



**“Am I Owned by my Followers?” - The Influencers’ Perspective: The Effects of Self-Disclosure on the Influencer-Follower Relationship and to what Extent this Affects Influencers’ Psychological Well-Being.**

A photo-elicitation study about the effect of self-disclosure on the influencer-follower relationship and how this affects influencers’ psychological well-being.

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### **Abstract**

Social media influencers can influence and adjust the opinions of their followers. Self-disclosure is needed to strengthen the follower-influencer relationship. Nevertheless, how does self-disclosure affect the influencer-follower relationship? And to what extent does this affect the psychological well-being of social media influencers? To this aim, 11 photo-elicitation interviews with Instagram influencers were conducted. The results revealed that self-disclosure strengthens the influencer-follower relationship and that this has a negative and positive effect on the psychological well-being of social media influencers. For example, self-disclosure leads to more positive and compassionate reactions from followers, enhancing the bond between social media influencers and followers. Social media influencers care about their followers and see them as motivation. On the other hand, the negative effect on psychological well-being is the pressure to be always active on Instagram; otherwise, the social media influencer might lose followers or even receive messages from followers about their absence. In conclusion, it can be stated that self-disclosure strengthens the influencer-follower relationship and positively and negatively affects the psychological well-being of social media influencers. Further implications of the results and future research on self-disclosure, influencer-follower relationship, and psychological well-being are discussed.

*Keywords:* social media influencers, followers, Instagram, self-disclosure, psychological well-being, influencer-follower relationship

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**“Am I owned by my followers?” - The influencers’ perspective: the effects of self-disclosure on the influencer-follower relationship and to what extent this affects influencers’ psychological well-being.**

Becoming a social media influencer (SMI) seems to be a wanted goal. They can be described as individuals active on a social media platform, such as Instagram, with many “followers”. SMIs are often experts in a particular niche (e.g., fashion, food, fitness) (De Veirman et al., 2017). Many people are pursuing fame on social media due to free products, visibility, and popularity (Abidin, 2015). Nearly 54% of young people in the United States would become an SMI (Morning Consult, 2019), and it is the second most popular profession among British youths (Awin, 2019). Currently, around 500,000 SMIs are active on the most popular influencer marketing platform: Instagram (Abidin, 2016; Emarketer, 2019), a platform that “creates an illusion of a sense of intimacy and closeness” between SMIs and followers (Chen, 2018, p.32).

SMIs are perceived as reliable, authentic, and honest by their followers because they are socially aligned. This makes followers accept something more quickly from an SMI (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Eventually, this will create a parasocial relationship (PSR), which is the illusion of having an intimate, one-sided, personal relationship with a media personality (Abidin, 2016; Lee & Watkins, 2016).

A factor that enhances developing a PSR between SMIs and followers is self-disclosure (Kim & Song, 2016; Wood & Forest, 2016), which means sharing personal information with another person regardless of the effect on one’s public self-image (Asher & McDonald, 2010). In general, the content SMIs share enables insight into their private personal lives (Solis, 2016). It implies a level of authenticity, meaning that the SMI is genuine and relatable with its followers (Gilani et al., 2018). Eventually, this self-disclosure develops trust (Gilani et al., 2018). Next to maintaining and developing a relationship, social media

users are motivated to disclose themselves to create enjoyable creative content for the audience. In general, self-disclosing would likely be done if it has a high probability of being favorably received by the audience (Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Krasnova et al., 2010; Schlosser, 2020).

Not much is known about how SMIs perceive the relationship with their followers. Van den Abeele (2019) has concluded that SMIs seem to find it essential to engage in a dialogue with their followers as much as possible. They use different strategies to strengthen that engagement, for example, by organizing meet & greets with their followers. They even call their followers their “fans”. Furthermore, Gilani et al., (2018) stated that SMIs’ relationship with followers involves interacting with them, such as thanking them and asking them for feedback on what to post next - resulting in the fact that followers influence the SMI on what to post and how they have to present themselves (Gilani et al., 2018). Through sentiment, engagement, and behavioral social media activities such as likes, comments, and private messages, followers have power over the SMI. Eventually, this influence could have positive effects such as motivating the SMI to create content (Gilani, et al., 2018) or adverse effects such as the pressure to perform (Khamis et al., 2016; Gilani et al., 2018).

SMIs experience pressure when posting new content and valuable information to stay relevant for followers and stand out compared to other SMIs. Due to constant pressure, SMIs could lose themselves, which results in a decrease in authenticity showing on social media and an increase of stress and anger (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016). Moreover, several studies suggest that SMIs can be victims of cyberbullying by other social media users, impacting their reputation, trust issues, and personal lives (Abidin, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018). No studies investigated whether this pressure, stress, and cyberbullying among SMIs on Instagram are related to self-disclosure or the influencer-follower relationship.

Although there are many works of literature focused on the PSR (Hu et al., 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Rasmussen, 2018), much less is known about how SMIs perceive the relationship with followers and to what extent this is affected by self-disclosure. Moreover, several studies focus on how social media use might affect psychological well-being (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016). Some studies focus on SMIs and cyberbullying (Abidin, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018). However, none of the studies have investigated the impact of self-disclosure and the influencer-follower relationship on SMI's psychological well-being.

Therefore, the present study will examine the SMI's perspective on their relationship with followers, to what extent this is affected by self-disclosure, and to what extent this affects their psychological well-being. Two research questions will guide the present study. The first research question will focus on *the effects of self-disclosure on the SMI-follower relationship (RQ1)*. The second research question will focus on *how self-disclosure and the SMI-follower relationship affect the psychological well-being of the SMI (RQ2)*.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 *Influencer Marketing and Social Media Influencers*

Brands are increasingly using SMIs for their marketing advertising strategies. The global Instagram influencer market size is worth 2.3 billion dollars in 2020. This amount has almost been doubled since 2018, when the market size was worth 1.3 billion dollars (Mediakix, 2019; Statista, 2020). Influencer marketing used to take place on blog platforms where bloggers shared promoted content with the public (Abidin, 2016). The content they posted contained, for example, reviewing a product or service that was sponsored by a brand. Today, influencer marketing has shifted to social media platforms. Instagram can be seen as one of the most essential platforms for influencer marketing (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017). With 500 million daily active users (Statista, 2020) and 500,000 active SMIs (Emarketer, 2019), the growing social media platform allows it to reach a broad audience.

In general, SMIs begin as standard social media users. By posting highly systematized content about their personal lives, they gain followers whose viewership can be monetized for brands. They are seen as relatable because many of them lead an everyday life compared to celebrities. SMIs present themselves by sharing engaging self-generated content in a specific niche in which they profile themselves as an expert (e.g., travel, food, fitness, fashion), or sharing their personal life as a whole (Khamis et al., 2017). SMIs have built their career online without being known to their followers before (De Veirman et al., 2017; Schouten et al., 2019). They can be categorized depending on the number of followers they have. Nano SMIs have the smallest number of followers (less than 1,000), mostly being people they know in real life. SMIs with a broader audience (1,000 – 100,000) are called micro-influencers and profile themselves in a specific niche. This group is perceived as having much engagement due to their interaction with their audience (Main, 2017). “Macro” influencers even have a

larger audience of followers (100,000 – 1 million) and are perceived as celebrities (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2019).

SMIs can have an influence on their followers on social media. This influence can take place when people are interested in certain products or topics. They are looking for information that can tell them more about, for example, a product to make a purchase decision. SMIs can provide this information and thus influence people in their purchase decision. Besides, consumers are more likely to take information from people who have a high status online (Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, SMIs with many followers are more likely to be seen as persons who provide confidential information. SMIs are, therefore, interesting for companies to use for their marketing advertising strategies. As a result, companies will create more brand awareness (Liu et al., 2015).

One of the aspects that are important to become a successful SMI is credibility. Therefore, showing who you are plays an important role. Trust within the relationship of SMIs and followers is increased when they share the same preferences and interests (Kim & Tran, 2013). Besides, strong interaction creates more trust in the relationship. When SMIs have much contact with their followers, for example, by responding to their private messages on Instagram, they will feel that the SMI is closer to them. This creates more trust between the SMI and the followers (Kim & Tran, 2013). Trust in their relationship also grows when SMIs show who they are and appear genuine to their followers, by sharing personal details about their lives by self-disclosing (Liu et al., 2015).

## ***2.2 Self-disclosure***

With the increasing use of social media, people tend to self-disclose by sharing their experiences, opinions, and feelings with other people to fulfill their needs of being connected and interact with other similar users (Laroche et al., 2012). Instagram brings people together



who share visuals of self-presentation. People want to post content to satisfy psychological and social needs, opinion exchange and entertainment (Al-Kandari et al., 2016). People who use Instagram very often are more likely to self-disclose more than people who do not use it that often. As people use Instagram every day, they get comfortable with the technology resulting in increased confidence and trust to disclose themselves on the platform (Al-Kandari et al., 2016). Some people use Instagram to seek support and similar others by disclosing themselves, wherefore they often receive positive support (Andalibi et al., 2017).

There are several reasons why people self-disclose. Keeping thoughts to oneself requires active mental work and can eventually result in stress. By sharing thoughts with other people, and thus by self-disclosing, stress can be released, which brings benefits to the individual. It gives a rewarding feeling and helps people feel connected and enjoying interactions with like-minded users (Laroche et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2016).

Moreover, people who receive emotional support are more willing to disclose. Emotional support can ease stress and verbalize talking about private feelings or personal problems (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). This type of support is encouraging people to self-disclose personal information. In the context of social media, it provides virtual spaces for people where issues and feelings can be discussed. In this way, people are reminded that there is always someone in their network that can support them. This support can help people self-disclose and easily discuss sensitive issues (Coulson et al., 2007). However, self-disclosure can involve risks because people give up their privacy by sharing personal information with others. This can result in increased vulnerability (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Haimson et al., 2015) and negatively impact identity (DiMocco & Millen, 2007).

Self-disclosure has thus become a crucial part of a persons' social life. It is seen as a necessary development of relationships and generates closeness between strangers (Aron et al., 1997). According to Collins & Miller (1994), the more people like someone, the more

they self-disclose towards that person. Also, people who disclose themselves seem to be liked more than people who self-disclose less. Accordingly, people who self-disclose are more likely to use social media to maintain and increase relationships with other people (Park et al., 2011).

### ***2.3 Self-disclosure and Relationship Development***

Self-disclosure is an essential factor for developing relationships by promoting trust, commitment, authenticity, and intimacy (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006). Utz (2015) even states that self-disclosure is the key to developing relationships. As Jourard and Whitman (1971) put it, “if we want to be loved, we must disclose ourselves” (p.83).

Social exchange theories suggest that relationships are based on reciprocal self-disclosure, where people expect mutual obligations in the relationship (Cozby, 1973), which means that people tend to disclose themselves to people who disclose themselves as well. They are willing to respond to received disclosure with their disclosure in return (Collins & Miller, 1994). In the context of social media, people engage in self-disclosure when they receive more benefits and fewer costs in relationship maintenance (Liu et al., 2016). People will only continue to disclose their personal information when the return is beneficial, and they perceive social support in the relationship (Homans, 1958). Moreover, other studies stated that self-disclosing on social media would likely be done if it has a high probability of being favorably received by the audience (Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Krasnova et al., 2010; Schlosser, 2020).

On Instagram, sharing personal content in the form of images, video's or private messages can motivate others to disclose in response, which in turn will motivate the first person to disclose even more, and so forth. For example, SMIs who self-disclose encourage their followers to like them and to self-disclose back by commenting on their content

(Ferchaud et al., 2018). This self-disclosure does not need to be intimate to build a relationship. Entertaining and positive self-disclosure also helps by developing connections (Utz, 2015).

Moreover, SMIs use self-disclosure to maintain authenticity (Ferchaud et al., 2017). Self-disclosure thus enhances the perceived authenticity of SMIs (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and motivates the followers' trust and feelings of intimacy towards the SMI (Huang, 2015). With this authenticity, SMIs look for interaction with their followers by mentioning them directly (Tolson, 2010), for example, by asking them questions in the caption of their shared images on Instagram. In turn, this provokes interaction and will encourage followers to engage with SMIs by commenting or liking their content (Chung & Cho, 2017).

A bond of intimacy is being developed with SMIs through shared experiences (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Common shared experience can be a personal story that an SMI is sharing or a questions-and-answer exchange where SMIs answer questions from their followers. This shared experience enables SMIs to get in touch with followers, which will eventually increase intimacy. Perlman & Fehr (1987) defined intimacy as a closeness feeling developed from personal disclosures between people. SMIs who share private information, honest opinions, and parts of their daily lives with their followers are perceived as more intimate. This improves the authenticity of the SMIs, and it brings them closer to their followers, which deepens the relationship they have (Peltola, 2019).

## ***2.4 The Influencer-follower Relationship***

Due to their personal content and interactions with their followers, SMIs are perceived as very relatable, honest, and approachable. Followers look up to SMIs, but at the same time, they believe that they are similar to them as they have the same opinion, interest, and activities (Abidin, 2015). As a result of this, followers are likely to build an illusionary,

intimate, one side relationship with the SMIs, also known as a parasocial relationship (PSR) (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This describes the relationship between the follower and the SMI. However, the relationship between the SMI and follower can be described as a two-sided relationship instead of one-sided, meaning that they can communicate and engage with each other.

Baym (2012) investigated the artist-fan relationship and stated that these relationships fundamentally differ from friendships, which are voluntary and equal. Artists do not choose their fans and cannot choose to end a relationship with a fan. Concluding that the relationship is usually not very reciprocal. The relationship can better be seen as market relationships where the artists sell things the audience wants (Baym, 2012). Stewart (2018) stated that artists should engage with their fans before trying to sell to them.

Marwick & boyd (2011) concluded that publicly known figures might use social media to create a connection with other people and that intimacy is not something only fans can consider, but something that artists experience as well. In this sense, for both public figures and fans, social media is a successful way to re-emphasize and resolidify the importance of both parties to each other (Bennett, 2014). Celebrities use social media to respond to their fans directly. Some fans may perceive that the celebrity is “there for them”. This connection results in fans feeling important and directly spoken to, regardless of the number of followers the celebrity has (Bennett, 2014). In this sense, celebrities use social media in such a way to not only share public and private elements of their life but also to directly speak with their fans as individuals alongside them. This process strengthens the feeling of connection and contact despite being one amongst millions (Bennett, 2014). Lady Gaga revealed the importance of her fans in her private life:

When I fight with someone I am in a relationship with, I think, what should my fans think if they knew this was happening? How would they feel about me...And then I

get out. My fans saved me from being myself, because they would never allow it – the same way I would never allow anything to hurt them. (Bennet, 2014. p. 117).

SMIs are highly responsive and communicate mutually with their followers, as well as some celebrities do with their fans. This ensures voluntary and interactive content that feels more authentic (Abidin, 2015). The relationship between SMIs and followers is thus mediated via an equalizing way. SMIs and followers both co-construct and lead the conversation. The information is interactive, given that there is a mutual conversation that could be at the same time “one-to-many” (when SMI share content with thousands of followers) and “one-to-one” (for example, a reply to an individual follower via Instagram private messages) (Abidin, 2015). Research concluded that the formation of the relationship is positively associated with the audience’s participation (Huang, 2015). Eventually, followers will engage with the SMI by liking or commenting on their social media content (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Abidin (2015) interviewed several influencers where one of them states that they have some followers who follow them for a long time. These followers leave lovely messages and recommend on what to post or to improve. SMIs’ communicative intimacy can lead to personal attachments to the followers, despite being motivated by commercial collaborations. Moreover, SMIs control their interaction with followers by using their personal voice to convey intimacy (Abidin, 2015). Followers often get the chance to interact with the SMI (i.e., “Let me know if you have any questions”) and can improve SMIs’ content by giving feedback (polls on Instagram Stories). However, due to the high number of reactions to their content, SMIs cannot always engage in real conversations with followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2018).

## ***2.5 Followers' Impact on SMIs***

Marwick & boyd stated, “public figures who use social media cannot just be considered one-dimensional strategists seeking to present a self that creates enough authenticity to be successfully commodified. They do not just affect audiences. Audiences affect them” (2011, p.312). SMIs are influenced mainly by the social media behavior of their followers through likes and comments. Followers have an enormous influence on SMIs’ activities, such as what content to post and how to brand themselves (Gilani et al., 2018; Crocker & Cronin, 2017). This power tends to shift from being in the hands of the SMI to being possessed by the followers and vice versa (Gilani et al., 2018). When the power is shifted into the followers’ hands, it could turn out positively and negatively (Gabriel, 2011).

According to Gilani et al. (2018), SMIs experience enjoyment from their social media influencing activities. It goes beyond having an interest. It motivates SMIs to put energy and time in organizing their content and in their followers. It becomes a part of their identity. Besides, it gives them self-confidence. However, in contrast to this, due to their increased confidence, SMIs are vulnerable, facing a fear of judgment. SMIs are afraid of their followers, where they might be perceived as focusing too much on their brand image instead of their community (Gilani et al., 2018). Moreover, Crocker and Cronin (2017) concluded that the power of followers on SMIs’ content leads to a collapse of SMIs’ power and decreased charisma and authenticity. This could impact how authentic SMIs see themselves. SMIs, therefore, jeopardize their true self, which can lead to inner conflicts in SMIs mindsets (Audrezet et al., 2018). Due to the critical role followers play in shaping the direction of SMIs, mental health issues can be triggered.

## ***2.6 Effects of Social Media on Psychological Well-being***

In general, social media use can create risks for people because they can lack self-regulation and are more prone to peer pressure (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Evidence suggests that people who use social media to a large extent are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and are more likely to experience psychological stress (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016). Moreover, Scott & Woods (2019) concluded that platforms, such as Instagram, provide various opportunities for social interactions through public profiles, number of likes, and 24/7 availability for messages. Together, these features contribute to an increase in social media use and the urgency to be continuously active.

Additionally, social media contributes to creating an unrealistic view of others' lives, making people more self-aware, and creating a lower self-image (Anxiety, 2016; Woods & Scott, 2016). Because of this high degree of self-awareness, people strive for good self-presentation and are more often anxious about how people perceive them (Rosenbaum, 1993).

Since SMIs spend much time on social media, they are dealing with mental health problems. While their lifestyle on social media seems to be careless and attractive (Abidin, 2014), their career is not without suffering and hard work (Abidin, 2013). Unfortunately, female SMIs often receive judgments referring to their bodies, persona, or private lives. People believe that these SMIs deserve to be hated because they see them as attention seekers (Abidin, 2019).

SMIs start their Instagram account with their own ideas on what to achieve and to post. But as soon as they attract more followers, the content of SMIs starts to be determined by what their followers want to see. Resulting in a conflict in the SMI’s mind because they no longer can be their authentic self by posting content they genuinely like. The pressure to create and post this new content with valuable information to stay relevant, is high (Gilani et al., 2018; Khamis et al., 2016). This is where SMIs could lose themselves due to the constant

pressure to perform, resulting in a decrease in authenticity showing on social media, stress, and anger (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016). One of the interviewed SMI in the study of Gilani et al., (2018) said:

I do feel...when I post something and it doesn't get many likes I do think about it, get frustrated and run around to get ideas. I check other influencers' content and then think-rethink what if my followers will not like it or think I am not funny. Some comments I get are so hurtful. It is like in a relationship. There are good and bad days I have with my followers. (p.14)

## ***2.7 The present study***

Becoming an SMI seems to be an attractive career that is increasingly popular. SMIs post content about their personal life and gain followers whose viewership can be monetized for brand collaborations. Through their appealing content, SMIs disclose personal information making their followers feel very similar to the SMI. Self-disclosure helps by developing connections with followers, and adds to the perceived authenticity of SMIs. An interaction between the SMI and follower arises whereby the followers build a PSR with the influencer. However, this relationship remains one-sided. SMIs are highly responsive and communicate mutually with their followers. Thus, the SMI-follower relationship is mediated in a more equalizing way where the SMI and follower both co-construct and shape the conversation. Moreover, research states that SMIs do not only influence their followers, but their followers also influence them. Followers have an enormous impact on the behavior and activities of SMIs, such as the content they post. This can turn out positively and negatively. Therefore, it is interesting to know what positive or negative effects self-disclosure has on the SMI-follower relationship and to what extent they affect the psychological well-being of the SMI.



Previous studies tend to focus on what impact SMIs have on followers. As more and more people are interested in becoming an SMI, it is necessary to investigate what impact self-disclosure has on the SMI-follower relationship and how this affects the SMI's psychological well-being. In this way, awareness concerning the consequences, either positive or negative, of being an SMI can be created. As more people want to become an SMI but also are followers themselves, they have to think about the impact they have on SMIs by piling the pressure on the people they admire.

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1 Qualitative research***

To investigate to what extent self-disclosure affects the influencers-follower relationship and to what extent this affects the psychological well-being of the SMI, a qualitative study in the form of photo-eliciting interviews (PEI) was conducted. PEI is a method of interviewing in which photographs are used to stimulate and guide a discussion between the interviewer and participant (Curry, 1986). The photographs used in this study originate from the participants. Researchers can use these photographs to expand on questions. The participants can use the photographs as a unique way to talk about the dimensions of their experiences in detail. It ensures that the interviews arise from the participants' perspective rather than from the researchers (Clark-Ibañez, 2004). Moreover, it motivates the participants to be involved in the interview actively. It gives the researcher a unique view into the SMI's daily experience with their followers' content and reactions. The use of this method is unique within the field of SMIs, self-disclosure, their relationship with followers and psychological well-being.

The interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams due to the COVID-19 situation. All interviews took place in November 2020. Before the interviews started, participants had to sign the informed consent whereby they agreed to the recording and the interview analysis.

#### ***3.2 Participants***

A total of eleven SMIs, also known as participants, were interviewed, of which one SMI was male, and ten SMIs were female. The age was between 21 and 32 years, with an average of 25,5 years. Table 1 shows the SMIs who participated in this study with their age, the number of followers they had at that time, the niche they belong to, and whether they included the photos. They are numbered to keep the SMIs anonymous. They were approached

via Instagram Direct Messages or - when available on their Instagram profile – via email.

Moreover, snowball sampling was used by asking the participants if they knew more SMIs who would like to participate in this study.

The SMIs had to have a minimum of 1,000 and a maximum of 100,000 followers on their Instagram. These types of SMIs are called micro-influencers. This is the largest category of SMIs on Instagram and offers the best engagement with their followers, whereby this is the most interesting group to investigate (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Five of the eleven interviewed SMIs were specialized in the Fashion & Lifestyle category. Research shows that the vast majority of SMIs qualify in this category and that this category is also the most popular online (Duffe & Hund, 2015). All interviews were held in Dutch.

**Table 1**

*List of Instagram Micro-Influencers that participated in this study*

<b>Nr</b>	<b>Number of followers (2-12-2020)</b>	<b>Niche</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Screenshot Photos Completed?</b>
1.	34.000	Horses	24	Female	Yes
2.	4.722	Fitness	23	Male	Yes, no negative.
3.	21.900	Fashion	26	Female	Yes, no negative
4.	6.804	Food	30	Female	No
5.	5.011	Fitness	24	Female	Yes, no negative
6.	10.200	Fashion & Lifestyle	22	Female	Yes, no negative
7.	6.024	Fashion & Lifestyle	26	Female	Yes, no negative
8.	26.100	Fashion	21	Female	No

Nr.	Number of followers (2-12-2020)	Niche	Age	Gender	Screenshot Photos Completed?
9.	21.500	Fashion & Lifestyle	31	Female	Yes
10.	11.100	Positivity	32	Female	Yes, no negative
11.	18.800	Fitness and lifestyle	22	Female	Yes, no negative

### ***3.3 Topic list photo-elicitation interviews***

**Print screens.** In this study, participants were asked to generate photographs before the interview took place. Participants were asked to take eight screenshots with their smartphone of their followers' reactions on Instagram. These could be comments or private messages. At least two negative and two positive reactions on a personal Instagram post and at least two negative and two positive reactions on a neutral Instagram post (see table 2). The personal Instagram posts contained self-disclosure and the neutral Instagram post did not. The reason for bringing these print screens was to see if there was a difference in the reactions of followers on pictures with self-disclosure and without self-disclosure and what impact these reactions had on the SMI. Participants were asked to make names and other personal details of followers' invisible in the print screens. After completing the collection of print screens, the participants were asked to send the print screens via the researchers' email.

**The photo-elicitation interviews.** Before the interviews were conducted a test interview was conducted. However, the researcher perceived this test interview as useful because of the valuable answers and conversation with the participant. Resulting in the fact that the answers from the test interview are used in this study (participant 1). No questions were adjusted after the test interview. Researcher Alma Puce conducted the interviews. Before the interview started, participants were reminded of confidentiality and asked whether they agreed to have the audio of the interview recorded. After this, the research was

explained, after which the interview started that was conducted based on a topic list. For the entire topic list, see Appendix A.

In-depth interview questions were used that guided the interview. However, participants were free to provide more in-depth and more detailed answers. The topic list starts with introducing questions about how they started being an influencer, then continues on self-disclosure and the screenshots. The interview ends with questions about their relationship with followers and their psychological well-being. This research examines to what extent self-disclosure affects the influencer-follower relationship and the psychological well-being of the SMIs. Therefore, these topics are discussed below.

The first sub-question that is being answered in this study is about self-disclosure and the influencer-follower relationship. This part of the interview tries to determine the extent to which the SMIs disclose themselves on Instagram and if this affects their relationship with their followers. To find this out, various questions about self-disclosure were asked. To begin with, the participants were asked if they self-disclose, their motivation to do so, and if they see a difference in followers' reactions when posting pictures with self-disclosure or without. After this the screenshots were discussed. Two participants delivered negative and positive reactions; seven participants delivered only positive reactions because they had no negative reactions to show. Furthermore, two participants delivered no screenshots at all. Finally, questions were asked about their relationship with their followers. The participants were asked if they feel a bond with their followers, if they desired to meet them and whether they were curious about them.

The second sub-question concerns the extent to which self-disclosure and the influencer-follower relationship affect the psychological well-being of SMIs. The questions included for this sub-question were about how much time SMIs spend on social media and whether they experience press, stress or other complaints. After this, they were asked how this

relates to their free time and meeting family and friends. They were also asked whether they found this challenging to combine.

**Table 2**

*List of sorts of screenshots used in the photo-elicitation interviews*

2 negative reactions on a personal Instagram post (self-disclosure)	2 negative reactions on a neutral Instagram post (no self-disclosure)
2 positive reactions on a personal Instagram post (self-disclosure)	2 positive reactions on a neutral Instagram post (no self-disclosure)

### **3.4 Analysis**

The researcher listened to all the interview audio records a couple of times and transcribed them in Microsoft Word. The data were carefully reviewed several times, after which the interviews were coded via Microsoft Excel. Two stages of coding are used. The first phase is the open coding in which the three main topics of this research were sought: self-disclosure, influencer-follower relationship, and psychological well-being. The second phase is the axial coding, in which the sentences in the transcripts are highlighted that are relevant to the topic in question.

After highlighting all relevant sentences, a coding scheme has been drawn up. This is divided into the numbers of participants, a text fragment that they have spoken, and the associated coding. Three subcategories have been created in the encoding scheme. The first subcategory is self-disclosure, the second subcategory is the influencer-follower relationship, and the third subcategory contains psychological well-being. The interviews were coded separately and included in the coding scheme. After this, they were compared with each other for similarities and differences. When a match was found in the text fragments, they were

given the same code. Various overarching codes have been found in this way. The codebook can be found in Appendix B.

## 4. Results

Appendix B shows the results of the interviews, divided into three parts: self-disclosure, influencer-follower relationship, and psychological well-being. The three parts have several sub-paragraphs, which will be explained per part. The main outcomes of the research are described per paragraph. Quotations are being used.

### *4.1 Self-disclosure*

This paragraph will focus on to what extent the participants disclose themselves via Instagram. This paragraph is divided into three sub-paragraphs: 1) self-presentation, 2) sharing personal and private information, 3) reactions to neutral pictures (contain no self-disclosure) versus personal pictures (contain self-disclosure).

**Self-presentation.** This first sub-paragraph is about whether the SMIs remain themselves on Instagram and that they do not present themselves otherwise on the platform. In general, all influencers interviewed remain very true to themselves. They are, therefore, not going to present themselves as different from who they are. For example, participant 8 says:

I really want to be myself and not another person. I think it is important that people around me know me well and can relate to me. I do not want people who follow me to feel that you have to be different. You have to be yourself.

However, some do admit that they often only show their positive side to their followers. More specifically, they pick out attractive photos and leave no signs of unhappiness; for example, participant 1 says that she shares an ideal online image. However, she feels the responsibility not always to do that: “There is an ideal online image, I do it as well. When I have ten pictures, I will choose the nicest one. I think everyone does. However, I do feel the responsibility to not always share the perfect photo.”. There is a distinction



between SMIs who are sure to be themselves online and SMIs who try to find a balance between real-life and perfect photos. For example, participant 11 posts “perfect” pictures but in the caption, she shows her real identity:

If you look at my Instagram, sure, I always wear make-up and have curled my hair.

When I take those pictures, I often look the way I would like to look every day. But in terms of personality and what I share, it is not a character or something I create. Or that I make life more beautiful than it is, no, I want to prevent that.

**Sharing personal and private information.** This second sub-paragraph is about whether the SMIs disclose themselves on Instagram by sharing personal and private information about their lives. The majority of the participants indicates that he or she shares personal or private information via Instagram. Participants are very optimistic about sharing these kinds of information because of the positivity they receive from their followers, the increasing contact they have with their followers, and because it is appealing to their followers. Examples are participant 1: “I see that the more open you are, the more people actually appreciate that. And perhaps less likely to post a negative reaction.”, participant 6 indicates that it is indeed well-received by followers:

You get a lot more responses. People identify with things and they like it. You notice that it is simply well received. I recently got a DM saying: "It's just nice to follow you because you are so much more real than all those fake influencers walking around".

That is exactly what I want!

However, two participants indicated that they do not share “too” personal information. For example, participant 3 does not desire to share everything about her life and

participant 5 said: “I do not share personal things. I also don't share when things are not going well with me. I do not think that really adds any value.”.

**Reactions to neutral pictures versus personal pictures.** This third sub-paragraph is about the reactions SMIs receive on neutral and personal pictures they share on Instagram. The reactions on both type of pictures is being compared.

When discussing the reactions to neutral pictures versus personal pictures, participants notice that the personal pictures receive more likes, comments that turn into deep conversations and compassionate comments because people can relate to the SMI. Participant 6 says:

It feels a lot better because the personal picture has more meaning. Often those responses are big enough to start a conversation and to be able to talk to people.

Apparently, they really like what you do. Only with those neutral posts it does not say that much. It does not result in a conversation; it does not necessarily add a lot of extra.

Participant 8 also shares that there is a difference in the reactions between neutral and personal pictures. The reactions on personal posts are more profound because people can put themselves into place. When sharing more neutral information the followers' comments tend to be much less in-depth and superficial.

The majority of the participants feel that their followers recognize themselves in personal pictures. The comments they receive are very positive, warm and compassionate. Participant 5 said: “You do notice that people get closer to you when they get to know you as a person. I notice when you have a story that you talk into the camera, people have the idea

that they know you.”. Moreover, participants say that these personal posts enhance the bond and the conversations they have with their followers. Participant 3 said:

I notice that the interaction is much higher on Instagram stories, higher than when I post a picture. With a picture you take a few photos and you choose the best picture and you post it. If you have a pimple, you photoshop it. This is not possible on your Instagram Stories. So, it is just very pure and you can tell stories to your followers and I notice that they like that. You do indeed create that bond with your followers. And I really like that small community.

Participant 7 says: “There are a few followers who react to everything. I recognize them. Now that I share more, I also see that new people are sending messages. That is great. You notice that it is appealing to more people.”. However, participant 9 is the only one who is equally happy with comments on neutral and positive posts.

From this first paragraph it becomes clear that SMIs share personal and private information about their lives on Instagram. The reactions they receive on these pictures with self-disclosure are very positive and have more meaning than reactions on a neutral picture.

#### ***4.2 Influencer-follower relationship***

This second paragraph will focus on the relationship between the SMI and the follower from the SMI’s perspective. This paragraph is divided into three sub-paragraphs that all impact the influencer-follower relationship: 1) followers’ negative and positive reactions, 2) conversations with followers, 3) bond with followers.

**Followers’ negative and positive reactions.** This first sub-paragraph is about the positive and negative reactions SMIs receive from their followers and how these reactions make them feel. The participants indicated that they hardly receive negative comments from their

followers. A few participants mentioned that they receive messages from spam accounts to buy likes or followers but they do not perceive that as negative comments. Out of the eleven participants, seven participants only delivered positive screenshots because they hardly receive negative comments, two participants did deliver screenshots of negative comments.

Participants 4 and 8 did not deliver any screenshots at all. Participant 4 hardly receives any negative comments. Once, she received a comment on a recipe that she posted and that people did not agree with the recipe. She shared this negative comment with her friends: "I notice that it always hurts, even if it's not personal. At that point I send a screenshot to six friends. I say: 'Gosh, look here'. Going to share it with them. After a day it will be gone again but that day I am startled.". Participant 8 does not receive negative comments at all.

Participant 1 did send a screenshot about negative reactions. According to her, both reactions result from the followers who did not read her post properly whereby the followers misunderstood her post. She does not think she can do anything about it. However, when she receives such a negative reaction, she tries to explain it to the follower and defend herself:

I always think very carefully before posting. Also, when I post something that I expect to have negative reactions on. I kind of built it in for myself beforehand. So, I am already justifying myself in the post to prevent any negative reactions.

More participants indicated that they think before they post. They wonder what their followers will think about their posts beforehand and want to prevent negative comments. Participant 9 does not care about negativity and has grown over it. Another response to these negative reactions is deleting them or responding positively to it: "I delete negative comments. My account is not meant to show those comments. Or I give a positive answer back." (participant 10). Participant 11 sees it as constructive criticism and that when she gets criticized, it is very loving, more like feedback. Participant 2 never receives negative reactions

from followers. However, he thinks that negative comments could have more impact than positive comments: “I think when someone posts a mean reaction and a hundred people something nice, the mean one lingers in mind.”.

Concerning the positive reactions, participants used words as “happy”, “overwhelming” and “nice” in their answers. Followers mostly leave positive and loving comments with emojis on the Instagram posts of the SMIs. Examples of these positive reactions: “So proud of you”, “This is exactly why I follow you!”, “Love this photo” and “You bring so much positive energy”. It is clear that the participants prefer it when followers post a “meaningful” reaction and not “just” an emoji where they did not really put effort in, for example participant 5 says:

People really take the time to post such an extensive response. Many people also only post an emoji for example, but if people really take time to post an extensive response, I really enjoy that. That gives me real satisfaction because all the effort I put into Instagram pays off.

Participant 6 says that positive reactions on neutral posts do not say much because they do not turn into a conversation. Furthermore, she said that with a personal post she was positively influenced by her followers’ positivity:

I was graduated. I was not going to post it because I was ashamed that it was not completed in time. I thought the less people know that I graduated with delay the better. My parents said I had to share it. So, then I thought: yes, let's share it. I received so many positive reactions that right now I am proud that I graduated. I did not have that pride at all beforehand. So, it influenced me positively.

**Conversations with followers.** This second sub-paragraph is about the communication the SMI has with his/her followers through direct messages, meet and greets and receiving feedback.

The majority of the participants said that positive comments on personal posts resulted in more comments that turned into more in-depth conversations. It is clear that the participants respond to the so called “DMs” (Direct Messages) or comments on Instagram, or try to keep up responding. For example, participant 7 indicated: “I am such a chatterbox. I like it when someone types something and I always respond to that. I would never just “like” the response.”. Sometimes it even happens that followers send very personal messages to the SMIs, for example participant 1: “I receive DM's from followers with personal messages like for example “my parents are getting divorced” I always answer those DM's. I find it really special that they see me as the designated person to discuss that topic with”.

Furthermore, what is remarkable is that all participants are curious about their followers. They look at their followers’ profile and sometimes even follow them. For example, participant 11: “I look a lot at profiles and like some pictures. I find that very fun.”. and participant 6 shared:

Those who often respond also send DM's, so you have conversations with them. A girl recently asked: “Why are you following me?” I responded that I like to see what my followers are doing because then I also know what is going on in my target audience.

Sometimes the initiative to contact comes from the SMI. Participant 10, for example, sends Christmas cards to her followers and organizes “giveaways” where she buys presents for her followers. Furthermore, participant 5 sends follow-up messages:

Several people always respond to my stories and I also respond to their stories. And then I also know if, for example, certain things are going on, something with their dog

or if they are going to do something, then I always try to give feedback by asking how it went.

When asking if the participants would like to meet their followers, they were enthusiastic about meeting them. Some of them already met their followers. Participant 1 organizes meet-ups herself:

I often organize giveaways where my followers can win a day with me at the riding school with the horses. Those are the followers that I know because I spent the whole day with them. When I see their Instagram accounts, I remember their faces.

Furthermore, participant 11 often thought about meeting her followers: “I often thought about going for a picnic or something like that. Or somewhere to go for a nice wine. That seems very nice to organize once.”.

During the contact the participants have with their audience, the followers tend to give feedback to the SMIs on what to improve or to inspire them with new content ideas. Sometimes the SMIs ask the followers for feedback themselves. The reason for doing so is mostly when the SMIs do not have any inspiration. The feedback of their followers inspires them to create content. Most participants indicated that they do listen to this feedback but only if it fits their personality, for example participant 1 shares: “When several people give the same feedback I would do it, if it fits my personality!”. However, several participants indicated that the feedback of their followers does influence their actions, for example participant 10: “I ask them for feedback. They asked me to be more personal so I did.”, and participant 3:

I posted a selfie once and then I got many questions like "Where are your pants from?" and then I thought: oh, people like this? So, then I asked them if they liked it and

everyone said "Yes", except two percent not. So, this also influences what I do ultimately. Or vlogging, I didn't really like that at all, but I got so many questions whether I wanted to vlog that I thought: Ok, then I will vlog.

**Bond with followers.** This third sub-paragraph is about the bond the SMIs perceive with their followers. From the interviews, it became clear that the participants have a bond with their followers. However, the majority of the participants indicate that they cannot have a bond with all of their followers. For example, participant 6 shared that she only has a bond with followers are dedicated and thus react a lot. Participant 2 is sure about having a bond with his followers. He says that followers are close to him, and he is close to his followers.

Participant 8 indicated that she finds it very important to create a bond with her followers:

I personally find creating that bond with my followers very important. I appreciate every follower. It is great that they follow me. So, I think it is essential that I respond to my followers and that we have conversations. They make the effort to respond to me about something personal. I just like that so much. I think that bond is essential. That's where I owe everything.

Moreover, some have the feeling that they know the follower, for example participant 7 shared:

I personally really like to respond to people and I also have some girls that I don't know at all, that I only speak to through DM, and then I think, you seem like someone I already know or something. It's sincere interest.

This also applies to participant 4: "I do have several followers on both Facebook and Instagram that you almost feel that you know that person. They respond to everything and



very extensively.”, she also explains that she got friendships out of it. Participant 5 says that she keeps an eye on her followers: “Yes of course I look at their profile and I keep an eye on them. When I don't see anything from them, I sometimes send them a message "Hey, I haven't seen you for a long time, are you okay?"”.

Participant 10 sees her followers as her friends. She also calls her followers “friends”. They can always message her when they are sad or when there is something wrong.

Moreover, participant 11 shares:

I know quite a few followers, via Instagram, mostly. Even if I need advice or just when I share personal things that I just get a very sweet response. Moreover, sometimes, I really want to share things with my followers. So yes, they really do feel like my friends in a way.

However, participant 1 does not really feel a bond with her followers and think it is more of a one-sided relationship.

From this second paragraph it became clear that the majority of the interviewed SMIs feel a bond with their followers. They barely receive negativity from their followers, talk to them via comments or DM, are genuinely interested in them and even have the desire to meet them in person.

#### ***4.3 Psychological well-being***

This last paragraph will focus on the psychological well-being of the SMIs. This paragraph is divided into six sub-paragraphs that all have a positive or negative impact on the SMI's psychological well-being: 1) social media use, 2) support by friends and family, 3) negativity, 4) pressure and stress, 5) competition, 6) motivation.

**Social media use.** This first sub-paragraph is about the amount of time the SMI spent on social media and whether this affects their psychological well-being. The majority of the participants indicate that their social media use is “too high” or that they spend “too much” on their phone. Participant 10 does not want to know how long she spends on social media: “I have not set that I can see how long I spend on social media. I do not want to know. It is a lot.”. However, a small number of participants does not spend too much online, for example, participant 11 is very consciously making use of social media and has other priorities: “I think my social life is essential, also for my mental health. School is always number 1 for me. And YouTube, I am the only one "pushing" that so, I leave it when I don't have time for it.”

**Support by friends and family.** This second sub-paragraph is about whether the family and friends of the SMIs support their career on Instagram and whether this affects their psychological well-being. The support the participants received by friends and family is mixed. Some followers share that they receive support and that their friends and family are proud of them. Remarkable is that there is some negativity from friends and family. For example, participant 5 shares that her family and friends are very supportive. However, some acquaintances act a bit condescending that Instagram is not going to work for her. Additionally, participant 7 shares that she thinks her friends and family like it but think her being an SMI is nonsense. Participant 9 shares that her friends follow her but sometimes tell her that she spends too much time on her phone.

Participants 6 and 9 even lost friends: “Sometimes people in your immediate environment are jealous of the products you get. They only see that. They don't see how hard you work for it. One friendship ended because of this. If they don't support my vision and cannot support me as a friend that I do this on social media, then it will just stop. We grew apart.”. Participant 8 experienced some negativity in her village by people who were

gossiping about her: “I only had negative reaction in the beginning of those gossiping people from my village. But not from my followers. It did affect me. And if it's people you know in the area, it still affects you. But I don't care about people I don't really know.”.

**Negativity.** This third sub-paragraph is about the negative aspects the participants perceive due to being an SMI and whether this affects their psychological well-being. Unfortunately, the participants do face some negatives aspects. It is clear that the SMIs nearly do not receive any negativity by followers, however they sometimes do receive this in their own environment. A few participants indicate that they are dealing with prejudices by others. For example, participant 1:

I rather not tell them that I am an influencer. Now and then I have a feeling that people have a prejudice about me when they know I do this. When I meet new people, it is always a "thing". I try to avoid that topic until I know someone well.

Participant 3 shares that the term “influencer” creates prejudices. She thinks that when people know she is an “influencer” they will think that she is a very narcissistic girl. She finds these prejudices difficult.

Concerning receiving negativity, participant 2 thinks that micro-influencers are more susceptible to bothersome and negative thinking because they put such a lot of effort into their Instagram. Most of the participants shared that when they would receive negative comments, they would stay in mind, especially if they are personal. For example, participant 5: “I think that if there is a negative comment that is really about me personally, I think that I would think about it back more often. Even though you receive hundreds of positive reactions and one negative reaction, you often start to think about it. “.

**Pressure and stress.** This fourth sub-paragraph is about whether the participant perceives any pressure or stress due to being an SMI and whether this affects their psychological well-being. In this part we will look at several aspects that could give the SMI pressure to perform.

Most SMIs indicated that they care about the number of likes and comments they receive. They say that they have a certain expectation, and when this expectation is not met, they get disappointed:

You want to get that number of likes or comments. I expect that and if I don't accomplish it, it will be disappointing. [...] People must really be aware that it takes a lot of time and effort and sometimes sleepless nights if something is disappointing or sad.

Some mention that it is important to be active before and after posting a picture on Instagram. Moreover, responding to all the messages of followers takes a lot of time. The pressure to be active and post on Instagram is high. One of the participants got emotional and shared:

This is actually going to be personal. It makes me quite emotional. Every time I post something, I feel the pressure. Now you are asking me about it, I think about it seriously. Normally you are in a rut and you just do it. [...] You always feel pressure.

(Participant 2)

Participant 11 confirmed it as well: "I feel the pressure to be continuously active. I sometimes find that difficult.". As a result, they are often tied to their smartphone and active all day, which for some of them can be detrimental for their sleep patterns, for example participant 8 told:

My phone rings all day. Recently I have had some new followers and I sent them a message. That pressure...last night I lied in bed at 12 o'clock and then quite a lot of

new followers started to follow me. If I don't send them a welcome message they might be gone by tomorrow or don't see it anymore because I can no longer scroll through the new notifications. So, then I think, I am going to send messages now. While at noon you should actually think: I am going to bed. But then I feel the pressure of, I have to do it. So yes, I do feel pressure.

Some SMIs even receive messages from followers when they are inactive: “When I am very busy with exams or something, and there is no video for a week, I get many reactions why there is not video and why I am inactive. And then I think by myself: guys, calm down.” (participant 1). However, participant 11 explains that she sometimes receives these messages but that the pressure comes more from other influencers:

I do have that my followers occasionally DM with: "Hey, where's your new video?". But I see it more with other influencers. They are so active and they post so much every day. Then I think: maybe I should go with the flow. I feel more pressure from them than from my followers.

Moreover, it is clear that the SMIs set the bar high for themselves and feel the pressure to post the “perfect” picture, participant 4 confirms that:

I am very strict for myself. For example, I made a Christmas recipe last week but I don't like the picture, so I am going to make it again tonight.”. Two SMIs used to feel pressure but can let it go now because “there are more things in life than making pictures. (participant 6)

Overall, most of the SMIs interviewed did not experience any form of stress, fear or anxiety. However, a few participants did indicate that they feel it in certain situations. For example, participant 1 gets stressed when she has a new idea for Instagram but has no time to

pick it up. “Then I am always a bit afraid that someone else will think of it before I do, for example, someone who is working on it full time. Then I think, this is it, there goes my chance.”. Another notable situation that gives the SMIs anxiety is receiving nude pictures from older men via DM on Instagram. Participant 6 explains:

The only bad reactions I get are from old men with nude photos. I got another one last weekend and I just get scared now when someone sends me a picture to open it. It feels like shit to be honest. Even though you had a really nice conversation with someone, when a guy sends a message, I don't trust it anymore. It is very unpleasant. She also shared that she finds it scary when followers send her messages when they see her walking in real life: “The only thing I find scary is when people send a DM with: “Hey did I just saw you walking?”. I think that is pretty creepy when people start sending that via Instagram.”.

**Competition.** This fifth sub-paragraph is about whether the participant feels competition between them and other SMIs on and whether this affects their psychological well-being. Some SMIs interviewed indicated that they often compare themselves to other SMIs. More specifically, it is often about SMIs who are “bigger than them” (e.g., more likes and followers). However, most participants rarely get the feeling of jealousy or insecurity. Rather, they see this as a source of inspiration and motivation to do better. They look up to these great SMIs and hope to achieve the same one day, for example participant 8:

I look up to some accounts. Some accounts are growing very much and really go sky high, so I get motivation from that. That it is possible. There are still plenty of options. This app is far from ready. So, I do get my motivation from that.

It is also notable that SMIs support each other: “I see influencers as my colleagues and as ‘Let’s support each other!’” (participant 11). Moreover, it also happens that the SMIs look up to others because of better quality pictures, but they keep a realistic view in mind, for example participant 5:

When I look at bigger influencers, the quality of their content is much better. Then I sometimes think, maybe I should put more time in it and get a better camera. But then again, I think, I am studying, I have work, this is not my full-time job. So, it is not realistic for me to perform at the same level.

However, some SMIs interviewed find it challenging to be unique because of the increasing number of SMIs on Instagram. Participant 1 said: “If you asked me this a few years ago, I would have said no. Because back then there were not that much SMIs. But now there are a lot. I often think: what is my unique selling point?”.

**Motivation.** This last sub-paragraph is about what motivates the SMIs to continue being an SMI and whether this affects their psychological well-being. The majority of the SMIs interviewed indicated that their biggest motivation to continue being a SMI are their followers. They get motivated by their positive messages, the contact they have with them and meeting them. For example, participant 11 stated: “My followers. The energy I get from that. But also, the people I met through social media, whom I still meet today. I just really like that. I just got so many good friends from that.”. Participant 2 confirmed it as well:

Positive reactions keep you going. I think if you post something three times a week and people don't say anything it's a bit boring. I would not feel like it anymore. So, it is some type of fuel, diesel or gasoline to me.

Some participants report that their motivation is to help or inspire others with their Instagram account or that it merely is their hobby and they enjoy creating content. Participant 6 even says that it is good for her personal development: “When I started, I was very insecure and I didn't even dare to post a picture of myself. It is completely different now because I am a lot more confident. I no longer find it scary to post photos of myself.”.

From this last paragraph it became clear that SMIs spend a lot of time on social media. They have to deal with prejudices and feel pressure to perform due to their followers. However, they barely feel competition against other SMIs and gain motivation by their followers.



## 5. Discussion

Based on 11 photo-elicitation interviews, this study aimed to investigate the effect of self-disclosure on the SMI-follower relationship (RQ1) and how self-disclosure and the SMI-follower relationship affect the psychological well-being of SMIs (RQ2).

To answer the first research question, the results discussed whether SMIs disclose themselves and whether this affects the SMI-follower relationship. The theory of Chen & Kirmani (2015), Krasnova et al. (2010) and Schlosser (2020) stated that self-disclosing on social media would likely be done if it has a high probability of being favorably received by the audience. The results of the interviews from this study are in agreement with the above findings. SMIs stay true to themselves. They like to share personal information about their private lives with their followers and it is indeed favorably received by their followers. Namely, SMIs receive more in-depth, positive and compassionate comments to pictures that contain self-disclosure compared to neutral pictures that do not contain self-disclosure. The comments they receive from followers are very positive, and motivate the SMIs to keep self-disclosing through Instagram. The SMIs shared that the comments on neutral posts, that did not contain self-disclosure, are superficial and less in-depth. According to Collins & Miller (1994), people who disclose themselves seem to be liked more than people who self-disclose less. Moreover, Ferchaud et al. (2018) argue that people who self-disclose encourage their followers to like them and self-disclose back by commenting on their content. From the results in this study, it can be concluded that SMIs perceive that followers prefer posts containing self-disclosure due to the higher number of likes and comments than neutral posts.

Followers identify themselves through SMIs who self-disclose, which motivates the followers to respond to the self-disclosure. Followers react by liking the posts and leaving compassionate comments, which results in deep conversations between the SMI and the followers. These results are in line with Laroche et al. (2012) and Ma et al. (2016), who stated

that self-disclosure helps people feel connected and enjoying interactions with like-minded users. As well as the findings of Kim & Tran (2013) who argue that when followers have much contact with the SMI, they will feel that the SMI is closer to them. Moreover, Peltola (2019), concluded that SMIs who self-disclose are perceived as more intimate. This improves the authenticity of the SMIs, and it brings them closer to their followers, which deepens the relationship they have. From the results in this study, it can be concluded that the SMIs notice that followers get closer to them when sharing personal information. However, not only the SMIs share their personal stories to the followers. Followers share their personal stories with SMIs as well. This result is in line with Collins & Miller (1994) and Cozby (1973), who suggested the social exchange theory, based on reciprocal self-disclosure, where people expect mutual obligations in the relationship. This means that people tend to disclose themselves to people who disclose themselves as well.

Looking at previous research by Marwick & boyd (2011), who investigated the artist-fan relationship, concluded that developing real social connections and intimacy with other people is not something only fans can consider, but something that artists experience as well. Concerning the relationship, the SMIs have with followers, it becomes clear that they certainly do have a relationship with them and that this relationship is two-sided. However, it is notable that the SMIs cannot have a relationship with all of their followers. They only experience this relationship with truly dedicated followers who are highly engaging with the SMI's content. Abidin (2015) argues that SMIs and followers both co-construct and lead the conversation. The information is interactive and there is high mutuality in the conversation. Additionally, Huang (2015) concluded that the formation of the relationship is positively associated with the participation of the audience, where eventually followers will engage with the SMI by liking or commenting on their content (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019). Which in this research also is the case. SMIs always respond to their followers'

message, or at least try to. Due to the deep conversations SMIs have with their followers, they are curious about them. SMIs tend to check out their followers' profile, follow them and use different strategies to strengthen engagement by for example organizing meet & greets, which is in line with the research conducted by Van den Abeele (2019). Moreover, SMIs comment on followers' content and even send them "DMs" to ask them how they are going or, when the follower has been absent for a while, ask them where they are and if they are doing well. This personal attachment to the followers is in line with Abidin's (2015) findings, who argued that SMIs communicative intimacy could lead to personal attachments. The bond the SMIs perceive with their followers is crucial to them. Most of the SMIs indicate that they have a feeling that they know their followers. Some SMIs shared that they call them their "friends", that they feel like friends or that even an offline friendship has arisen out of the online contact they had. Additionally, they see this is their motivation to continue with their Instagram account.

The second research question asks to what extent self-disclosure and the SMI-follower relationship affect the psychological well-being of the SMI. There will be discussed whether followers influence SMIs and whether this is positive or negative for their psychological well-being. The findings of Gilani et al. (2018) stated that followers have power over the SMI through sentiment, engagement, and behavioral social media activities such as likes, comments and on the content SMI post. From this study it can be concluded that SMIs carefully think before they post, keeping in mind what their followers will think and thereby preventing any negativity. These findings are also in line with Rosenbaum (1993), who stated that people strive for good self-presentation and are often anxious about how people perceive them. Moreover, it becomes clear that SMIs depend on the number of likes they receive by their followers. They get disappointed when their expectations of the number of likes are not

met. Therefore, it can be concluded that the results of this study are in line with the results of Gilani et al. (2018) and that followers do have power over the SMI.

According to Gilani et al. (2018), this power by followers could have positive effects such as motivating the SMI to create content, which is in line with the results of this study as well. Followers can be seen as the motivation for SMI to continue creating content. However, it could also have an adverse effect, such as experiencing pressure to perform (Gilani et al., 2018; Khamis et al., 2016). As well as having the urgency to be continuously active on Instagram (Scott & Woods, 2019). From the current study it becomes clear that SMIs spend much time on social media. They feel the pressure to perform and to be active on Instagram all the time. Otherwise, they might lose followers. Sometimes this might even lead to detrimental sleep patterns as a result of pressure and disappointment. It is notable that followers tend to send messages when the SMIs are inactive to ask them where they are and when they are posting new content. This results into pressure to the SMI to be even more active.

Several studies stated that pressure and the power of followers could lead to a decrease in authenticity, which in turn has a negative effect on the self-confidence and life satisfaction of SMIs (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016), which is not in line with the findings of this study. In this study, it becomes clear that SMIs stay authentic by their true self by self-disclosing and that the pressure does not lead to less authenticity. As well as the findings of Abidin (2019) and Hassan et al. (2018) who stated that SMIs can be victims of cyberbullying. From this study, it can be concluded that SMIs do not experience cyberbullying by their followers.

Concerning receiving negative comments, from the results, it can be concluded that the SMIs hardly receive any negativity from their followers. However, it is remarkable that they sometimes do receive negativity from their friends, family or, acquaintances. SMIs deal

with others' prejudices, thinking that they are probably narcissistic, telling them that being an SMI is only receiving presents for free and that they do not work while the SMIs put hours into their content. Moreover, SMIs do not like to announce that they are an SMI when meeting new people because of these prejudices. This negativity can linger in the SMIs mind and is sometimes hard to let go of. These are results that have not been found in previous studies. Moreover, concerning competition between other SMIs, it can be concluded that SMIs do not see other SMIs as competition. There is no jealousy or insecurity. Some SMIs compare themselves to others and sometimes find it hard to be unique or stand out given the large number of SMIs on Instagram nowadays. Additionally, sometimes SMIs feel pressure when seeing other SMIs grow or being more active on Instagram than them. However, SMIs rather see it as their motivation to even achieve more popularity in the future.

## **6. Conclusion**

Based on eleven photo-elicitation interviews with micro-influencers several findings about self-disclosure, the influencer-follower relationship, and psychological well-being of SMIs are found. It can be concluded that SMIs like to disclose themselves by sharing personal and private information with their followers. Self-disclosure leads to more likes, positivity, and in-depth conversations with followers, resulting in a strong influencer-follower relationship. SMIs are genuinely interested in their followers and feel a strong bond with them. The positivity SMIs receive from their followers motivates them to continue being an SMI which positively impacts their psychological well-being. However, SMIs feel a strong pressure to perform and be continuously active on the platform; otherwise, they might lose followers, which has a negative impact on their psychological well-being.

## **7. Practical Implications**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, many people are pursuing fame on social media due to free products, visibility, and popularity. Speaking with the different SMIs during the photo-elicitation interviews, it is essential to gain awareness for the pressure SMIs are dealing with. The pressure to continually be active on social media results in high social media use and detrimental sleep patterns. As more and more people want to become an SMI but also are followers themselves, they have to think about the impact they have on SMIs by piling the pressure on the people they admire. Additionally, SMIs need to take care of their well-being and talk to a professional when feeling too much pressure.

Besides, people have prejudices about SMIs such as that it is easy work and get stuff for “free” while SMIs are putting many hours into their content. Therefore, it is advisable to share more about why SMIs are useful for marketing strategies and how they spend their time creating the content they post.

We also notice that SMIs are very positive about sharing personal and private details about their lives. They receive more likes, comments, and compassionate messages from their followers, resulting in an intimate bond. Therefore, it is recommended for SMIs to openly share about their lives (at a certain height) to help or inspire their followers with their actions. This is where SMIs can use their influence, due to their large audience, by speaking up about, for example, taboos, charities, and personal stories to help and inspire others. This, as well, can be a strong tactic to use in influencer marketing strategies.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

A limitation of this research is that it did not look at the personality of the SMIs. One of the SMIs revealed that she has a strong personality and therefore does not care about pressure or negativity, that she “has grown over it”. It might be interesting for further research to

compare the personalities, age or years of experience of SMIs to see if this affects pressure or other negativities. For example, underaged SMIs versus older SMIs.

Secondly, in general, the SMIs interviewed are smaller micro-influencers. The target group for this research were micro-influencers (1,000 – 100,000), however, the SMIs in this study all had less than 35,000 followers. It might be interesting for future research to investigate SMIs with a larger following to see if this might affect the results. Moreover, 11 SMIs have been interviewed. An immense number of participants would be recommended to receive more insights into SMIs perspectives.

Thirdly, not all SMIs who participated sent a screenshot, which could have affected the photo-elicitation interview since this method is used to stimulate and guide a discussion between the interviewer and participant. Moreover, the interviews are transcribed and coded by one researcher, which could result in the fact that the researcher interpreted the interviews differently than someone else would.

Additionally, further research can investigate the pressure of being online and available at any time. This topic emerges from the interviews. SMIs mainly experience pressure, detrimental sleep patterns, and sometimes stress due to the use of social media and the fact that they continuously have to be active. Scott & Woods (2019) concluded that the urgency of online interactions and expectancy to be available 24/7 online is high and can result in implications for mental health and sleep. Therefore, it might be interesting to investigate further on this topic concerning the underlying issues such as motivations and experiences of online social interactions.

Lastly, according to this study, some family, friends, and acquaintances of SMIs seem to react negatively to their influencer activities and have prejudices about SMIs. Therefore, it would be an interesting study to investigate how people close to the SMIs influence the psychological well-being of SMIs and how SMIs handle these prejudices.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Interview topic list

Subjects	Questions
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reason for the interview</li> <li>- Introducing self-disclosure, psychological well-being</li> <li>- Do you have any questions?</li> </ul>
Being an influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did you become an influencer?</li> <li>- Why did you become an influencer?</li> <li>- Was it your intention to become an influencer?</li> <li>- Is being an influencer your fulltime job?</li> <li>- Are you different in real life than on Instagram?</li> </ul>
Self-disclosure / content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What kind of content do you post?</li> <li>- Have you ever posted something that you regret?</li> <li>- Before posting content on your Instagram account, do you think about what your followers would think about it?</li> <li>- To what extent do you share private information via Instagram?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Why do you share private information?</i></li> <li>○ <i>Can you give examples of personal information you share with your followers?</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Discussing photographs positive/negative about the neutral posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do we see on this image?</li> <li>- What happened?</li> <li>- What feeling does this give you?</li> <li>- How did you react?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>when negative: based on coping scale</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>- Did you have other interactions in the past weeks that were important to you but are not displayed in these images?</li> </ul>
Discussing photographs positive/negative about the personal posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do we see on this image?</li> <li>- What happened?</li> <li>- What feeling does this give you?</li> <li>- How did you react?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>when negative: based on coping scale</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<p>- Did you have other interactions with your followers in the past weeks that were important to you but are not displayed in these images?</p>
Relationship with followers	<p>- To what extent do you interact with your followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Comment on their comments, private messages, ask a question in your caption e.g.</i></li> <li>○ <i>Do you comment on all their messages?</i></li> </ul> <p>- Do you have the feeling that when you share more personal information with your followers (instead of more neutral information) your followers react different to it?</p> <p>- How important are likes/comments and feedback from your followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Why is this important to you?</i></li> </ul> <p>- Do you get feedback of your followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>What do they say?</i></li> <li>○ <i>Do you listen to this feedback? Do you adjust your content to their feedback?</i></li> <li>○ <i>When adjusting content: are you satisfied with that? Or does it feel you have to act different than you actually are.</i></li> </ul> <p>- Do you feel a bond with your followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Do you have a feeling that you know them?</i></li> <li>○ <i>Do you build a relationship with them?</i></li> <li>○ <i>To what extent does the interaction come from your side?</i></li> </ul> <p>- Are you curious about your followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Would you like to get to know them?</i></li> <li>○ <i>Do you follow them? Or click on their profile? e.g.</i></li> </ul> <p>- How do you handle negativity from followers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Do you reply to them?</i></li> </ul>
Psychological well-being	<p>- How much time do you spend on social media a day?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>How much time do you spend on being an influencer? (taking pictures, editing, posting, interacting with followers etc.)</i></li> </ul> <p>- Do you still have spare time?</p>

- Does being an influencer hinder your bond with friends/family?
  - *What do your friends/family think about your influencer life?*
  - *Do you receive feedback on your content from them? What kind of feedback?*
  - *Is this more important to you than followers' feedback?*
- To what extent does followers' feedback affect you?
  - *Do you care?*
  - *Does it give you insecurity/motivation/happiness/anxiety?*
- To what extent do you find it hard to be an influencer?
- According to you, what are the disadvantages of being an influencer?
- Do you feel pressure to perform as an influencer?
- Do you experience stress or other complaints?
- Do you feel competition with other influencers?
  - *Do you compare yourself with other influencers? What kind of feeling does this give you?*
  - *Are there influencers you look up to? (Could be motivation, jealousy)*
- What gives you motivation to continue being an influencer?
- For how long do you think you want to continue being an influencer?
- Do you recommend other to become an influencer?

## Appendix B. Coding Scheme without quotes

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Self-disclosure	Privacy	Private second account
	Careful posting	Think before posting
	Disclose personal information	Information about myself
		More likes and comments
		Personal and positive content
		Enhances bond with followers
		Too personal is annoying
		Enhances nice reactions from followers
		People get closer if they get to know you
		Positive comments
		Instagram versus reality photos
		Followers identify with SMI
		Appealing to followers
		Sharing real life
		Terrifying to share
		Not showing family
		Less likely to receive negativity
		Reactions go much deeper
		Personal captions
	Not disclosing information	Personal information does not add value
	Ideal identity	Choosing the perfect pictures
	Own identity	Same in real-life
		No distorted image on Instagram
		Used to have an ideal image
		Awareness not to show perfect world
		Personal content
	Planning tools	Less personal
	Neutral information	Less valuable comments

		Receive superficial comments
Influencer-follower relationship	Followers' negative reaction	Unreasonable reactions
		SMI defending themselves
		Not worrying about it
		More effect than nice reactions
		Showing understanding by sending DM
		Grown over negativity
		Deleting comments
		Other people receive worse comments
		Sharing negative comments with friends
		No hate comments from followers
		Constructive criticism
	Followers' positive reaction	Overwhelming
		Desire to receive positivity all the time
		Extensive reactions give more satisfaction
		Nice to receive positivity on personal posts
		Positivity to neutral posts less valuable
		Positivity to personal posts more valuable
		More profound
		No difference in neutral or personal posts
	Meeting followers	Bizarre that people want to meet
		Nice but scary
		Enjoying real life conversations with followers
		Desire to meet followers
		Organizing meet and greets
	Likes and comments	Expecting likes and comments
		Important
		Pity when followers don't respond
		Disappointment when less response
	Value followers	Valuing loyal followers
		Overwhelmed about amount

	Lose followers who not engage
Knowing followers	Knowing who will respond to post
Contact with followers	Only follows personal network on Instagram
	Trying to respond to followers
	Personal DM from followers
	Checking followers' profile
	No welcome message
	Always responding to followers
	Feeling that follower cares
	Following followers
	Self-disclosure enhances contact
	Daily Insta Stories for interaction
	Organizing giveaways and sending Christmas Cards
Followers' feedback	Asking for feedback
	Reacting to feedback
	Not reacting to feedback
	Asking for help or advice
	Influences SMI
	Likes to receive feedback
	Using feedback when lack of inspiration
Relationship with followers	One sided relationship
	Two-sided relationship
	Taking and giving
	Community and connection with followers
	Fan mail
	Self-disclosure enhances bond
	Knowing followers
	Friendship
	Caring about followers
	Only with dedicated followers
	Bond is very important
	Cannot bond with everyone



Psychological well-being		Incentive to know more about follower
		Calling them "friends"
		Sharing personal stories and asking for advice
	Social media use	High amount of time on social media
		Less Instagram in weekend
		Not spending too much time
		Time limit on phone
		Active before posting
		Active after posting
		Does not want to know
		Social media has no priority
	Support by family and friends	Family and friends support
		Friends do not follow
		Family is proud
		Condescending reactions from acquaintances
		Accepting feedback from family
		Family and friends think it is nonsense
		Annoyed by phone use
		Jealous about free products
	Prejudices	Mother is manager
		Not telling people about being SMI
	Stress	Term influencer is difficult
		Earning money
		No stress to post
	Anxiety	Depending on daylight
		Receiving nudes from old men
	Pressure	Followers reaction when seeing SMI in real life
		Setting the bar high to perform
		Messages from followers when inactive
		Before posting
		Striving for the perfect picture

	Few photo spots at home
	Welcome messages to followers
	Depending on daylight
	Looking up to other SMIs
	Continuously being active
	Used to have pressure
	No fixed moments give peace
	Urge to post
	Striving for number of likes
Competition with other SMI's	A lot of SMIs
	Difficult to stand out
	Always competition
	Girls are not nice to each other
No competition with other SMI's	Other SMI's are inspiring
	Helping each other
	Realistic view
	Staying with herself
	Instagram is big enough
	Everyone is unique
Motivation being SMI	Followers
	Positive reactions
	To inspire others
	Passion and hobby
	Helping others
	Overcame insecurity
	Contact with others
	Other SMIs that grow fast
	Helping other companies
	Meeting new people
Advice for being SMI	Stand your stand
	Think before becoming SMI

		Costs time
		Have a passion
		Can't be shy
		Withstand criticism from others
	Negativity	Negative comments
		Hurts
		More impact
		Negativity from surroundings
		People gossiping
		Opinions from others
		Micro-influencers more susceptible
		Prejudices