F	Marketing assistant	27	
	F	University Art and History student	25	
	M	Engineering manager	34	
	F	Fashion event manager	34	
	F	Tourist guide	35	
	F	Fashion store manager	34	
	F	Fashion store associate	30	
	F	Market research analyst	33	
	F	Fashion product manager	26	
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	25	
	M	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	30	
	F	Fitness entrepreneur	34	
	F	University Business and Administration student	23	
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	24	
	F	University Business and Administration student	24	
	F	University Business and Administration student	22	
	F	Fashion product manager	26	
	F	University Art and Entertainment student	26	
	F	University Business and Administration student	20	
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	31	
(continued)				Table 4. Participants' socio- demographic information

Country	Gender	Occupation	Age
United Kingdom	F	University Fashion and Marketing student	22
	F	Marketing associate	30
	M	University Economics student	23
	F	Human resource coordinator	29
	M	MSc Business student	24
	M	University Economics student	22
	M	Interior Design student	23
	F	University Business student	21
	M	Fitness instructor	27
	F	Administrator	30
	M	MSc Economics student	25
	M	Mortgage advisor	33
	F	Procurement officer	26
	F	University Marketing student	18
	F	University accommodation officer	24
	M	University Finance student	21
	M	Lecturer in Marketing	29
	F	Receptionist	27
	M	Accountant	32

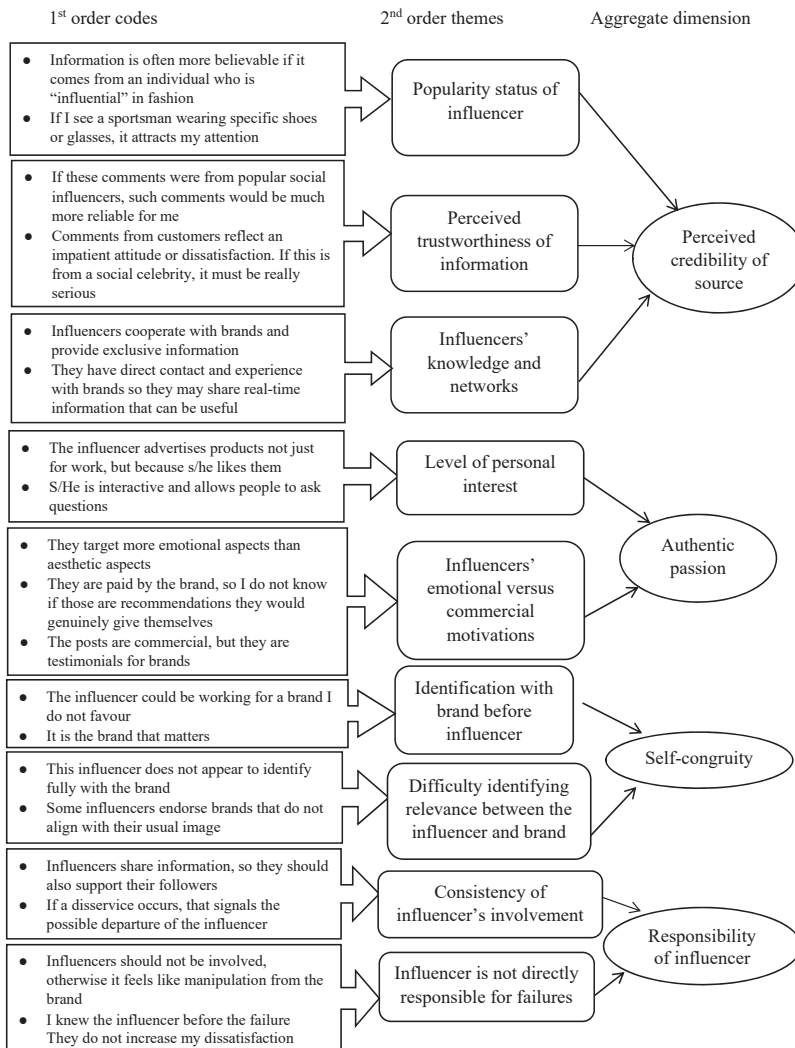
Table 4. Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

reach clarity and precision of the participants’ individual experiences (Seidman, 2006). Data were transcribed in hardcopy format consisting of 260 pages of verbatim discussion. These transcriptions were read and analysed in order to identify incidents and distinct conceptual patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3.3 Data analysis approach

Data from the three countries were analysed together using a three-tier qualitative process to organise codes that emerged from participants’ explicitly stated responses and sub-themes based on the researchers’ interpretations, before they were combined to generate the key themes representing the data as a whole (Gioia et al., 2013; Pincombe et al., 2013). The first stage of the analysis process comprised a review of the transcribed interview data to extract and make sense of prominent statements that related to the study (Helal et al., 2018). The second stage involved the process of formulating these statements into themes. We identified nine implicit second-order themes that reflected participants’ experiences and perspectives; we then conducted validity scanning to ensure our coding interpretations were consistent with participants’ responses (Gioia et al., 2013).

In the third stage we identified four key final themes that emerged from the phenomena of interest: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencer (Figure 1). To check for errors in the validity and reliability of the themes, one of the researchers used the qualitative data analysis program NVivo to record and affirm any similarities and differences between emerging codes and the transcribed responses of the participants. Responses that were similar to other participants’ from the three countries confirmed the representation of the themes of the data as a whole. Additionally, the four final themes were used as the core concepts of the current emergent model (Figure 2). Further examination of these themes supported the researchers’ identification of insights that were conceptualised into four distinct pathways, which represented SMIs’ efforts that are unified in the SFR process and illustrated in the current model. Each of the four themes is discussed in Subsections 4.1 to 4.4; the four pathways are discussed in Section 5.



Source(s): Author’s own creation/work

Figure 1.
Data structure

4. Results

In this section we explore the conditions under which SMIs’ actions emerged in SFR and how failure recovery was manifested. To this end, we synthesised respondents’ experiential accounts and linked them to the main themes.

4.1 Perceived credibility of source

Perceived credibility of source refers to a recipient’s perception of the credibility of a message *source*, without reflecting on the credibility of the message itself. If the perceived status of the sender is high, recipients will probably perceive the information as believable, competent and

trustworthy. A 22-year-old female British university Fashion and Marketing student contended:

Information is often more believable if it comes from an individual who is “influential” in the fashion field like Olivia Palermo. You may not interact with them directly but observing what they say can influence attitudes.

Credibility of source can be linked to another term, believability of information; that is, information perceived as believable and accepted by the recipient (Yin *et al.*, 2018). Trust in an organisation and the sharing of brand-related information is partly facilitated by source credibility (Giakoumaki and Krepapa, 2020). In response to SMIs’ credibility, this 27-year-old female Italian marketing assistant commented:

I find service reviews of people who are not influencers, but people like me. If these comments were from popular socials, those comments would have been for me much more reliable.

This statement reflects an important issue: the provision of information shared through social media, including service failure and recovery information, is not limited to the formal personnel of a provider, but also includes non-institutional individuals (de Kervenoael *et al.*, 2015), such as customers and SMIs. As expressed by this 25-year-old female French luxury hospitality manager:

Comments from customers reflect an impatient attitude or dissatisfaction with the service, but these could be a minority. But if it’s from a social celebrity, it must be really serious.

This comment further supports the view that online status or popularity can influence the perceived credibility of an individual acting as a source of information. This 34-year-old male Italian engineering manager stated:

I have followed fashion influencers, but I am not a super fan of them. However, if I see a sportsman wearing specific shoes or glasses, it gets my attention.

The comment justifies the view that influencers must have both the status and personal characteristics with which observing customers can identify to increase the influencer’s perceived credibility and authenticity (Voorveld, 2019). In contrast, other customers may seek information from influencers who are closely connected to brands of a certain industry, as indicated by this 30-year-old female British marketing associate:

Sometimes these influencers cooperate with brands and provide exclusive information about the brand.

Additionally, this 23-year-old female French MSc Global Client Service Management student stated:

Social celebrity models and fashion bloggers cause us to look forward to future trends. They have direct contact and experience with brands so they may share real-time information that can be useful.

SMIs establish their online identity based on a specific subject they specialise in (Kim and Kim, 2021). The effect of negative WOM from a source perceived as highly credible, because of their expertise and trustworthiness, on customers’ perceptions will be stronger than the effect of negative WOM from a less credible source, despite positive comments from alternative sources or other customers, as this 30-year-old male Italian university Fashion Marketing and Business student affirmed:

Inevitably, criticism from well-known people is more attention-grabbing.

As mentioned earlier, customers who are socially connected with individuals who defected from a brand are likely to defect from the brand themselves (Haenlein, 2013). Additionally,

though an influencer may offer recommendations to remain with brands despite service failures, customers are likely to assess the validity of their recommendations when it concerns service failures, as argued by a 23-year-old male British university Economics student:

When dealing with service failure, it's much more important for me to have the opinion of someone who has the right advice rather than someone labelled as an opinion leader.

Some customers may resist influencers' communication efforts, as it may be unclear whether an influencer is providing credible information for specific brands or activities. It is important to note that influencers will have had different individual experiences with the same brand; thus, their recommendations to their followers will vary as will their perceived credibility.

4.2 Authentic passion

Authentic passion refers to the perception that a SMI's personal enjoyment and interest in endorsing or commenting about brands and their services and products overrules the monetary or status rewards they receive from contributing content sponsored by a brand (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018). This perception is indicated by a 35-year-old female Italian tourist guide:

Alice Basso is the one I like the most because she doesn't just talk about products, she seems to me more real, she also talks about her personal story. She advertises products not just for work, but because she likes it.

Additionally, SMIs' authentic passion can be indicated by their level of interactivity, as indicated by this 34-year-old female Italian fashion store manager:

I follow an influencer on Instagram who deals with various themes: make-up theme, skincare theme, clothing. I like her because she is very interactive, she gives me the chance to ask questions and then she answers through stories.

SMIs' online activity revolves around self-expression and they produce content based on their admiration for a topic, activity or brand (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, SMIs may focus on brands that align with their personality, taste and identity (Voorveld, 2019) and align with their target audience, as indicated by this 26-year-old female Italian fashion product manager:

With respect to PAUSITIVE [influencer] . . . she targets women who are overweight and with low esteem She targets the emotional aspect more than just aesthetic aspects . . .

SMIs with specific fashion preferences and values become representatives of particular customer segments, such as millennials who favour luxury branded products. This along with the influencer's passion to share specific brand-related information can be considered narrowcasting, a form of communication where the sender transmits information to a specific audience (Barasch and Berger, 2014).

The authentic passion of the messages of influencers who exhibit extrinsic motivation can be critically questioned by customers, as indicated by a 23-year-old female French MBA Global Luxury Management student:

For NOHOLITA . . . she makes a complete review of products and gives suggestions about how to wear something . . . but then she is paid by the brand, so I don't know if they are recommendations she would give herself . . .

Though messages from SMIs are perceived as authentic communication, and SMIs are generally expected to discuss several brands, their perceived passion to create and share fashion-related information could be overshadowed by sponsorship opportunities to promote

brands they would not themselves usually endorse. Another respondent, a 23-year-old female Italian university Business and Administration student stated:

Giulia De Lellis' product posts are commercial, but she gives testimonials for certain cosmetic brands and always signals when she advertises (adv).

Customers often have difficulty in distinguishing commercial content from non-commercial content when SMIs are sharing content (Stubb and Colliander, 2019). SMIs may engage in sharing content that positively impacts their online image, giving less priority to promoting the brand itself or information that could benefit customers. A 26-year-old female Italian fashion product manager posited:

Some influencers put a lot of emphasis on what brands they wear. I look at Chiara Ferragni's outfit dressed in Louis Vuitton head to toe. Altogether I felt it was "too much", like she was trying hard to be noticed.

Like celebrities, SMIs can be perceived as endorsing brands for their own interests (Singh *et al.*, 2020), which causes customers to be sceptical of influencers' claims, especially during service failure and recovery procedures. Another respondent, a 29-year-old female British human resource coordinator stated:

One of the influencers that I follow always posts photos saying to buy from Zalando . . . I would like to ask her in case of disservice, but her comment may depend on her relationship with the brand.

Similarly, this 24-year-old male British MSc Business student stated:

Regarding social media influencers, I often think: Am I sure they are giving me the right advice? Should I stay with the brand following a disservice?

SMIs may have authentic passion in endorsing brand-related information and make recommendations to continue using a brand's services, thus contributing to a service recovery on behalf of the provider. However, customers may be sceptical of influencers who try to encourage remaining with brands despite service failures, which can potentially decrease their perceptions of the SMI's authentic passion.

4.3 Self-congruity

Self-congruity is considered an extension of self-concept; it refers to the match between a brand's image and an individual's self-concept (Xu and Pratt, 2018). The assumption of self-congruity is that individuals express positive attitudes towards a focal object when they perceive it to be a representation of, or a match with, their image or beliefs (Styvén *et al.*, 2020). A 33-year-old female Italian market research analyst averred:

I would certainly give a brand the benefit of the doubt as opposed to a social influencer's negative comments because they may be someone working for a brand that doesn't align with my preference.

Correspondingly, this 30-year-old female Italian fashion store associate stated:

The so-called fashion influencers, I don't often take their advice because I don't have a particular inclination towards them. It's the brand that matters.

These participants' comments identify the fact that a positive brand relationship can impact a customer's acceptance of information related to the brand. Customers who are strongly independent of a brand's influence may be more critical about its service failures (Klein and Dawar, 2004). A 22-year-old male British university Economics student stated:

I've had experience where influencers advertise products that are of little relevance to them and they look bad if the product doesn't function properly. It only gets worse when they try convincing customers that it will get better.

Self-congruity establishes a bond between customers and brands that are consistent with each other (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012) and causes customers to search for consistency between marketing messages and self-identities (Nickel *et al.*, 2020), particularly between the brand and influencers. Another participant, a 27-year-old male French fashion store associate stated:

This social media celebrity often endorses all sorts of brands, some that don't align with her usual image. She complained once about a brand that I felt did match her image, I found it odd.

Similarly, this 25-year-old female French MBA Global Fashion and Luxury Management student stated:

This influencer appeared too different to the brand. I felt I couldn't trust their information when I had an issue with the service.

If an influencer endorses too many products or brands, credibility and attitude towards marketing messages become less favourable (Jin and Phua, 2014). Influencers' associations with different brands could cause customers to perceive them as having little congruence with specific brands, thus weakening the effect of influencers, especially following service failures.

This is supported by a 22-year-old female French fashion product manager:

My favourite influencers are Chloebbbb and Caroline Receveur. They are young fashionista women fascinated by entrepreneurship which is what I desire to be.

Self-congruity between influencers and followers creates an environment comprising shared values and characteristics, which causes followers to increasingly follow influencers on subjects of interest (Nekmat and Ismail, 2019). This may increase the positive effect influencers have on supporting brands' recovery strategies by increasing the influencer's relevance to the information as well as their credibility. Correspondingly, a 23-year-old male British Interior Design student posited:

I follow influencers specifically linked to topics like design, interior design and fashion brands that I like. They provide relevant information solutions if the product doesn't deliver as expected.

The images of SMIs are likely to be perceived by followers based on the beliefs and knowledge that fans associate with them (Kim and Kim, 2020) and followers will assess whether the images align with themselves and the brand. Some customers may overlook an influencer's information if the influencer does not match with the brand or with themselves. In contrast, a positive match between the parties may increase the acceptance of information and the effect influencers have on positive customer behaviour towards service recovery strategies.

4.4 Responsibility of influencer

Responsibility of influencer refers to customers' perceptions regarding the extent to which SMIs are responsible for the service failures of brands they endorsed and are obliged to assist in service recovery procedures (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018). SMIs are considered to have control over their endorsement of products or brands through their online content, which is meant to represent their alleged real life. This means that their followers may hold the influencers accountable for failures, even if these failures were beyond their control; this is supported by this French 25-year-old female fashion store associate:

Once an influencer was presenting a very nice pair of trousers, I really loved those but I discovered that they were out of stock . . . I tried to contact them but did not get any answer. It was bad as I was influenced by the influencer to buy it; they should have thought before to have enough products.

When customers have an unsatisfactory experience with one brand, their satisfaction with another brand is likely to be more noticeable, causing them to defect to that brand (Tang and Chen, 2020). A 21-year-old female British university Business student stated:

There are many who rely heavily on influencers as the reassurance comforts them. Influencers take on the role of sharing information, so they need to take responsibility in supporting their followers when needed.

Some customers may have a need to connect with others for informational and emotional support (Sharma and Khadka, 2019) during service failures. Engagement is important for customers when measuring service quality and can prompt them to identify a supportive nature within online channels (Lin *et al.*, 2021). A 27-year-old male French creative designer stated:

I don't often see influencers involved in companies' service inefficiencies; if a disservice occurs, that signals the possible departure of the influencer.

Correspondingly, this 30-year-old female British administrator stated:

This influencer at first boasted their connection with this brand, but when complaints came through she almost disappeared.

An influencer's tendency to diverge from brands following service failure becomes quite noticeable to customers (Thomas and Fowler, 2016) when their eWOM related to the brand is less active following service failures. Customers may develop suspicions about a brand's attempt to manipulate customers by using influencers (Singh *et al.*, 2020) to promote an image that may cause customers to overlook failures, as supported by this 25-year-old male British MSc Economics student:

I actually think brands shouldn't involve influencers; it feels like a manipulation attempt to make customers forget the brand failures.

Customers' earlier exposure to influencers they find likeable is likely to reduce their negative reaction to failures due to the accrued reputation of the influencer. For example, a 23-year-old male French luxury fashion customer experience officer stated:

I've always trusted the influencer; she is honest and always gives good fashion advice . . . the service failure doesn't bother me, because they made a mistake it doesn't have to be all negative.

Fans of organisations that have engaged and appear likeable are likely to support the organisation or influencers and are willing to overlook mistakes made by the organisation (Sinha and Lu, 2016). If customers perceive the influencer to have minor responsibility for the failure, they are less likely to assign their negative evaluation of a service failure to them. A 22-year-old female Italian university Business and Administration student stated:

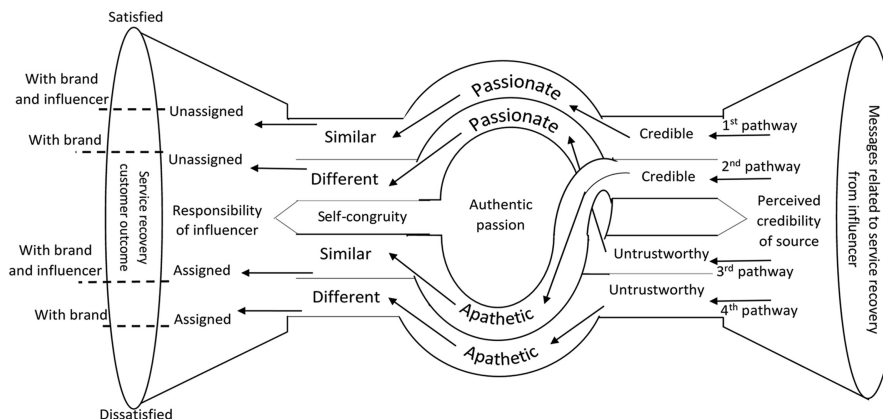
The social influencer was involved before failure occurs; so, they do not directly increase my dissatisfaction with the service.

Despite the commercial involvement of influencers, it can be argued that they are only responsible for reproducing or sharing messages (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020) and are not responsible for delivery failure of services and products, thus reducing the perceived level of blame or responsibility assigned to them.

5. Discussion and conceptual framework

Interpretation of the data revealed four major themes: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencer. Based on the emergent data, relevant literature and the researchers' own understanding, a dual funnel model (Figure 2) was developed to illustrate the relationship between SMIs and service recovery. The model has four pathways that illustrate how customers interpret the significance of specific SMIs during or following service failures. SMIs play a significant role in influencing consumers' behaviour (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Voorveld, 2019). However, the level of impact of SMIs, as part of firms' service recovery strategies, can be reduced by customers' assessment of individual influencer's perceived attitudes and behaviours expressed through online content (Barcelos *et al.*, 2018; Ju *et al.*, 2017; Stapel and Koomen, 2005). Additionally, an influencer's perceived impact may be affected by customers' judgements regarding whether the influencer's involvement with a brand's service recovery procedures is necessary (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, a customer's assessment of the involved influencer, alongside their service failure and recovery experience, will impact their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the brand, the SMI, or both.

Role of SMIs in SFR strategies



Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Figure 2.
The dual funnel model

The first pathway depicts the positive relationship between influencers and their followers, as well as the influencers' social media behaviour, as the vital mediators affecting customers' perceptions of service failure and recovery procedures. Past research suggests that the presence of SMIs has a positive impact on consumers' perceptions (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lee and Watkins, 2016) due to their perceived credibility, popularity and, most importantly, their communal relationship with their followers. Customers' early exposure to SMIs, whom they recognise as having self-congruity with the brand and customers themselves, can impact customers' cognitive thoughts about a service failure and recovery procedure because SMIs are perceived as closely relatable to their target audience, which increases SMIs' perceived credibility and authenticity (Voorveld, 2019). As a result, customers may develop feelings of intimacy with digital celebrities enabling them to develop pseudo-friendships with them (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). As the relationship continues to evolve, followers regard the digital celebrity or influencer as a credible source of information (Hwang and Zhang, 2018) and perceive their online activity to be driven by authentic passion, which leads customers to positively receive service failure and recovery-related information

from the SMI. The information the influencer posts is received more positively by the customer and builds or maintains positive perceptions of the brand (Lu *et al.*, 2014), which leads the customer to develop attitudinal loyalty to the brand as well as the influencer; this keeps customers from defecting from the brand despite service failures (Sinha and Lu, 2016). Thus, positive attitudes towards the influencer reduce the likelihood of customers assigning responsibility for the failure to the influencer and cause them to positively receive recovery-related information leading to their satisfaction with the influencer and the brand.

However, customers' perceptions of a lack of personal interest or apathy from an influencer can create scepticism despite the influencer's status as a credible source and the perceived self-congruity between the brand, customers and influencer. This is illustrated in the second pathway of the funnel model. Customers' concerns that influencers' involvement with a brand are commercially motivated negatively affect perceived trustworthiness as well as brand reputation (Singh *et al.*, 2020). If a negative situation occurs, customers are likely to assess the level of blame and responsibility the influencer should bear (Louie and Obermiller, 2002; Agnihotri *et al.*, 2023). High blame could be directed towards the influencer if their information was misleading as well commercially motivated, which would lead customers to assign responsibility to the influencer as well as the brand. Research suggests that firms should take care when involving influencers in brand crises due to concerns of perceived manipulation (Singh *et al.*, 2020) or lack of authentic passion from the influencer (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Gamage and Ashill, 2023). When there is a lack of authentic passion from an SMI to support customers' failure recovery processes, it may contradict previous communications delivered by influencers that were posted to make the influencer and the brand more likeable (Brown and Billings, 2013), which caused customers to have expectations of the brand and the influencer. Customers are likely to have expectations regarding the standards of information delivered to them (Leban *et al.*, 2021), and engagement throughout a service process is likely to be one of their expectations (Rezaei and Valaei, 2017). As the second pathway illustrates, if influencers lack passion in supporting their followers through interpersonal engagement during a recovery process, then the customer may feel that the influencer has not met their expectations; thus, the customer might assign responsibility to the influencer and become dissatisfied with the brand and the influencer.

The third and the fourth pathways of the funnel model begin with the customer perceiving the influencer to be an untrustworthy source of information; however, customers' evaluations do not necessarily lead them to develop negative perceptions on this pathway. Trustworthiness is an important factor that customers look for in messengers (Dholakia and Sternthal, 1977; Singh *et al.*, 2020; Stubb and Colliander, 2019); however, the third pathway considers that trustworthiness of a source is not solely limited to the online status of the influencer. Perceived credibility of a source can be measured by the supposed characteristics of the influencer (Lee and Eastin, 2021; Voorveld, 2019) and whether they are relatable to the observing customer. Customers may specifically examine whether the characteristics of the influencer align with their beliefs and image (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2022; Styvén *et al.*, 2020) and the image of an endorsed brand. If an influencer does not fit such criteria, the customer may perceive the influencer as unrelatable and irrelevant to the brand, which results in them disassociating from the influencer in the recovery process. However, despite the lack of perceived relevance towards the customer and the brand, customers may still notice the influencer's perceived enthusiasm and passion towards brands (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018), especially if the influencer is not being directly sponsored by the brand (Stubb and Colliander, 2019). As the third pathway indicates, a customer may not have a psychological attachment to the influencer, but the influencer's passionate involvement can still contribute towards a customer's satisfaction with the brand.

In contrast, the fourth pathway identifies that an untrustworthy source, who is apathetic and who is considered to differ from the audience and the brand, is likely to leave a negative

impression on customers in terms of the brand's decision to employ a SMI as a recovery strategy. Arguably, the fourth pathway relates to the concern that brands use influencers in an attempt to manipulate customers to overlook failures (Singh *et al.*, 2020), especially if the influencer lacks genuine passion, which results in customers' dissatisfaction with the brand. If the influencer is directly employed by the brand, they may be expected to acknowledge the failure on behalf of the company (Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). However, because the customer has no psychological attachment to the influencer, the brand's decision to employ the influencer may overshadow their relevance, thus causing customers to be more dissatisfied with the brand than the influencer.

6. Conclusion

This study examines a perspective of SMIs that considers the cycle of their influence on customers through SFR. The study summarises this cycle, illustrated in the dual funnel model (Figure 2), through four key themes identified following interpretation of interview data: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencer. Each of the discussed themes plays a major role in shaping how customers perceive SMIs involved in service failure and recovery efforts. This study finds that the positive effect of SMIs on customers is not immediate or based on short-term interactions with providers' services or the influencers themselves. The findings suggest that negative reactions towards service failure and recovery are reduced if customers have a relationship with influencers prior to the service failure and recovery compared with the reactions of customers who do not have a relationship with the influencer. Therefore, the influence process of SMIs may begin prior to service recovery processes for some customers and begin at the beginning of service failures for other customers.

For customers with no prior relationship with employed influencers, authenticity is one of the key factors needed to maintain the impact of the influencer. Customers' unfamiliarity with an influencer can disrupt the perceived credibility and authentic passion of the influencer, and make it difficult for customers to identify self-congruity between the influencer, the brand and themselves. Thus, if brands employ specific influencers, they need to be given time to build a follower relationship with the customers to build trust and believability in their efforts.

7. Theoretical implications

Corbin and Strauss (1990) argued that generalisation from sample to population encompassed only one type of generalisation and a study may generalise from situation to situation. However, it may be argued that generalisation or transferability may be achieved through assessing how individuals feel in different situations and how they may act in certain circumstances. Transferability ascertains the extent findings can be generalised to other settings and/or situations. Constructivist, hermeneutical studies entail in-depth studies of groups and pursue a depth of understanding regarding unique situations. "Thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) are pursued through a selection of interpretive methods that will in turn become "thick interpretations" (Vydich, 2000); "Such thick interpretations will provide a database that will allow judgements about transferability of findings to other situations" (Howell, 2013, p. 190).

These findings have several theoretical implications and raise a number of additional issues which require further examination. This study is the first to investigate how the presence of SMIs during service failure and recovery processes impacts customers' perceptions. Previous research suggests that under normal circumstances SMIs are beneficial to brands (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), whereas other researchers suggested that SMIs can negatively impact brand reputation when customers experience or encounter negative situations (Singh *et al.*, 2020). While taking these perspectives into consideration, this study

extends the defined customer reactions towards SMIs, and the role and effect of SMIs on service failure and recovery processes.

The findings reveal the importance of understanding how the customer perceives the influencer undertaking the endorsement activity. Specifically, we show that individual customers can have different reactions to the same influencer given that the influencer's followers will already have a positive perception of the influencer compared with individuals who are not familiar with the influencer or perceive a mismatch between the influencer's image and values and the individual's own image and values. Furthermore, an SMI's value-driven motives have a strong mediating impact on customers' trust or scepticism of the influencer's involvement (Singh *et al.*, 2020; Hughes *et al.*, 2019). We expand existing research by clarifying how influencers' online image and actual online behaviour influence customers' reactions to service failures, and provide a theoretical explanation of the characteristics of SMIs that can be employed as part of service recovery strategies, and how. Further research could examine whether SMIs manage their online endorsements through the four socio-technical pathways illustrated in Figure 2, thus adapting their communication approach to customers. In the early stage of communication, influencers may start by complying with requirements stated in their brand collaboration contract, but gradually begin to deliver content based on their creativity. In contrast, another influencer may begin with genuine intrinsic passion but gradually adopt a more commercial role. Considering the issues in balancing commercial and non-commercial gains, it would be interesting to empirically test the extent to which evolving from one pathway to another affects the influencer's career and alters their followers' perceptions.

Another important theoretical implication of this study is the focus on the relationship between the multiple actors involved in the service failure and the recovery procedure. Thus, the study concludes that the rationale behind customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a brand, influencers, or both, is not solely based on the action of the influencer, the brand or the customers' isolated thinking. Instead, they should be considered individual links in a chain of associations which all act as mediating actors. Additionally, the same actors involved in shaping experiences can influence the creation of multiple realities. Whether or not customers perceive an influencer to be relevant to a brand or service failure and recovery process, the influencer still acts as an important mediator influencing customers' perspectives of a service recovery process, although they may not be perceived as the direct cause of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

8. Managerial implications

The significance of influencer marketing within social media suggests that SMIs cannot be excluded from a brand's communication strategy (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Our findings reveal that influencers' engagement can reduce the perceived severity of service failures and enhance recovery procedures, thus motivating customers to remain with brands. However, the findings also reveal several risks associated with employing influencers as part of recovery strategies that brands must consider, including a perceived mismatch between the influencer and the brand, and the diverse criteria individual customers apply when evaluating their recovery experience and the influencer's contribution. Brands must approach their employment of influencers with caution by considering the behavioural characteristics they deliver through social media and how customers will respond to them.

The present research clarifies that there are different socio-technical processes involved in how SMIs approach their audience and how customers react to the influencers' delivery in service failure and recovery situations. For instance, SMIs participate in sharing commercial and non-commercial content, and both have the potential to influence the behaviour of their audience (Stubb and Colliander, 2019). If the volume of commercial content exceeds non-commercial content, or if influencers' content is mainly focused on directly selling the

reviewed branded products, then this could generate perceived inconsistencies if customers encounter service failures. This outcome becomes more severe if the influencer does not have a perceived passion beyond the commercial orientation of their involvement, thus weakening their character profile (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018) as well as their perceived impact on service recovery. Our findings suggest that in circumstances where SMIs contribute to a brand's recovery strategies, customers are willing to accept efforts they believe to be driven by intrinsic motivations. This finding suggests that collaboration with influencers with genuine passion for specific brands is crucial. This will impact the positive reception of the influencer's messages and perceived attitude, which will enable the influencer to ingratiate themselves with brand customers through social media.

Our findings suggest that brands should consider not only the influencer's strong social network of followers but also the target audience the influencer will most appeal to. Prior to collaborations with brands, influencers have an existing established network of followers with whom they have built pseudo-friendships (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). By employing an influencer with an existing base of followers, brands can obtain access to potential customers and the influencer can contribute by gradually building their followers' attitudinal loyalty towards the brand itself. The influencer's passion towards their follower network and the brand, along with their pre-existing influencer-follower relationships prior to service failures, may reduce the perceived severity of potential service failures (Brown and Billings, 2013), thus motivating customers to remain with the brand. However, a brand must ensure that the influencer appeals to its customer base and matches the brand. An influencer who does not meet such criteria may be perceived as dishonest or their collaboration with the brand may be perceived as commercially driven. This could lead to the involvement of the SMI in a recovery strategy being perceived as the brand's attempt to manipulate customers by persuading them that the severity of the failure is less than perceived, thus reducing the effect of influencers (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, customers' earlier exposure to influencers who appeal to them and match the brand will have long-term positive effects, such as reducing customers' negative evaluation of service failure and recovery procedures.

9. Future directions and limitations

Further research could test the generalisability of our findings within other industries or different service failure contexts. A deeper examination of the perceived severity of service failures could contribute to the level of responsibility and blame customers assign to SMIs. Findings may differ in a context of less severe cases, whereby customers' negative perceptions may be lower compared with more severe cases. It is recommended that future research further examines the characteristics required of influencers to increase endorsement effectiveness, and the level of impact individual influencers have on customers differentiated by their perspective and relationship status with the influencer. Furthermore, future research could examine how influencers manage their relationship status and endorsement activity, thus adapting the pathway they may be following, as illustrated in the dual funnel model proposed in this study. In addition, we consider that a comparative analysis in relation to different countries would be useful and intend to develop this for a subsequent paper.

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