

# Radboud University



## **To buy or not to buy: How self-congruent influencers affect your purchase intention**

*The effect of self-congruence on purchase intention via para-social  
relationships with influencers*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on para-social relationships with influencers on Instagram, which influences followers' purchase intention. Besides, engagement was hypothesized to influence both para-social relationships, and vice versa, and purchase intention. An online survey was sent out to discover the relationships between these variables. Factor analysis showed that para-social relationships were split up in passive para-social relationships and active para-social relationships. First, the analyses showed that actual self-congruence positively influenced both passive and active para-social relationships, whereas ideal self-congruence only positively influenced active para-social relationships. There was no difference in strength between the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on passive para-social relationships. Next, only passive para-social relationships showed to have a direct positive influence on purchase intention and engagement, whereas active para-social relationships indirectly influenced purchase intention via engagement. Besides, engagement both directly and indirectly influenced purchase intention, mediated by passive para-social relationships. Lastly, men having passive para-social relationships and men being engaged with the influencer had a higher purchase intention than women. The results of this study are valuable for brands and marketers working or wanting to work with influencers and for influencers themselves.

**Keywords:** *self-congruence, para-social relationship, purchase intention, influencer marketing, Instagram*

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Over the years, influencers have become hugely successful. Because of the growth of social media, digital advertising has become very important (Woods, 2016). One way of digital advertising is via influencer marketing, a way for brands to advertise their products and services via “someone like you” (Miachon, 2018). Influencers are people who formed their own group of followers through social network sites (Gross & Van Wangenheim, 2018) and who can influence others’ purchase decisions and attitudes (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011). These influencers are especially loved and followed by Generation Y (Rinka & Pratt, 2018) and Generation Z (Miachon, 2018) and these followers do not view their connections as fan ships but more as friendships (O’Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016). Followers view influencers as role models, especially because of the lifestyle they portray (Hermanda, Sumarwan & Tinaprilla, 2019), because they compare themselves to these influencers (Choi & Rifon, 2012). However, it is still unclear why people follow certain influencers and if people are more likely to follow influencers who are like themselves or looking like who or how they would like to be. Since social media are seen as fantasy worlds in which users can express themselves to be who or what they want to be (Castells, 2000, as cited in Chen, 2016), the latter would seem more likely. This is also confirmed by Hermanda et al. (2019), who found that influencers are seen as people’s ideal selves. However, in a study about emotional attachment to brands, Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer and Nyffenegger (2011) found that matching a brand’s personality to the customer’s actual self had a positive impact on emotional attachment to that brand, whereas they did not find this effect for ideal self-congruence with brands. It is thus possible to build an emotional connection with brands, which is most likely to happen among younger adults (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Cole & Leets, 1999). Some may see influencers as brands as well, since they can be managed professionally and can be associated with a particular brand (Thomson, 2006). Furthermore, these brands can also be represented by so-called human brands, which are familiar personalities who are the principal theme of marketing communications (Rindova, Pollock & Hayward, 2006). Brands are created by people within the organization and are characterized by those outside the organization (Moore, 2018). Celebrity attachment is defined as “the emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific celebrity” (Wong & Lai, 2015, p. 161) and can eventually result in forming a close relationship to this celebrity (Su, Huang, Brodowsky & Kim, 2011). Feelings connected to attachment are essential for building strong relationships (Thomson, 2006). This means you can also become attached to the people belonging to that brand or, in this case, to the influencers that are endorsing products from a particular brand, who can either be like your actual or ideal

self. Someone's actual self is how that person actually identifies him- or herself, and someone's ideal self is how he or she wishes to be (Sirgy, 1982). The results of Malär et al. (2011) could be translated to the field of influencer marketing to see if actual or ideal self-congruence leads to developing relationships between followers and influencers, which are called para-social relationships (PSRs) (Bond, 2018). These PSRs feel like interpersonal relationships between followers and influencers but are experienced in the online world (Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen, 2016) and are often unilateral and non-reciprocal (Lou & Kim, 2019). Followers feel connected to these influencers (Bond, 2018) and because their power on adolescents is greater than that of acquaintances (Al-Harbi & Al-Harbi, 2017), influencers have a positive impact on followers' purchase intention (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). This means that today, even more customers are buying products promoted by influencers, since these PSRs increase followers' desires to own the same products as these influencers (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The positive influence of PSRs on followers' purchase intention may also be mediated by engagement, since PSRs lead to engaged customers (Men & Tsai, 2013) and engaged customers are more likely to buy products endorsed by influencers than customers who are not engaged with (an) influencer(s) (e.g. Kilger & Romer, 2007; Toor, Husnain & Hussain, 2017; Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli & Pizzetti, 2018).

There are many social media platforms on which digital advertising is possible, of which one of them is Instagram, which is seen as the most popular platform for following influencers (Bond, 2016). Ever since the launch of Instagram in 2010, the number of users has been increasing. In 2020, Instagram is the largest growing social media platform in The Netherlands, with an increase of 14% compared to 2019 (Van der Veer, Boekee & Hoekstra, 2020). For example, Facebook's daily usage has only increased with 4% in 2020, while Instagram's daily usage has grown with 29%. On Instagram, you can edit and upload pictures, which can be found by other users by using hashtags (#). People can like these pictures and follow the pages of users they adore. Since social media have been growing, they have become a bigger platform for advertising as well. People look at their friends and other people they like to see what kind of products are in fashion. This has brought a new profession with it, namely that of being an influencer. These influencers are ordinary people who promote certain products on their Instagram pages that fit their personality to reach potential buyers (Blauwe Monsters, n.d.). The concept influencer refers to someone who created his or her own crowd on any social media platform and is able to influence other people. The difference with celebrities is that influencers create their own content and acknowledge followers' feedback (Gross & Von Wangenheim, 2018). Nowadays, when people think of Instagram, they almost automatically also think of

influencers, since they have a big part to play. The influence bloggers, owners of blogs to write personal content on (Tang & Wang, 2012), had a couple of years ago is now assigned to influencers. The popularity of influencers is their authenticity, since they are free in the creation of their content, which makes them more trustworthy and their followers will be less likely to see their pictures as real advertisements (Blauwe Monsters, n.d.). But why do we even follow influencers?

“At the end of the day we don’t want to follow blogs. We want to follow people.” (Killoren, 2016, para. 6). We follow influencers because we want to follow people who are like ourselves and who we would like to be friends with. This also has to do with their authenticity. So, besides the fact that we want to follow people we can associate with, and reflect our “actual self”, we also want to be inspired by people who portray the version of our “ideal self” (Killoren, 2016). Most influencers only show their perfect selves on Instagram by posting pictures of the most amazing holidays and beautifully edited pictures, while others also show their imperfections and try to make it a bit more real. For example, Dutch influencer Anna Nooshin only posts flawless pictures that make it look like she has a perfect life, whereas Dutch influencer Rianne Meijer also posts pictures where she compares her perfect Instagram-worthy pictures with “ugly” real-life pictures. For years, the standard in the beauty industry was being extremely beautiful and even being perfect, with many companies helping you to achieve this goal of the “ideal self”. However, in 2004, Dove launched their Campaign for Real Beauty for the first time to praise women’s real beauty. Instead of using models, they featured real women in their campaign, with all different shapes and skin colors (Unilever, 2017). Customers could see these women as a reflection of their “actual self” and be happy in their own skin. This authenticity can also be found with many influencers, especially the ones also portraying a realistic version of themselves. For example, Rianne Meijer is followed by girls who are still at university and who may not be able to afford going on as many trips as she is going to, but, because of her authenticity, they do like her and follow her. Besides, she is followed by fellow influencers whose lives are more like hers and who can more relate to her.

This thesis looks at the impact of para-social relationships on purchase intention, whereby people’s congruity, both actual and ideal self-congruity, with influencers is being compared. Previous research on actual and ideal self-congruence did not look at the influence on para-social relationships, but only at the influence of the connection between customers and brands (e.g. Kaufmann, Petrovici, Filho & Ayres, 2016; Malär et al., 2011). The objective of this thesis is to get an understanding of the influence of actual and ideal self-congruence on forming para-social relationships with influencers and how this affects customers’ purchase

intention. This study will add value to the academic field by looking at the influence of self-congruity on purchase intention via para-social relationships between influencers and their followers. Also, the influence of engagement will be taken into account, as a mediator, as an antecedent and consequence of para-social relationships and as an antecedent of purchase intention. The results of this study can be used by businesses who would like to use influencer marketing and find out which influencers fit best with their corporate strategy. Besides, the results can be used by influencers themselves to get an idea of how they should portray themselves in order to be a successful salesperson of a brand or product. The main research question in this research is:

*What is the effect of self-congruence on purchase intention via para-social relationships with influencers?*

The outline of this thesis is as follows: the second chapter presents a review of what is known about self-congruence, para-social relationships, engagement and purchase intention in the literature. Besides, other theories that are important for this research will be discussed. The third chapter outlines the methodology used for this research, including the procedure, the operationalization, the sample, the data analysis procedure and the research ethics and possible limitations. Chapter four includes the main results of the research, which will also be discussed more in detail in chapter five, including the implications, limitations and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature review**

In this chapter, the relevant concepts supporting this research will be explained in the sequence of the conceptual model, which can be found at the end of this chapter (see Figure 1).

### **2.1 Self-congruence theory**

According to the self-concept theory, people have two parts of the self: the actual self, reflecting who and how someone is in reality, and the ideal self, reflecting how someone aspires to be in the future (Lazzari, Fioravanti, & Gough, 1978). A form of self-congruence, which is a fit between the follower's self-concept and that of a certain influencer (Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1982), can be reached by following an influencer who is either like a person's actual or ideal self. Actual self-congruence can be reached by finding a match between a person's actual self and an influencer, whereas ideal self-congruence can be reached by finding a match between a person's ideal self and an influencer (Aaker, 1999). An actual self-congruent influencer is an influencer who is similar to someone's true self, whereas an ideal self-congruent influencer is an influencer who is similar to what someone wants to be like. Self-congruence with an influencer can be seen as comparing yourself with the source similarity, which is how followers perceive themselves as being alike to an influencer (Lou & Kim, 2019). In addition, Aron et al. (2005) state that, according to self-expansion theory, people integrate others into their lives to improve themselves. Close emotional relationships are formed when a person is perceived to fulfill a larger part of someone's self. Research found that attachment to brands (in this case, to influencers) depends on how much someone sees a brand (influencer) as being part of him- or herself and thus indicates who he or she is (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisengerich & Iacobucci, 2010). The more a brand (influencer) indicates someone's self, that is self-congruence, and the more someone feels connected to that brand (influencer), the greater the emotional attachment (Malär et al., 2011).

One form of self-congruence is actual self-congruence and reflects who someone is (Rhee & Johnson, 2012). According to Gilmore and Pine (2007, as cited in Malär et al., 2011), the actual self reflects signs of reality and authenticity and is seen as being cognitively close to someone and therefore being more likely to be established, compared to someone's ideal self (Malär et al., 2011). Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983) states that people want to maintain their current self-concepts and are looking for people and events that confirm this current self and stay away from those that challenge their current self. Therefore, people will behave in such ways that their actual self will be retained, which also leads to emotional attachment to brands (Malär et al., 2011). As mentioned before, this can be linked to attachment with

influencers since they can be considered as brands as well (Thomson, 2006). By following influencers who are perceived to be like your actual self, you will develop positive feelings towards these people and might even develop PSRs with them, since people tend to favor self-verifying partners when having to choose a communication partner (Hixon & Swann, 1993). Besides, when a person or a brand is close to someone's actual self, it is more likely to form a connection with this person or brand because they are seen as being more authentic (Erickson, 1995, as cited in Malär et al., 2011). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), when comparing yourself to excellent people or people that are out of your league (Gulas & McKeage, 2000), this can cause negative feelings (Gilbert, Giesler & Morris, 1995), such as insecurity. Gilbert et al. (1995) found that these comparisons are not always made consciously but are sometimes made automatically. If these emotions are too unpleasant, the person feeling inferior will distance him- or herself from the superior other (Collins, 1996). He and Mukherjee (2007) looked into Chinese people's shopping behaviors and found that store loyalty and customer attitude were mainly stimulated by actual self-congruity. This is in line with the self-consistency motive that states that people are likely to behave in line with how they see themselves. Thus, buying products that are in line with your actual self is a way to look after your personal identity (Kim, 2015).

Another form of self-congruence is ideal self-congruence and reflects who someone wants to be (Rhee & Johnson, 2012). The ideal self-concept is important because people would like to improve themselves (Sirgy, 1982) and brands and people who portray this ideal self can help by decreasing the distance to this ideal self (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967), since your ideal self is seen as something being far away from you; it is a desirable state that you would like to obtain (Malär et al, 2011). Following people or consuming brands that are in line with your ideal self can give you a confidence boost and can thus increase your relationship with this person or brand (Malär et al, 2011). Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) states that decreasing the difference between the actual and ideal selves, so, by approaching your ideal self, is a self-enhancing strategy for people who are insecure about their actual self. People who are trying to pursue their self-enhancement are having a self-esteem motive (He & Mukherjee, 2007). This self-enhancement can be realized by buying products that are in line with your ideal self (Kim, 2015). Besides, Japutra, Ekinici, Simkin and Nguyen (2018) found in a study of the effect of ideal self-congruence on brand attachment in customers' negative behavior that ideal self-congruence also leads to emotional brand attachment.

In a study on emotional attachment to brands, Malär et al. (2011) found that actual self-congruence has a larger impact on emotional brand attachment than ideal self-congruence,

which could also be applied to the field of PSRs. He and Mukherjee (2007) found comparable results in that customer attitude and store loyalty were mainly driven by actual self-congruence, opposed to ideal self-congruence. Therefore, actual self-congruence is expected to have a larger influence on forming connections between influencers and their followers, opposed to ideal self-congruence. However, Kaufmann et al. (2016) found comparable effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment in the context of buying counterfeits. This means that neither actual nor ideal self-congruence has a stronger impact on the relationships between customers and brands, and thus maybe influencers. When customers perceive themselves as being similar to influencers, either ideal or actual self-congruence, this will lead to forming PSRs between adolescent followers and influencers (Lou & Kim, 2019).

## **2.2 Para-social relationships**

A suitable concept to explain the connection between influencers and their followers is para-social relationship (PSR) (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Followers perceiving themselves as being similar to an influencer are likely to form PSRs with these influencers (Lou & Kim, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Influencers becoming important attachment figures can expand their followers' perceived social networks (Stever, 2017), since PSRs work comparable to real-life interpersonal relationships (Bond, 2016), and even complement real-life relationships (Bond, 2018). PSRs can be conceptualized as lasting, one-sided relationships that followers build with media personalities (Bond, 2016; Rubin & Step, 2000) to be able to create intimate feelings with them (Dibble et al., 2016). These intimate feelings are developed because influencers give a glimpse into their personal lives, which in turn strengthens PSRs (Bond, 2016). Because of these behind-the-scenes impressions, active social media users are more likely to develop PSRs with online celebrities than active radio listeners or television viewers (Chen, 2016). Although PSRs are unilateral, communication on social media can be two-way between influencers and their followers (Tsiotsou, 2015). Strong attachment will only happen with a few celebrities, often with people's favorites (Bond, 2016), even though followers may like many of them (Thomson, 2006). Besides, women are more likely to have stronger PSRs with influencers than men (Bond, 2016).

A term that is interchangeable to PSR is para-social interaction (PSI). This is a perception of a short relationship with an influencer that is restricted to only one moment of exposure to this person, whereas PSR is about a long-lasting relationship between an influencer and a follower (Dibble et al., 2016). Bond (2018) describes this difference as follows. When watching an episode of a tv show, your bond to one of the characters may be affected when you

learn something new about one of the characters (PSI) but this will continue after the episode has finished (PSR). In this research, the focus is on PSR since it is studied if people are more prone to actually follow influencers who are like their actual or ideal selves. When following an influencer on Instagram, this means you are repeatedly exposed to this person. Bond (2018) found that repeated media exposure had a positive influence on forming PSRs, since the more exposed you are to certain people, the more likely you will feel connected to them (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). This was also found in the context of attachment to human brands. Regularly interacting with a human brand forms better conditions to become attached to this human brand (Thomson, 2006).

Two other antecedents of PSRs are perceived similarity and attraction (Bond, 2018; Lou & Kim, 2019). If someone is perceived as being attractive, having characteristics that are considered desirable, you are more likely to form a relationship with this person. This holds for interpersonal relationships as well as for PSRs. Different kinds of attraction, such as task, social and physical attraction, can positively influence the strength and excellence of PSRs (Schiappa et al., 2007, as cited in Bond, 2018). This result was also found for attachment to human brands. People should in some way be attracted to the human brand initially, otherwise it is unlikely that this attachment will take place (Boon & Lomore, 2001), since it is rare to develop an attachment based on unfavorable feelings or thoughts (Thomson, 2006). Furthermore, similarity with an influencer, followers' perception of a comparison between themselves and an influencer, also positively influences PSRs (Lou & Kim, 2019), which also applies for interpersonal relationships (Duck & Barnes, 1992). People you share certain interests, backgrounds or attitudes with are seen as more interesting partners (Klimmt et al., 2006, as cited in Bond, 2018). Besides, liking someone also increases the chance of seeing yourself as being similar to that person (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Bond (2018) found that heterosexual youngsters are less likely to form PSRs with LGB media celebrities than LGB youngsters and that they are more likely to build PSRs on the basis of gender. In addition, boys are more likely to form PSRs with same-gender influencers than girls (Hoffner, 2011, as cited in Bond, 2018). A study by Schmid and Klimmt (2011) investigated respondents' PSR with Harry Potter and found that attraction was the most important influence in forming PSRs, with homophily, which is related to similarity, not having a large influence. Moreover, Lou and Kim (2019) found that the influencer's knowledge, trustworthiness and the value of entertainment of their content had a positive relationship with forming PSRs between followers and influencers. Hwang and Zhang (2018) looked at empathy, loneliness and low self-esteem as possible antecedents of

forming PSRs and noted that followers' empathy with influencers and followers' low self-esteem were positively impacting their PSRs with influencers.

PSRs are formed because people desire social relationships and attachment to others (Bond, 2016). They are most often formed by adolescents, since they are most likely to be influenced by unknown people of whom they think they can trust (Calvert & Richards, 2014, as cited in Bond, 2016). Young people communicate with online celebrities in the same ways as they do offline with friends and family (Kim, Ko & Kim, 2015) and followers view PSRs in the same way as they do interpersonal relationships (Kanazawa, 2002). The feelings that are formed by these PSRs are similar to those of real-life interactions (Hwang & Park, 2007, as cited in Kim et al., 2015). PSRs also work like interpersonal relationships, since uncertainty and connectedness are formed by repeated and confidential interplays (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in Bond, 2016).

Livingstone (1988) found that people's favorite television characters are being viewed as colleagues or friends, which could also hold for social media influencers. Repeated exposure to online celebrities (Lee & Watkins, 2016) and forming PSRs with these celebrities increases feelings of trust and improved relationships. Followers experience larger feelings of trust and closeness than with traditional celebrities, since PSRs with influencers are based on similarities and familiarities between ordinary people (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

These feelings of trust can also positively influence purchase intention, since PSRs lead to purchase intentions of influencer-advertised products (e.g. Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Ilicic & Webster, 2011; Lou & Kim, 2019). Hwang and Zhang (2018) investigated digital celebrities' persuasion power over their followers in terms of electronic word of mouth and purchase intention. They found a positive influence of para-social relationships on both electronic word of mouth and purchase intention. This positive influence was probably based on the fact that people trust the digital celebrities they form PSRs with. Ilicic and Webster (2011) looked into the relationship between celebrity attachment strength and purchase intention while controlling for familiarity, match-up and attractiveness. They found that followers feeling strongly attached to a celebrity held positive attitudes towards the advertised message and brand. However, when that celebrity was endorsing multiple products, this had a negative influence on customers' purchase intention. Yet, when followers were weakly attached to a celebrity, purchase intention increased when this person was endorsing multiple products. The number of endorsed products is not taken into account in the current research. Finally, Lou and Kim (2019) examined several antecedents of PSRs and the influence of PSRs on materialism and purchase intention among adolescents. They found that having PSRs with influencers had a positive impact on

adolescents' purchase intention, especially influenced by the antecedents of attractiveness and perceived similarity.

### **2.3 Engagement**

The positive influence of PSRs on purchase intention may also be mediated by engagement. The way that media audiences engage with media personalities is altered by social media (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). According to Men and Tsai (2013), PSRs positively impact the engagement with social network sites of the Chinese public. However, they also found that simply liking and following any kind of social network page did not lead to deep engagement. Engagement can also precede the bonds between customers and brands, which results in a value creation for both parties. This bonding can be facilitated by social media (Toor et al., 2017). In their study on the role of social media within advertising, Bond, Ferraro, Luxton and Sands (2010) found that engaging with customers via social media can result in forming a strong, loyal audience, who may even become representatives for the brand. This may also hold for forming PSRs with influencers.

Bakhshi, Shamma and Gilbert (2013) state that engagement is essential to photo sharing communities like Instagram, which makes it an important concept to understand in the light of this research. Instagram is the best social media platform for engagement, compared to Twitter and Facebook. Strikingly, the audiences of users with many followers are less engaged to them than the audiences of users with fewer followers (Forsey, 2020). Engagement is defined as “an active digital behavior of consuming, using, interacting with and participating in different digital activities and platforms by the means of visual content” (Valentini et al., 2018, p. 363). Bond (2018) refers to a PSR as an “episodic pseudo-engagement” (p. 458) and thus sees this type of relationship as a form of engagement. Furthermore, engagement is an individual's inner motivation (Belanche, Cenjor & Pérez-Rueda, 2019) and personal involvement (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011), that moves him or her to perform certain behaviors. Being able to learn from influencers is a reason for followers to engage with these people, whereby it is important for the influencer to be seen as credible and trustworthy in particular topics (Bond, 2018). Engagement behaviors are behaviors such as following a post or page, liking a picture or video, commenting on it, sharing it or creating a post (Valentini et al., 2018). All these types of engagement are also possible on Instagram and can be categorized as different levels of participation with online content. This classification of three types of active online behavior consists of consuming, contributing and creating (Muntinga et al., 2011). The lowest form is consuming, which indicates behaviors such as viewing, downloading and following.

Contributing is more active behavior and consists of commenting, for example. The highest form is creating and is behavior like producing, uploading and publishing brand-related content. Influencers can do something in return for their followers by engaging with them in terms of replying to their comments or messages, liking, commenting or sharing posts from their followers or going “live” on Instagram and hosting offline meet and greets (Abidin, 2015).

Customers who are highly engaged to either a brand or an influencer spend more money with every purchase and make more frequent purchases, bringing 23% more revenues (Magneto, 2015, as cited in Toor et al., 2017). Research has found that engagement positively influences purchase intention across different media (Kilger & Romer, 2007; Toor et al., 2017; Valentini et al., 2018). For example, Kilger and Romer (2007) investigated trustworthiness as a dimension of engagement and discovered that trust had a positive influence on the intention to purchase the advertised products. Furthermore, in a study among Pakistani customers, Toor et al. (2017) looked into the effect of social network marketing on customers’ purchase intention and found that engagement mediated this relationship and thus showed that engagement has a positive influence on customers’ purchase intention. Besides, they found that emotional attachment supported the influence of engagement. Finally, Valentini et al. (2018) looked at the relationship between digital visual engagement and purchase intention by manipulating subject’s gaze and product salience in Instagram images. They discovered that purchase intention increased when people were more engaged with the images.

## **2.4 Purchase intention**

These days, people are increasingly buying products that are promoted by influencers (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), as a consequence of their PSRs (Kim et al., 2015). Followers trust these influencers more than their acquaintances, which leads to 40% of followers purchasing products promoted by influencers (Sekhon, Bickart, Trudel & Fournier, 2016). Thus, PSRs with influencers have a direct, positive effect on followers’ purchase intentions (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015). Purchase intention can be described as customers’ intention to purchase a certain product or service (Ko & Megehee, 2012), in which advertising plays a large role (Kim et al., 2015). Congruity between customers’ self-concepts and brand personalities generates beneficial customer responses, such as purchase intentions (Aaker, 1997; Sirgy, 1982). In addition, congruity between customers’ ideal self and a celebrity’s image will lead to a more positive attitude and larger purchase intention (Ekinici & Hosany, 2006). This is also confirmed by Choi and Rifon (2012), who state that ideal self-congruence with an influencer

directly leads to greater purchase intentions. However, this is not taken into account in the current research.

Influencers are perceived as being trustworthy because of the PSRs that followers form with them, which leads to the intention to purchase their advertised products. Besides, people trust their friends, and followers recognize influencers as their friends (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Lee and Watkins (2016) noted that PSRs with vloggers, producers of video blogs (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), positively influenced followers' brand perception, which has a positive impact on purchase intentions. They found that people's aspirations of luxury brands increased because they compared themselves to the luxury belongings of these vloggers. Furthermore, bloggers also have an influence on followers' purchase intentions via PSRs formed via their blogs (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) looked into digital celebrities' influence on followers' purchase intention by conducting interviews with eighteen female Instagram users in the age category of 18 – 30. They found that digital celebrities had a larger impact on purchase intentions for this age group than traditional celebrities, because the former are regarded as being more socially close and trustworthy.

## **2.5 Control variables**

All these hypotheses will be controlled for by the demographics gender, age and educational level. Besides, area of expertise will be included as one of the control variables, based on Lou and Kim (2019). They found that one of the areas of expertise, namely lifestyle, had a positive influence on purchase intention. The other areas of expertise that are controlled for in this study are fashion, gaming, health living, travel, food, pets, parenting and other (Lou & Kim, 2019).

## **2.6 Hypothesis development**

Based on the gap in the literature, this study aims to find out the effect of self-congruence on purchase intention via para-social relationships with influencers, mediated by engagement. See Figure 1 for the conceptual model of the study.

Congruity between customers and brands has predicted the chance of becoming emotionally attached to these brands (e.g. Malär et al., 2011). Customers can also become attached to their favorite celebrities or influencers (Wong & Lai, 2015), which may imply that congruity between customers and their favorite influencers can result in PSRs with these influencers (Su et al., 2011). Research has found support for the influence of both actual and ideal self-congruence on attachment to brands (Kaufmann et al., 2016), which may also hold for attachment to influencers and thus in forming PSRs with them.

H1: Actual self-congruence leads to forming para-social relationships with influencers.

H2: Ideal self-congruence leads to forming para-social relationships with influencers.

When customers have PSRs with influencers, they are more likely to buy products that these influencers promote on their Instagram. The reason for this is that followers are inspired by these influencers and desire to have the same products as they do (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Besides, followers trust these influencers when promoting certain products, based on their PSRs (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Sekhon et al., 2016).

H3: Having para-social relationships with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.

Furthermore, when customers have PSRs with influencers, they are also more likely to be engaged with these influencers (Men & Tsai, 2013). This can be explained by the fact that these relationships reflect a form of attachment, since influencers show their intimate feelings (Bond, 2016; Dibble et al., 2016). However, Toor et al. (2017) note that engagement can also lead to forming bonds between customers and brands, which may also be true for forming PSRs with influencers. Engaged customers are more likely to buy a product endorsed by an influencer and also spend more money on these products (Magnet, 2015, as cited in Toor et al., 2017). So, followers intend to purchase products endorsed by influencers based on their PSRs, which is mediated by engagement. Similarly, PSR may mediate the relationship between engagement and purchase intention, since engagement is hypothesized to lead to purchase intention and to PSR, which, on its turn, also leads to purchase intention. As of today, no research has looked into the mediation of engagement in the relationship between PSR and purchase intention and into the mediation of PSR in the relationship between engagement and purchase intention.

H4: Having para-social relationships with influencers leads to engaged followers.

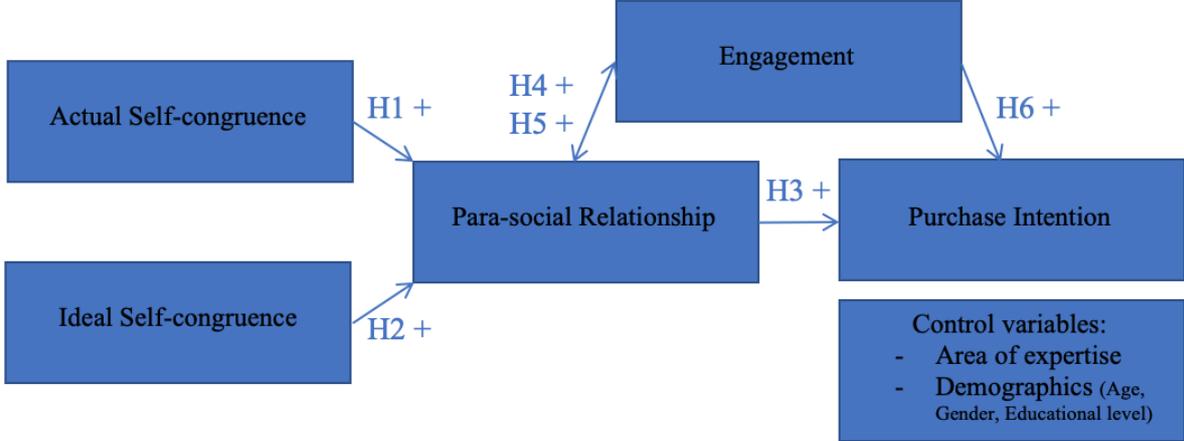
H5: Engagement leads to forming para-social relationships with influencers.

H6: Engaged followers have a higher purchase intention.

H7: Engagement mediates the relationship between having para-social relationships with influencers and followers' purchase intention.

H8: PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



## **Chapter 3 – Methodology**

To test the hypotheses, a quantitative approach was used, namely an online questionnaire. This type of method was chosen because many people can be reached in a short period of time.

### **3.1 Procedure**

An electronic survey was used to be able to reach as many people as possible, regardless of their time and location. Besides, by using an online survey, respondents could fill in the survey at any time wanted. The survey was sent via different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Because it was an electronic survey, there was no supervision but the respondents filled it in individually. The procedure was the same for all respondents. The first thing the respondents saw when clicking on the link was the introduction of the survey (see Appendix I).

### **3.2 Operationalization**

When starting the survey, respondents had to start by filling in the screening questions “*Do you have Instagram?*” and “*Are you following any influencer on Instagram?*” (definition by Gross & Von Wangenheim (2018) given). If they answered “no” to the first question, they were not a suitable respondent and the survey thus ended immediately after this question. The same held for the second screening question. If they answered “yes” to both questions, they would continue to the following questions and they had to start by filling in their favorite influencer. This influencer was used to answer the rest of the questions.

For this survey, questions from different research articles were used (see Appendix II). First, self-congruence was measured using the scale by Malär et al. (2011) on a five-point Likert scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. Para-social relationship was measured by the questions used by Lou and Kim (2019) on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. Next, engagement was measured by adopting the questions of Toor et al. (2017) on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Lastly, purchase intention was measured using the scale of Hwang and Zhang (2018) on a five-point Likert scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. All questions were adapted to fit with the current research. At the end of the survey, demographic questions about age, educational level and gender were asked. See Appendix III for the total questionnaire. To be able to get as many respondents as possible, the questionnaire was translated into Dutch because most people in the researcher’s personal network are Dutch and

this would enlarge the chance of people filling in the questionnaire. Afterwards, the questions were translated into English again.

### **3.3 Sample**

There was no screening used beforehand, because using social media for sending out questionnaires can often cause a snowball effect. The only prerequisites were that the respondents needed to have an account on Instagram and needed to follow at least one influencer.

### **3.4 Data analysis procedure**

To test the hypotheses and the research question, the data was analyzed by means of several regression analyses, since all variables are metric variables. To test H1 and H2, a multiple regression analysis was used, as well as for H3 and H4. Simple regression analyses tested H5 and H6 and PROCESS was used to analyze H7 and H8.

### **3.5 Ethics & Limitations**

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and the length of the survey. They were told that the survey was completely anonymous and that confidentiality was guaranteed. Besides, they were told that they could withdraw from the research at any time wanted but that they gave permission for using their answers for the current research when proceeding to the first question. Lastly, the researcher's mail address was provided if respondents had any questions regarding the research or if they were interested in the research results.

A possible limitation could be that the respondents were found by means of snowball and convenience sampling, through the researcher's personal network. Therefore, not all Instagram users got the chance to fill in the questionnaire, also because the questionnaire was in Dutch. Besides, only Instagram users were questioned and not Facebook or YouTube users, for example. This could also bias the results, since there may be differences in the measured constructs for different social media platforms. Another limitation could be that there might not have been enough respondents to be able to generalize the results to the whole Instagram community.

## **Chapter 4 – Results**

This chapter discusses the data analyses and the results. First, a description about the sample is given, followed by the reliability analysis and the descriptive statistics. Next, the assumptions are shortly mentioned after which the tested hypotheses are discussed. Finally, an overview is given about the regression analyses.

### **4.1 Sample description**

In total, 312 respondents took part in the survey, of which 256 finished the total questionnaire. Out of these 256 respondents, 235 had an account on Instagram (91.8%) and 182 indicated they also followed an influencer (71.1%). When analyzing these 182 respondents, it became clear that 28.9% entered a space in the box where they had to report their favorite influencer. Furthermore, 1.2% filled in another kind of meaningless answer. For example, someone filled in “artists” as their answer. Lastly, 8.8% filled in a celebrity or a group of influencers. The answers about the influencers were coded as being correctly if they fit in with the definition by Lou and Yuan (2019): “Contrary to celebrities or public figures who are well-known via traditional media, social media influencers are “regular people” who have become “online celebrities” by creating and posting content on social media” (p. 58). Furthermore, the definition by Lou and Kim (2019) was used, who state that:

Some reality show celebrity who has a strong online presence and who fits into this definition was also included, including Kylie Jenner. Among the 500 complete responses, those who listed renowned actor/actresses, singers, rappers, soccer players, or politicians (e.g., Trump) as their favorite social media influencer was removed (p. 7).

Therefore, 157 out of 182 respondents filled in a valuable answer, who made up the sample to run the analyses with (age:  $M = 23.33$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ; 80.9% female). The most frequent finished educational level was higher professional education and most influencers are experts in the areas of lifestyle (77.1%) and fashion (48.4%). See Table 1 for the frequencies and percentages.

Age, gender and educational level were also used as control variables, together with area of expertise. To be able to include it as a control variable, Age was recoded into Generation Y (13.4%), respondents between the ages of 26 and 40, and Generation Z (86.6%), respondents between the ages of 10 and 25 (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Because Area of expertise was measured with a multiple response question, an influencer could for example be an expert in both fashion and travel and this person is thus part of both the fashion and the travel group.

Therefore, it was decided to control for how many areas of expertise an influencer has, instead of which area of expertise, and take these counted values as the control variable.

*Table 1 Demographics and Control variables*

Measure	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	127	80.9%
	Male	30	19.1%
	Other	0	0%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Age	18	3	1.9%
	19	4	2.5%
	20	7	4.5%
	21	13	8.3%
	22	25	15.9%
	23	43	27.4%
	24	21	13.4%
	25	20	12.7%
	26	8	5.1%
	27	7	4.5%
	29	4	2.5%
	31	1	0.6%
33	1	0.6%	
Educational level	Elementary school	0	0.0%
	Pre-vocational secondary education	0	0.0%
	Senior general secondary education	12	7.6%
	Pre-university education	11	7.0%
	Secondary vocational education	2	1.3%
	Higher professional education	51	32.5%
	University Bachelor	43	27.4%
	University Master	37	23.6%
Other	1	0.6%	

	- Premaster	1	0.6%
Area of expertise	Fashion	76	48.4%
	Gaming	3	1.9%
	Health living	13	8.3%
	Travel	37	23.6%
	Lifestyle	121	77.1%
	Food	16	10.2%
	Pets	4	2.5%
	Parenting	19	12.1%
	Other	33	21.0%
	- Beauty	6	3.8%
	- Humor	7	4.5%
- Sustainability	3	1.9%	
- Sports	6	3.8%	
- Lifestyle	8	5.1%	

#### 4.2 Reliability analysis

To see if the items correlate on the right construct, factor analyses were performed for each construct. Next, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the variables. After the reliability analyses were done, the items were computed into variables. See Table 2 for the variables and their standard descriptives.

##### *Actual self-congruence*

A common factor analysis showed that both items loaded on the same construct and explained 82.73% of the total variance. The reliability of Actual self-congruence composed of two items was acceptable:  $\alpha = .79$ .

##### *Ideal self-congruence*

A common factor analysis showed that both items loaded on the same construct and explained 89.57% of the total variance. The reliability of Ideal self-congruence composed of two items was good:  $\alpha = .88$ .

### *Para-social relationship*

A common factor analysis with orthogonal rotation showed that seven out of eight items loaded on two factors which together explained 63.35% of the total variance. Factor 1 is called “Passive PSR” and consists of questions PSR1, PSR2, PSR3 and PSR4 and Factor 2 is called “Active PSR” and consists of questions PSR5, PSR6 and PSR8 (see Table 2). The reliability of Passive PSR composed of four items was acceptable:  $\alpha = .75$ . The reliability of Active PSR composed of three items was also acceptable:  $\alpha = .78$ .

### *Engagement*

A common factor analysis with orthogonal rotation showed that all five items loaded on two factors which together explained 64.54% of the total variance. Factor 1 is called “Passive Engagement” and consists of questions Engagement1, Engagement2 and Engagement3 and Factor 2 is called “Active Engagement” and consists of questions Engagement4 and Engagement5 (see Table 2). The reliability of Passive Engagement composed of three items is questionable:  $\alpha = .67$ . The reliability of Active Engagement composed of two items is unacceptable:  $\alpha = .45$ . Forcing the components of Active Engagement was of no use and neither was running the analysis with the first component set and then another one with either the two or three active ones. Therefore, it was decided that Engagement1, Engagement2 and Engagement3 were going to be used in the analysis altogether, called “Engagement passive involvement”, and Engagement4 and Engagement5 were included individually.

### *Purchase intention*

A common factor analysis showed that all four items loaded on the same construct and explained 83.59% of the total variance. The reliability of Purchase intention composed of four items is excellent:  $\alpha = .93$ .

*Table 2 Measurement items and standard descriptives.*

Variable	Operationalization	Mean	Standard deviation	Sources
Actual self-congruence	<i>Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you see yourself (your</i>	3.78	1.43	Malär et al. (2011)

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*actual self*). What kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:

- *(Name of favorite influencer)* is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self). (Actual1)
- *(Name of favorite influencer)* is a mirror image of me (my actual self). (Actual2)

Ideal self-congruence	<p><i>Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you would like to see yourself (your ideal self). What kind of person would you like to be? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer)</i> is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self). (Ideal1)</li> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer)</i> is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self). (Ideal2)</li> </ul>	4.71	1.43	Malär et al. (2011)
Passive PSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I look forward to seeing <i>(name of favorite influencer)</i> posts on Instagram. (PSR1)</li> <li>• If <i>(name of favorite influencer)</i> starts another social media channel, I will also follow. (PSR2)</li> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer)</i> seems to understand the kind of things I want to know. (PSR3)</li> </ul>	5.06	1.09	Lou & Kim (2019)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I see a story about (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) in other places, I would read it. (PSR4)</li> </ul>			
Active PSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would love to meet (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) in person. (PSR5)</li> <li>• (<i>Name of favorite influencer</i>) would fit well with my group of friends. (PSR6)</li> <li>• If (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) lived in my neighborhood we would be friends. (PSR8)</li> </ul>	4.26	1.31	Lou & Kim (2019)
Engagement passive involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I often visit (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) Instagram. (Engagement1)</li> <li>• I often read (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) posts on Instagram. (Engagement2)</li> <li>• I often use the “like” option on (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) posts. (Engagement3)</li> </ul>	5.13	1.18	Toor et al. (2017)
Engagement – Commenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I often comment on (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) posts. (Engagement4)</li> </ul>	1.87	1.45	Toor et al. (2017)
Engagement – Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I follow (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) of my interest to get information (e.g. on new products). (Engagement5)</li> </ul>	3.96	1.85	Toor et al. (2017)
Purchase intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will buy products that (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) promoted on Instagram. (PI1)</li> <li>• I have the intention to buy products that (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) promoted on Instagram. (PI2)</li> <li>• I am interested in buying products that (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) promoted on Instagram. (PI3)</li> <li>• It is likely that I will buy products that (<i>name of favorite influencer</i>) promotes on Instagram in the future. (PI4)</li> </ul>	3.60	1.44	Hwang & Zhang (2018)

### 4.3 Assumptions

All hypotheses were tested by doing a simple regression analysis, a multiple regression analysis or by means of PROCESS. The assumptions belonging to linear regression that needed to be checked were: Linearity, Homoscedasticity, Independence of the residuals, Normality and Multicollinearity. Linearity and homoscedasticity were checked by looking at scatterplots. If the observed values were situated equally around zero, there was linearity and if there was no pattern visible, the assumption of homoscedasticity was met. The independence of the residuals was checked by looking at the Durbin-Watson test, which should be between 1.5 and 2.5 to be met. Finally, the assumption of normality was tested by looking at the histogram and the assumption of multicollinearity was tested by having a VIF value of one. The assumptions were met for all hypotheses, except for the ones including Engagement – Commenting and Engagement – Information. Therefore, it was decided to delete these variables and not take them into account when doing the analyses. So, Engagement was measured using Engagement1, Engagement2 and Engagement3 and the label of “Engagement passive involvement” was changed back into “Engagement” for the sake of clarity.

### 4.4 Hypothesis testing

All hypotheses were tested individually, except for H1 and H2, which were tested together. Multiple regression analyses were used to test H1 and H2, H3 and H4. Simple regression analyses were used to test H5 and H6 and H7 and H8 were analyzed by means of PROCESS. See Figure 2 and Table 14 at the end of this chapter for an overview of the found effects. Because PSR was split up in Passive PSR and Active PSR, several hypotheses were also split up into two hypotheses. This resulted in the following hypotheses:

- H1a:** Actual self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- H1b:** Actual self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.
- H2a:** Ideal self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- H2b:** Ideal self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.
- H3a:** Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.
- H3b:** Having active PSRS with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.
- H4a:** Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.
- H4b:** Having active PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.
- H5a:** Engagement leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- H5b:** Engagement leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.

**H6:** Engaged followers have a higher purchase intention.

**H7a:** Engagement mediates the relationship between having passive PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.

**H7b:** Engagement mediates the relationship between having active PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.

**H8a:** Passive PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.

**H8b:** Active PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.

**H1: Actual self-congruence leads to forming PSRs with influencers**

- **H1a:** Actual self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- **H1b:** Actual self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.

**H2: Ideal self-congruence leads to forming PSRs with influencers**

- **H2a:** Ideal self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- **H2b:** Ideal self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.

Because H1 and H2 were combined when doing the analyses, the first regression analysis that was performed was testing the effects of Actual and Ideal self-congruence on Passive PSR. A multiple regression showed that 25% of Passive PSR could be explained by the variables Actual and Ideal self-congruence ( $F(2, 154) = 26.95, p < .001$ ). Both Actual self-congruence ( $\beta = .28, p = .002$ ) and Ideal self-congruence ( $\beta = .28, p = .002$ ) proved to be a significant predictor of Passive PSR. Besides, a multiple regression showed that 19.9% of Active PSR could be explained by the variables Actual and Ideal self-congruence ( $F(2, 154) = 20.40, p < .001$ ). Actual self-congruence proved to be a significant predictor of Active PSR ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ), but Ideal self-congruence did not ( $\beta = .10, p = .31$ ). Therefore, H1a, H1b and H2a were accepted and H2b was rejected. See Table 3 for the coefficients of the influences of Actual and Ideal self-congruence on Passive PSR. See Table 4 for the coefficients of the influences of Actual and Ideal self-congruence on Active PSR.

Table 3 Regression analyses H1a and H2a

Model	Coefficients			
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	3.257	.264		12.362
Actual self- congruence	.212	.068	.280**	3.093
Ideal self- congruence	.214	.068	.282**	3.121

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4 Regression analyses H1b and H2b

Model	Coefficients			
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	2.493	.330		7.559
Actual self- congruence	.358	.086	.390***	4.175
Ideal self- congruence	.088	.086	.096	1.028

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### Control variables – Passive PSR

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Passive PSR from Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence equaled .26 (adjusted  $R^2 = .25$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(2, 154) = 26.95, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .69, p = .41$ ). This means that both predictor variables Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence were statistically significant but the control variable Gender was not.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .87, p = .35$ ). This means that both predictor variables Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence were statistically significant but the control variable Age was not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .07, p = .79$ ). This means that both predictor variables Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence were statistically significant but the control variable Educational level was not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .02, p = .90$ ). This means that both predictor variables Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence were statistically significant but the control variable Area of expertise was not.

#### *Control variables – Active PSR*

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Active PSR from Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Actual self-congruence and Ideal self-congruence equaled .21 (adjusted  $R^2 = .20$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(2, 154) = 20.40, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .80, p = .37$ ). This means that the predictor variable Actual self-congruence was statistically significant but the predictor variable Ideal self-congruence and the control variable Gender were not.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = 1.31, p = .25$ ). This means that the predictor variable Actual self-congruence was statistically significant but the predictor variable Ideal self-congruence and the control variable Age were not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .02, p = .89$ ). This means that the predictor variable Actual self-congruence was statistically significant but the predictor variable Ideal self-congruence and the control variable Educational level were not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .22, p = .64$ ). This means that the predictor variable Actual self-congruence was statistically significant but the predictor variable Ideal self-congruence and the control variable Area of expertise were not.

### **H3: Having PSRs with influencers leads to increased purchase intention**

- **H3a:** Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.
- **H3b:** Having active PSRS with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.

A multiple regression showed that 28.2% of Purchase intention could be explained by the variables Passive PSR and Active PSR ( $F(2, 154) = 31.63, p < .001$ ). Passive PSR proved to be a significant predictor of Purchase intention ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ ), but Active PSR did not ( $\beta = .05, p = .49$ ). Therefore, H3a was accepted and H3b was rejected. See Table 5 for the coefficients of the influences of Passive PSR and Active PSR on Purchase intention.

*Table 5 Regression analyses H3a and H3b*

Model	Coefficients			
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	-.138	.495		-.278
Passive PSR	.691	.097	.519***	4.143
Active PSR	.056	.080	.051	.698

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### *Control variables*

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Purchase intention from Passive PSR and Active PSR while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational

level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Passive PSR and Active PSR equaled .29 (adjusted  $R^2 = .28$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(2, 154) = 31.63, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .04, which was a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = 8.57, p = .004$ ). Since the influence of Active PSR on Purchase intention was not significant, this means that only the predictor variable Passive PSR and the control variable Gender were statistically significant, but Active PSR was not. Thus, Gender only controls for the effect of Passive PSR on Purchase intention.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .46, p = .50$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Age were not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .67, p = .42$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Educational level were not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .67, p = .42$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Area of expertise were not.

#### **H4: Having PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers**

- **H4a:** Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.
- **H4b:** Having active PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.

A multiple regression showed that 38.1% of Engagement could be explained by the variables Passive PSR and Active PSR ( $F(2, 154) = 49.08, p < .001$ ). Passive PSR proved to be a significant predictor of Engagement ( $\beta = .57, p < .001$ ), but Active PSR did not ( $\beta = .13, p =$

.06). Therefore, H4a was accepted and H4b was rejected. See Table 6 for the coefficients of the influences of Passive PSR and Active PSR on Engagement.

Table 6 Regression analyses H4a and H4b

Model	Coefficients			
	Unstandardized Coefficients <i>B</i>	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	1.515	.376		4.031
Passive PSR	.615	.073	.566***	8.383
Active PSR	.116	.061	.129	1.917

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### Control variables

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Engagement from Passive PSR and Active PSR while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Passive PSR and Active PSR equaled .39 (adjusted  $R^2 = .38$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(2, 154) = 49.09, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .13, p = .72$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Gender were not.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .63, p = .43$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Age were not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .84, p = .36$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Educational level were not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 153) = .78, p = .38$ ). This means that the predictor variable Passive PSR was statistically significant but the predictor variable Active PSR and the control variable Gender were not.

**H5: Engagement leads to forming PSRs with influencers**

- **H5a:** Engagement leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.
- **H5b:** Engagement leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.

A simple regression analysis showed that 37.1% of Passive PSR could be explained by the variable Engagement ( $F(1, 155) = 92.89, p < .001; \beta = .61, p < .001$ ). Another simple regression analysis showed that 10.5% of Active PSR could be explained by the variable Engagement ( $F(1, 155) = 19.28, p < .001; \beta = .33, p < .001$ ). Therefore, H5a and 5Hb were accepted. See Table 7 for the coefficients of the influence of Engagement on Passive PSR and see Table 8 for the coefficients of the influence of Engagement on Active PSR.

*Table 7 Regression analysis H5a*

Model	Coefficients			<i>t</i>
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	
(Constant)	2.179	.307		7.096
Engagement	.563	.058	.612***	9.638

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Table 8 Regression analysis H5b*

Model	Coefficients			<i>t</i>
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	
(Constant)	2.360	.444		5.320
Engagement	.370	.084	.333***	4.391

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### *Control variables – Passive PSR*

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Passive PSR from Engagement while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Engagement equaled .38 (adjusted  $R^2 = .37$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(1, 155) = 92.89, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .84, p = .36$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Gender was not.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .26, p = .61$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Age was not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .17, p = .68$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Educational level was not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = 1.42, p = .24$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Area of expertise was not.

### *Control variables – Active PSR*

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Active PSR from Engagement while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Engagement equaled .11 (adjusted  $R^2 = .11$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(1, 155) = 19.28, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance

accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = 1.42, p = .24$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Gender was not.

Next, instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .96, p = .33$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Age was not.

Next, instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .39, p = .53$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Educational level was not.

Next, instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .11, p = .74$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Area of expertise was not.

### **H6: Engaged followers have a higher purchase intention**

A simple regression analysis showed that 12.9% of Purchase intention could be explained by the variable Engagement ( $F(1, 155) = 24.15, p < .001; \beta = .37, p < .001$ ). Therefore, H6 was accepted. See Table 9 for the coefficients of the influence of Engagement on Purchase intention.

*Table 9 Regression analysis H6*

Model	Coefficients			
	Unstandardized <i>B</i>	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	1.297	.481		2.698
Engagement	.449	.091	.367***	4.914

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### *Control variables*

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Purchase intention from Engagement while controlling for Gender, Age, Educational level and Area of

expertise, respectively. The results of model one indicated that the variance accounted for with Engagement equaled .14 (adjusted  $R^2 = .13$ ), which was statistically significant ( $F(1, 155) = 24.15, p < .001$ ).

Next, Gender was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .03, which was a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = 4.64, p = .03$ ). This means that both the predictor variable Engagement and the control variable Gender were statistically significant. Thus, Gender controls for the effect of Engagement on Purchase intention.

Instead of Gender, Age was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to zero, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .16, p = .69$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Age was not.

Instead of Age, Educational level was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was not a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = .97, p = .33$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Educational level was not.

Instead of Educational level, Area of expertise was entered into the regression equation. The change in variance accounted for was equal to .01, which was a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over model one ( $\Delta F(1, 154) = 1.68, p = .20$ ). This means that the predictor variable Engagement was statistically significant but the control variable Area of expertise was not.

#### **H7a: Engagement mediates the relationship between having passive PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.**

To investigate H7a, a simple mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS. The path from Passive PSR to Engagement (path a) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .67, t(151) = 9.44, p < .001$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention (path b) was positive but not statistically significant ( $b = .08, t(150) = .79, p = .43$ ). The path from Passive PSR to Purchase intention, mediated by Engagement (path c'), was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .69, t(150) = 6.07, p < .001$ ). The path from Passive PSR to Purchase intention (path c) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .74, t(151) = 8.26, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of Passive PSR on Purchase intention was not found to be statistically significant [Effect = .0545,

95% C.I. (-.0952, .2150)]. Therefore, H7a was rejected. See Table 10 for the coefficients and Appendix IV for the visual representation of H7a.

#### *Control variables*

Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Engagement to Purchase intention and for the effect of Passive PSR to Purchase intention, mediated by Engagement ( $b = -.70$ ,  $t(150) = -2.76$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Besides, Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Passive PSR to Purchase intention ( $b = -.70$ ,  $t(151) = -2.79$ ,  $p = .01$ ). However, as noted above, H7a is not significant. Furthermore, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise did not significantly control for any of the effects.

*Table 10 Mediation analysis H7a*

Model	Outcome variable Engagement (path a)	Outcome variable Purchase intention (paths b & c')	Total effect model (path c)
	Coefficients	Coefficients	Coefficients
Constant	2.38***	-.08	.12
Passive PSR	.67***	.69***	.74***
Engagement	n.a.	.08	n.a.
Age	-.17	.21	.20
Gender	-.07	-.70**	-.70**
Educational level	-.03	.05	.05
Area of expertise	-.06	.01	.01

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### **H7b: Engagement mediates the relationship between having active PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.**

To investigate H7b, a simple mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS. The path from Active PSR to Engagement (path a) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .29$ ,  $t(151) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention (path b) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .41$ ,  $t(150) = 4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The path from Active PSR to Purchase intention, mediated by Engagement (path c'), was positive but not statistically significant ( $b = .16$ ,  $t(150) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ ). The path from Active PSR to Purchase intention

(path c) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .28, t(151) = 3.2, p = .002$ ). The indirect effect of Active PSR on Purchase intention was found to be statistically significant [Effect = .1191, 95% C.I. (.0437, .2087)]. This means that there is a full mediation, since the indirect effect of Active PSR on Purchase intention, mediated by Engagement, is significant and the direct effect is not. Therefore, H7b was accepted. See Table 11 for the coefficients and Appendix V for the visual representation of H7b.

#### *Control variables*

Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Engagement to Purchase intention and for the effect of Active PSR to Purchase intention, mediated by Engagement ( $b = -.60, t(150) = -2.15, p = .03$ ). Besides, Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Active PSR to Purchase intention ( $b = -.59, t(151) = -2.02, p = .045$ ). Age, Educational level and Area of expertise did not significantly control for any of the effects.

*Table 11 Mediation analysis H7b*

Model	Outcome variable Engagement (path a)	Outcome variable Purchase intention (paths b & c')	Total effect model (path c)
	Coefficients	Coefficients	Coefficients
Constant	4.51***	.94	2.69***
Active PSR	.29***	.16	.38**
Engagement	n.a.	.41***	n.a.
Age	-.28	.17	.05
Gender	.01	-.60*	-.59*
Educational level	-.05	.06	.04
Area of expertise	-.01	.07	.06

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### **H8a: Passive PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.**

To investigate H8a, a simple mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS. The path from Engagement to Passive PSR (path a) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .56, t(151) = 9.44, p < .001$ ). The path from Passive PSR to Purchase intention (path b) was positive

and statistically significant ( $b = .69, t(150) = 6.07, p < .001$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention, mediated by Passive PSR (path c'), was positive but not statistically significant ( $b = .08, t(150) = .79, p = .43$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention (path c) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .47, t(151) = 5.08, p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of Engagement to Purchase intention was found to be statistically significant [Effect = .3838, 95% C.I. (.2403, .5384)]. This means that there is a full mediation, since the indirect effect of Engagement on Purchase intention via Passive PSR is stronger than the direct effect. Therefore, H8a was accepted. See Table 12 for the coefficients and Appendix VI for the visual representation of H8a.

### *Control variables*

Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Passive PSR to Purchase intention and for the effect of Engagement to Purchase intention, mediated by Passive PSR ( $b = -.70, t(150) = -2.76, p = .01$ ). Age, Educational level and Area of expertise did not significantly control for any of the effects.

*Table 12 Mediation analysis H8a*

Model	Outcome variable Passive PSR (path a) Coefficients	Outcome variable Purchase intention (paths b & c') Coefficients	Total effect model (path c) Coefficients
Constant	1.79**	-.08	1.15
Engagement	.56***	.08	.47***
Passive PSR	n.a.	.69***	n.a.
Age	-.14	.21	.11
Gender	.23	-.70**	-.54
Educational level	.02	.05	.07
Area of expertise	.10	.01	.08

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**H8b: Active PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.**

To investigate H8b, a simple mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS. The path from Engagement to Active PSR (path a) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .36$ ,  $t(151) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The path from Active PSR to Purchase intention (path b) was positive but not statistically significant ( $b = .16$ ,  $t(150) = 1.84$ ,  $p = .07$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention, mediated by Active PSR (path c'), was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .41$ ,  $t(150) = 4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The path from Engagement to Purchase intention (path c) was positive and statistically significant ( $b = .47$ ,  $t(151) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of Engagement to Purchase intention was not found to be statistically significant [Effect = .0570, 95% C.I. (-.0035, .1333)]. Therefore, H8b was rejected. See Table 13 for the coefficients and Appendix VII for the visual representation of H8b.

*Control variables*

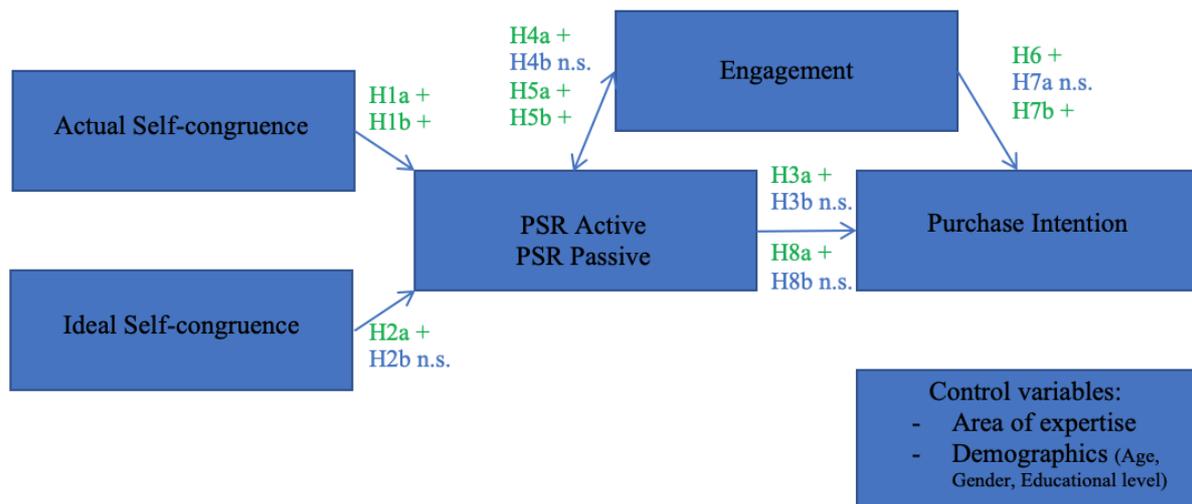
Gender negatively and significantly controlled for the effect of Active PSR to Purchase intention and for the effect of Engagement to Purchase intention, mediated by Active PSR ( $b = -.60$ ,  $t(150) = -2.15$ ,  $p = .03$ ). However, as noted above, H8b is not significant. Furthermore, Age, Educational level and Area of expertise did not significantly control for any of the effects.

Table 13 Mediation analysis H8b

Model	Outcome variable Active PSR (path a)	Outcome variable Purchase intention (paths b & c')	Total effect model (path c)
	Coefficients	Coefficients	Coefficients
Constant	1.97*	.84	1.15
Engagement	.36***	.41***	.47***
Active PSR	n.a.	.16	n.a.
Age	-.34	.17	.11
Gender	.35	-.60*	-.54
Educational level	.05	.06	.07
Area of expertise	.06	.07	.08

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 2 Revised conceptual model



*Table 14 Summary analyses*

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1a	Actual self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.	Accepted
H1b	Actual self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.	Accepted
H2a	Ideal self-congruence leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.	Accepted
H2b	Ideal self-congruence leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.	Rejected
H3a	Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.	Accepted
H3b	Having active PSRS with influencers leads to increased purchase intention.	Rejected
H4a	Having passive PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.	Accepted
H4b	Having active PSRs with influencers leads to engaged followers.	Rejected
H5a	Engagement leads to forming passive PSRs with influencers.	Accepted
H5b	Engagement leads to forming active PSRs with influencers.	Accepted
H6	Engaged followers have a higher purchase intention.	Accepted
H7a	Engagement mediates the relationship between having passive PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.	Rejected
H7b	Engagement mediates the relationship between having active PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention.	Accepted
H8a	Passive PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.	Accepted
H8b	Active PSR mediates the relationship between engaged followers and their purchase intention.	Rejected

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion & Conclusion**

This chapter uses the results of the data analyses to have a look at the hypotheses, to provide additional information and to be able to answer the research question. Furthermore, the limitations, implications and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

### **5.1 General discussion**

When looking at the mean scores of actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence, respondents indicate that, on average, they have higher ideal self-congruity with their favorite influencer than actual self-congruity. This means that, on average, people are more likely to follow influencers who are like their ideal self than their actual self. This is in line with Hermanda et al. (2019) who noticed that people see influencers as their ideal selves. When looking at the mean scores of passive PSR and active PSR, respondents indicate that, on average, they are more likely to form passive PSRs with influencers than active PSRs. Passive PSRs are relationships in which you passively connect with another person. Looking forward to someone's posts on Instagram, following someone's other social media channel(s), reading stories about someone and having the same interests are all part of passive PSRs. These are the basics of a relationship; you do not have to be actively involved. However, active PSRs are relationships in which you actively want to be engaged with another person. It consists of loving to meet someone, being friends with this person and him or her being like your friends. On average, respondents indicate a medium to large level of engagement and a medium level of purchase intention.

The current research adds to existing literature by investigating the influence of actual and ideal self-congruence on PSRs. Actual self-congruence has a larger impact on forming active PSRs with influencers than on forming passive PSRs with influencers (H1), whereas ideal self-congruence only has an impact on forming passive PSRs with influencers (H2). A potential reason for this could be that influencers who are more like your actual self are seen as being cognitively close (Malär et al., 2011) and the ones who are more like your ideal self seem to live in a fantasy world (Castells, 2000, as cited in Chen, 2016), making it unlikely to, for example, become friends with this influencer, which is part of active PSRs. Besides, in general, followers indicated to be more likely to form passive PSRs with influencers than active PSRs. Passive PSRs may be easier established than active PSRs since passive PSRs can be formed when just liking someone but active PSRs are really about forming friendships with these people. There is no difference in the impact of actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on forming passive PSRs with influencers (H1a and H2a). This means that forming passive

PSRs with influencers who are like someone's actual self are as likely to happen as forming passive PSRs with influencers who are like someone's ideal self. This is in line with the findings of Kaufmann et al. (2016), who found that the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment of counterfeits were similar, and Wang, Hsu, Huang and Chen (2015), about the influence of both actual and ideal self-congruence on blogger-reader relationship quality. However, He and Mukherjee (2007) and Malär et al. (2011) both found that actual self-congruence has a larger impact on customers attitude and store loyalty and on emotional brand attachment, respectively. Contrary to these results, Japutra et al. (2018) found that ideal self-congruence influences emotional brand attachment. These differences can be explained because of the context of the research. He and Mukherjee (2007), Japutra et al. (2018) and Malär et al. (2011) all looked into the effects of self-congruence on attachment to brands and stores, no living creatures, whereas the current research looks into attachment with people, influencers to be precise. This means that self-congruence has a different impact on attachment to brands and attachment to influencers. More research needs to be done in the future to get more information about this. Nevertheless, H1a, H1b and H2a are accepted and H2b is rejected.

The results of H3 are in line with previous research that showed that PSRs with influencers positively influence followers' purchase intention (e.g. Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Ilicic & Webster, 2011; Kim et al., 2015; Lou & Kim, 2019). This means that brands, marketers and the influencers themselves need to encourage customers to build a PSR with an influencer in order to increase their purchase intention. This may be explained by the fact that followers are inspired by these influencers to buy certain products (Lee & Watkins, 2016). However, the present study showed that only followers having passive PSRs with influencers have the intention to purchase the advertised products. Active PSRs were also hypothesized to influence purchase intention, since influencers are viewed as friends and people trust their friends when making a purchase decision (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), but this effect was not found. This might be explained by the fact that Lau, Lam and Cheung (2016) found that the subjective norm, feeling a social pressure to behave in a certain way or not (Ajzen, 1991), does not have an impact on the purchase intention of smartphones in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, H3a is accepted and H3b is rejected.

Only followers having passive PSRs with influencers are likely to be engaged with these influencers. This means that those loving to meet their favorite influencer and wanting to be friends with him or her are not the ones being engaged with influencers (H4b), but only the ones looking forward to the influencer's posts, having interest in following his/her or other social media channel(s) and having the same interests (H4a). The influence of passive PSR on

engagement is partly in line with Men and Tsai (2013) who found a positive relationship between PSRs and engagement in the context of social network sites in China. However, they found that only liking and following a social media page were no antecedents of deep engagement, whereas that is the case in the current research. Engagement was measured by items about visiting someone's Instagram, reading posts on Instagram and liking posts on Instagram; items that are part of the lowest form of engagement, according to Muntinga et al. (2011). Passive PSR showed to influence this engagement with an increase of .615. Followers with passive PSRs with influencers may see their relationship as being more superficial, whereas followers with active PSRs with influencers may be more interested in having a deeper connection with an influencer. Since the dimensions of engagement that are measured in the current research are part of the lowest form of engagement, followers with active PSRs may not recognize themselves in this type of engagement, but they might be looking for a higher form, such as contributing (Muntinga et al., 2011). Nonetheless, H4a is accepted and H4b is rejected.

Engaged followers are likely to form both passive PSRs (H5a) and active PSRs (H5b) with influencers, indicating that engagement positively influences all researched aspects of PSRs, namely looking forward to seeing an influencer's posts on Instagram, following a new social media channel of an influencer, the influencer understanding the kind of things the follower wants to know, reading stories in other places about the influencer, loving to meet the influencer in person, the influencer fitting well with the follower's group of friends and being friends with the influencer if (s)he lived in the same neighborhood (see Table 2). This is consistent with findings by Toor et al. (2017) who indicated that engagement can be an antecedent of forming connections between customers and brands. For engagement, there is thus no difference in forming connections between customers and brands and customers and influencers. Besides, Burke and Kraut (2014) found that passive consumption, composed of visiting and readings someone's posts, led to increased tie strength, whereas they did not find this result for one-click communication, such as "liking" a post. This means that the results of this study are partly in line with Burke and Kraut (2014). In the current research, visiting someone's page, readings someone's post and liking someone's post are taken together as dimensions of engagement, which may explain the fact that likes did lead to forming PSRs. Nevertheless, both H5a and H5b are accepted.

Furthermore, engaged followers have the intention to purchase the advertised products (H6), which means that followers having a higher engagement with an influencer thus have a higher intention to purchase the advertised product. This is in line with several previous

researches. For example, Kilger and Romer (2007) found that trust, as an element of engagement in different media settings, positively influenced people's purchase intention. Furthermore, Toor et al. (2017) and Valentini et al. (2018) also supported this finding. Accepting H6 is thus consistent with previous research. However, a mediation analysis showed that passive PSR fully mediated the effect of engagement on purchase intention (H8a). This means that the direct effect of engagement on purchase intention becomes insignificant when the mediator engagement is added to the model. This shows that there is evidence for (passive) PSR in affecting followers' purchase intention. However, active PSR did not show to be a significant mediator on the effect of engagement on purchase intention (H8b), which, again, might be explained by the fact that engagement in this study was measured at its lowest form, possibly not being interesting enough for followers having active PSRs with influencers.

Engagement only mediates the relationship between active PSR and purchase intention (H7b) but not between passive PSR and purchase intention (H7a). This is partly in line with Toor et al. (2017) who demonstrated that emotional attachment was an antecedent of engagement in the influence on purchase intention. Strikingly, active PSR does not have a direct influence on purchase intention, whereas it does have an indirect influence on purchase intention when mediated by engagement. Besides, active PSR also does not have an effect on engagement. This may be explained by research by Magneto (2015, as cited in Toor et al., 2017), who found that highly engaged customers have a higher purchase intention than customers who are not or only slightly engaged. On the contrary, passive PSRs only directly influence purchase intention but this effect is not significant when mediated by engagement. A possible reason for this is that trust does not necessarily have to be based on engagement but can also be based on PSRs (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Sekhon et al., 2016). All in all, H7a is rejected and H7b is accepted.

When looking at the impact of the control variables, only gender had an impact on some of the effects. Gender negatively controlled for the effect of passive PSR on purchase intention and negatively controlled for the effect of engagement on purchase intention, both directly and indirectly, mediated by passive PSR. Gender also negatively controlled for the indirect effect of active PSR on purchase intention, mediated by engagement. This means that men having passive PSRs with influencers have a higher purchase intention than women, with and without the antecedent of engagement, and that men being more engaged with influencers also have a higher purchase intention than women, both directly and mediated by engagement. This can be explained by research by Kempf, Palan and Laczniak (1997) and Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) who both found that men require less advertising exposure than women when trying to

convince them to purchase a certain product. A short advertisement of an influencer on Instagram might thus be enough to persuade them to have the intention to purchase the advertised product. However, since the current research had a distorted sample in terms of gender, with a high proportion of females, it is difficult to generalize this result to the whole Instagram population. Besides, previous research found more, contradictory, results for the effects of gender. For example, Bond (2016), among others, showed that gender had an effect on PSRs with media personae in that women were more likely to form strong PSRs than men (e.g. Bond, 2016), whereas McCutcheon, Lange and Houran (2002) found that men attach more value to their PSRs with celebrities. Neither of these effects were found in the current research. Furthermore, Rosaen and Dibble (2008) found that age had a negative influence on PSIs among children. This means that older children are less likely to form PSIs with their favorite television characters compared to younger children. Besides, Choi and Rifon (2012) speculated that older customers might not want to change themselves (i.e. ideal self) or expect a brand, or influencer in light of the current study, to help him or her with this achievement. Therefore, age could have had a negative influence on the relationship between ideal self-congruence and PSR. Lastly, purchase intention was also thought to be influenced by age. Previous research found that purchases were twice as likely to happen for customers in the ages between 16 and 34 than for younger and older customers (The Future Data Foundation, 2004, as cited in Pringle & Binet, 2005). However, age did not have an influence on any of the hypothesized effects.

## **5.2 Implications**

This section discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the current research. First, the theoretical implications will be discussed, followed by the managerial implications.

### ***5.2.1 Theoretical implications***

The findings of the current study add to the theory in different ways. The first academic contribution is the presence of the influence of self-congruity on PSR. While previous research either focused on actual and ideal self-congruence (e.g. Malär et al., 2011) or on PSR (e.g. Lou & Kim, 2019), the current research was the first to demonstrate the influence of actual and ideal self-congruence on forming PSRs with influencers. Actual self-congruence showed to impact both passive and active PSRs with influencers, whereas ideal self-congruence only had an effect on forming passive PSRs with influencers. There was no difference in strength between the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on forming passive PSRs with influencers. This means that self-congruence does not only have an influence on the relationship between

customers and brands, as found in previous research, but also on PSRs between customers and influencers.

Next, previous research did show the influence of PSRs on engagement (e.g. Men & Tsai, 2013) and the other way around (e.g. Toor et al., 2017), the influence of engagement on purchase intention (e.g. Magneto, 2015, as cited in Toor et al., 2017) and the influence of PSRs on purchase intention (e.g. Hwang & Zhang, 2018) but the current research was the first to look at all those influences together. Besides, this research looked at multiple mediation analyses between the two types of PSRs, engagement and purchase intention, where engagement only mediated the relationship between active PSR and purchase intention. Only passive PSR, but not active PSR, mediated the relationship between engagement and purchase intention. Followers having passive PSRs with influencers, opposed to the ones having active PSRs with influencers, were engaged with these influencers and had a higher intention to purchase the advertised products. Engagement was an antecedent of both passive and active PSR and an antecedent of purchase intention. This shows that passive PSRs and engagement are important in directly influencing followers' purchase intention, whereas active PSRs are important in indirectly influencing followers' purchase intention, via engagement.

The demographics that were used as control variables were not included in hypotheses, but gender did show to have an impact on the relationship between passive PSR and purchase intention and on the relationship between engagement and purchase intention, both directly and indirectly, via engagement. Gender also influenced the effect of active PSR on purchase intention, mediated by engagement. Men having passive PSRs with influencers or men being engaged, both directly and indirectly via passive PSR, showed to have a higher purchase intention than women having passive PSRs with influencers or being engaged with them. Besides, men having active PSRs with influencers showed to have a higher purchase intention than women when this effect was mediated by engagement. By including gender as one of the control variables, the current research extends the knowledge about the influence of PSR on purchase intention and about the influence of engagement on purchase intention.

### ***5.2.2. Managerial implications***

Previous research already indicated that influencer marketing is an effective advertising strategy (e.g. Lou & Yuan, 2019) and that Instagram is very popular for following influencers (Bond, 2016). This is acknowledged by the current research that showed that followers formed passive PSRs with influencers on Instagram, who are in line with either followers' actual or ideal selves, which leads to increased purchase intention. Influencers thus do not have to worry

about how they portray themselves, as both actual and ideal self-congruence lead to passive PSRs, which, in turn, positively influence followers' purchase intention. However, actual self-congruence between a follower and an influencer has a larger impact on active PSR, compared to passive PSR, which does not have a positive direct influence on purchase intention. When this effect is mediated by engagement, active PSR does positively influence followers' purchase intention.

As influencers are hired by businesses to promote their products, the results can give insights in which influencers are a suitable match for companies and their strategic decisions. Passive PSRs are more likely to be formed when customers have the idea that the influencer is in line with his or her ideal self, whereas active PSRs are more likely to be formed when influencers feel like someone's actual self. Passive PSRs have a positive impact on people's engagement and purchase intention, which is not the case for active PSRs. However, when the relationship between active PSRs and purchase intention is mediated by engagement, so when people visit, read or like posts on an influencer's Instagram page, active PSRs also positively influence followers' purchase intention. Brands using Instagram influencers for the promotion of their products can thus either focus on ideal self-congruence, which easily leads to purchase intention via passive PSRs with influencers, or on actual self-congruence, which requires followers to be engaged with the influencer in order to lead to purchase intention.

Furthermore, men showed to have a larger purchase intention than women. Brands and marketers might thus focus on influencers with many male followers, since that may increase the chance on acquisitions. Influencers can then choose to either promote products that are more interesting for men than for women or adjust their advertisements by targeting their male followers instead of their female followers, for example by naming the functional benefits of a product rather than by giving detailed descriptions (Garrison & De Rooij, 2015).

### **5.3 Limitations & Suggestions for future research**

The first limitation of the current research has to do with respondents' favorite influencers. The definition of Gross and Von Wangenheim (2018) was used to define an influencer (see Appendix III). However, it might have been better to have used the definition that Lou and Kim (2019) used in their questionnaire:

Social media influencers are digital personalities who have amassed large number of followers across one or several media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs) and carry influence over others. Compared with traditional

celebrities, influencers are “regular people” who become online “celebrities” by creating content on social media, e.g. toys review YouTuber *Ryan*, gaming YouTuber *PewDiePie*, Instagram star *Loki the Wolfdog*, fashion influencer *Aimee Song*, among other influencers in areas like toys, gaming, healthy living, travel, lifestyle, food, etc. (p. 17).

By providing respondents with examples, they might have given real influencers as their answer instead of celebrities, such as Lionel Messi. However, another definition was chosen to let respondents recall their favorite influencer instead of recognizing him or her from a provided list of names. Therefore, another solution could have been to name people who are not influencers, again, such as Lionel Messi. Besides, it might have been better to stress that people should write down a single person’s name, since some respondents indicated multiple influencers or indicated a whole family. As in Bond (2016), it was decided to delete these respondents from the sample. Furthermore, 30.1% of the respondents filled in a meaningless answer when they were asked to fill in their favorite influencer, for example by entering a space in the box. Unfortunately, there were no questions in the survey to check why this happened. Since this was only the third question in the survey, survey taking fatigue (Gould, 2019) is not very likely to be the reason. Maybe respondents were not interested in the topic or they were suffering from survey request fatigue (Gould, 2019), since the survey was posted in Facebook groups where people can look for respondents. These groups work reciprocally: when you fill in someone’s survey, (s)he will fill it in for you. It might be possible that some people just quickly filled in the current survey by getting the researcher to fill out theirs as well.

Furthermore, the sample used in this research may not be representative for the whole Instagram population. Since the questionnaire was in Dutch, only respondents speaking the Dutch language were able to fill it out. Besides, respondents in the current research were between the ages of 18 and 33, with most of them belonging to Gen Z. As of April 2020, 64% of the Instagram users worldwide fall within the ages of 18 and 34 (Clement, 2020a), which means that the current research may be applicable to approximately 60% of the whole Instagram population, nationality not taken into account. Age does not have a significant effect on any of the hypothesized effects, which could be explained by the small range in age. Future research should include both younger and older respondents to see if age might have an influence for other age groups. For example, age could have a negative influence on the relationship between ideal self-congruence and PSRs, as based on Choi and Rifon (2012), or age could have an effect on purchase intention, whereby customers between the ages of 16 and 34 have a higher purchase

intention than both younger and older customers (The Future Data Foundation, 2004, as cited in Pringle & Binet, 2005). The sample was also not diverse in terms of educational level, since 84.1% was highly educated. Educational level might have an influence in future research when more respondents with a lower educational level are researched. When this comparison can be made, research may find a difference in purchase intention for respondents with different educational levels, as Tan, Goh, Wee and Yeow (2017) did. They found that respondents with a higher educational level had a higher purchase intention than those with a lower educational level. Future studies can expand this finding by looking at the impact of PSRs and engagement on purchase intention, when controlling for educational level. Lastly, 80.9% of the sample is female, whereas just 51% of the Instagram population is female (Clement, 2020b). Since there are no demographics available of the respondents who either do not have an account on Instagram or are not following (an) influencer(s), no statements can be made about them. In future studies, it may be good to have a better representation of the Instagram population as a sample. When that is the case and when the control variables control for the hypothesized effects, these results can be generalized to the whole Instagram population.

When looking into the literature on self-congruity, some researchers only discuss the two aspects actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence, as in the current research, whereas others also talk about social self-congruence and ideal social self-congruence (e.g. He & Mukherjee, 2007). For example, Sarwary and Chaudhry (2015) found that all four types of self-congruence had a positive direct effect on people's purchase intention. It may be interesting to include PSR in this effect to see if PSR strengthens or weakens this effect and to test the influence of social self-congruence and ideal social self-congruence on both passive and active PSR.

Factor analysis showed that the items of engagement did not load on one factor but on two. When checking the reliability of these two factors, it became clear that one of them was unacceptable. This led to the decision to analyze these two variables individually. However, when checking the assumptions, these two variables did not meet all of them, causing deletion of these individual items after all. Therefore, engagement was only measured by looking at visiting, reading and liking posts, while there are more dimensions to it. This could have had an effect on the results. In future studies, other engagement scales should be used to be able to incorporate all, or at least more, dimensions of engagement. For example, Kilger and Romer (2007) found that trust, as a dimension of engagement, positively influenced people's purchase intention. Including trust may increase the already found effect of engagement on purchase intention as in the current study. Besides, when looking into higher forms of engagement, these

might be influenced by active PSRs, because followers having active PSRs with influencers might be looking for one of these higher forms of engagement.

Area of expertise did not control for any of the hypothesized effects. A possible explanation for this is that there is controlled for the number of areas of expertise instead of a particular area of expertise. This method was chosen because not all areas consisted of a large sample (see Table 1). Therefore, making statements about some groups would have been meaningless. Besides, because influencers may have multiple areas of expertise, differences between these groups could be ascribed to a single person and not to the area of expertise. In future research, influencers of a particular area of expertise could be researched, making sure every area consists of a large group of influencers and the areas are approximately equal in size.

Besides controlling for area of expertise, the present study only controlled for the demographics. For example, Malär et al. (2011) controlled for product involvement, public self-consciousness and self-esteem and found that these variables positively influenced the positive effect of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment, whereas they reduced the effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. It may be useful to include these control variables in a future study to look at their impact on the effects of actual and ideal self-congruence on PSRs with influencers. Since the effect of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment and on PSRs are both positive, product involvement, self-esteem and public self-consciousness might all have a positive influence on the effect of actual self-congruence on PSR. When product involvement is high, customers may be more likely to form PSRs with influencers who are like their actual selves, because people want to keep up with their current self, according to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983). This also holds for people with a high self-esteem, because those people are satisfied with their current selves (Kernis, 2003), and for public self-conscious people, because when forming PSRs with actual self-congruent influencers these people feel they can live up to other people's expectations (Baumeister, Hamilton & Tice, 1985). For ideal self-congruence, the effects of these control variables may be hypothesized to be the opposite, so negative. When product involvement is low, PSRs with ideal self-congruent others may be established because people do not have to think about their own ideal selves but can use the image of the other person to evaluate the product (Malär et al., 2011). As mentioned before, people with a high self-esteem are already satisfied with themselves, having a low discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves (Higgins, 1987). Therefore, the positive emotions of self-improvement are absent, making it less likely to form PSRs with ideal self-congruent others. Lastly, because public self-conscious people want to be able to live up to others' expectations, they are less likely to form PSRs with influencers who

are like their ideal selves. Furthermore, other possible control variables could be empathy and loneliness, of which the former was found to have a positive impact on PSRs (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). When adding self-congruence to this model, loneliness may also have an impact on PSRs. People feeling lonely in real life may be more actively looking for online relationships to compensate for their loneliness in the real world than people having many real-life friendships.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

Based on a quantitative analysis, this study tried to get an answer to the research question: *What is the effect of self-congruence on purchase intention via para-social relationships with influencers?* The results showed that both actual and ideal self-congruence positively affect purchase intention via passive PSRs with influencers. However, this effect is not present when looking at active PSRs with influencers. Actual self-congruence does positively influence forming active PSRs with influencers, whereas this is not the case for ideal self-congruence, but this does not have a direct impact on purchase intention. However, when the relationship between having active PSRs with influencers and followers' purchase intention was mediated by engagement, there was a positive impact. This indirect effect was not present for passive PSRs. Furthermore, engagement positively influenced passive and active PSR, whereas the impact the other way around was only significant for passive PSR. Lastly, the influence of engagement on purchase intention was significant.

Overall, the effect of actual self-congruence is stronger for forming active PSRs with influencers, whereas there is no difference in strength between actual and ideal self-congruence in forming passive PSRs with influencers. In total, actual self-congruence thus has a larger impact on forming PSRs with influencers, which can be explained by the self-verification theory that explains that people are looking for communication partners and events that maintain their actual selves. The current research shows that this also holds for PSRs with influencers in an online setting.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix I: Survey introduction**

Dear respondent,

This survey is part of my master thesis for the master Marketing at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Thank you for participating. The survey is about influencers on Instagram and followers' relationships with them and may be useful for businesses who are interested in working with influencers. Your personal opinion is asked for, so please answer the questions honestly, there are no right or wrong answers. The survey will take about 10 minutes of your time and is completely anonymous. It is possible to quit the survey at any time wanted. The results are confidential information and will only be used for scientific purposes. If you have any questions regarding this research or if you are interested in the research results, please feel free to send an email to [l.huting@student.ru.nl](mailto:l.huting@student.ru.nl). When proceeding to the next page, you give permission to use your answers for this research.

Thank you in advance!

## Appendix II: Measured variables and their operationalizations

Variable	Operationalization	Source
Self-congruence	<p><i>Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you see yourself (your actual self). What kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer) is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self).</i></li> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer) is a mirror image of me (my actual self).</i></li> </ul> <p><i>Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you would like to see yourself (your ideal self). What kind of person would you like to be? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer) is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self).</i></li> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer) is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self).</i></li> </ul>	Malär et al. (2011)
Para-social relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I look forward to seeing <i>(name of favorite influencer)</i> posts on Instagram.</li> <li>• If <i>(name of favorite influencer)</i> starts another social media channel, I will also follow.</li> <li>• <i>(Name of favorite influencer)</i> seems to understand the kind of things I want to know.</li> </ul>	Lou & Kim (2019)

- If I see a story about (*name of favorite influencer*) in other places, I would read it.
- I would love to meet (*name of favorite influencer*) in person.
- (*Name of favorite influencer*) would fit well with my group of friends.
- If something happens to (*name of favorite influencer*), I will feel sad.
- If (*name of favorite influencer*) lived in my neighborhood we would be friends.

Engagement

- I often visit (*name of favorite influencer*) Instagram. Toor et al. (2017)
- I often read (*name of favorite influencer*) posts on Instagram.
- I often use the “like” option on (*name of favorite influencer*) posts.
- I often comment on (*name of favorite influencer*) posts.
- I follow (*name of favorite influencer*) of my interest to get information (e.g. on new products).

Purchase intention

- I will buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram. Hwang & Zhang (2018)
- I have the intention to buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram.
- I am interested in buying products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram.
- It is likely that I will buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promotes on Instagram in the future.

### **Appendix III: Questionnaire**

1. Do you have Instagram?
2. Are you following any influencer on Instagram?
  - An influencer is someone who created his or her own crowd on any social media platform and is able to influence other people. The difference with celebrities is that influencers create their own content and acknowledge followers' feedback (Gross & Von Wangenheim, 2018).
3. Please report your favorite influencer that you are following on Instagram.

*Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you see yourself (your actual self). What kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:*

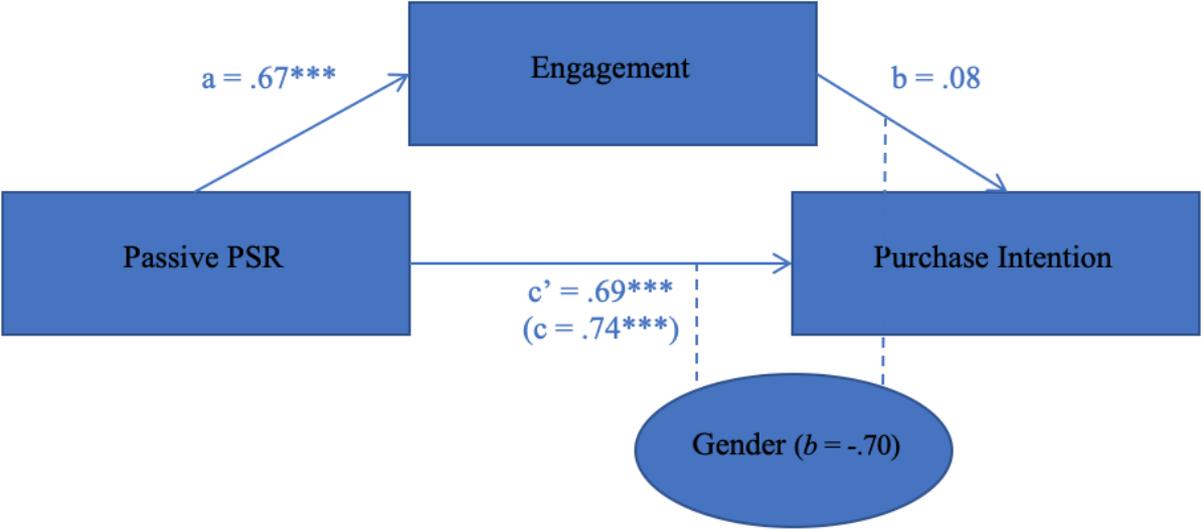
4. *(Name of favorite influencer)* is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self).
5. *(Name of favorite influencer)* is a mirror image of me (my actual self).

*Take a moment to think about influencer x. Describe him/her using personality characteristics such as reliable, smooth, etc. Now think about how you would like to see yourself (your ideal self). What kind of person would you like to be? Once you've done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:*

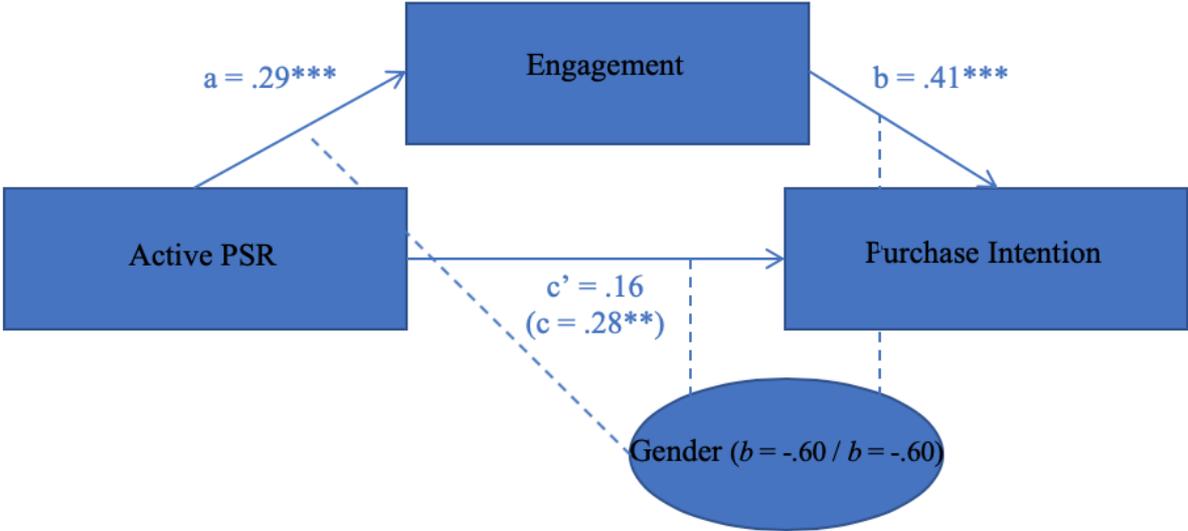
6. *(Name of favorite influencer)* is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self).
7. *(Name of favorite influencer)* is a mirror image of the person I would like to be (my ideal self).
8. I look forward to seeing *(name of favorite influencer)* posts on Instagram.
9. If *(name of favorite influencer)* starts another social media channel, I will also follow.
10. *(Name of favorite influencer)* seems to understand the kind of things I want to know.
11. If I see a story about *(name of favorite influencer)* in other places, I would read it.
12. I would love to meet *(name of favorite influencer)* in person.
13. *(Name of favorite influencer)* would fit well with my group of friends.
14. If something happens to *(name of favorite influencer)*, I will feel sad.
15. If *(name of favorite influencer)* lived in my neighborhood we would be friends.

16. I often visit (*name of favorite influencer*) Instagram.
17. I often read (*name of favorite influencer*) posts on Instagram.
18. I often use the “like” option on (*name of favorite influencer*) posts.
19. I often comment on (*name of favorite influencer*) posts.
20. I follow (*name of favorite influencer*) of my interest to get information (e.g. on new products).
  
21. I will buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram.
22. I have the intention to buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram.
23. I am interested in buying products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promoted on Instagram.
24. It is likely that I will buy products that (*name of favorite influencer*) promotes on Instagram in the future.
  
25. What gender do you identify as?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to answer
  
26. What is your age?
  
27. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
  - a. Elementary school
  - b. VMBO
  - c. HAVO
  - d. VWO / Gymnasium
  - e. MBO
  - f. HBO
  - g. WO

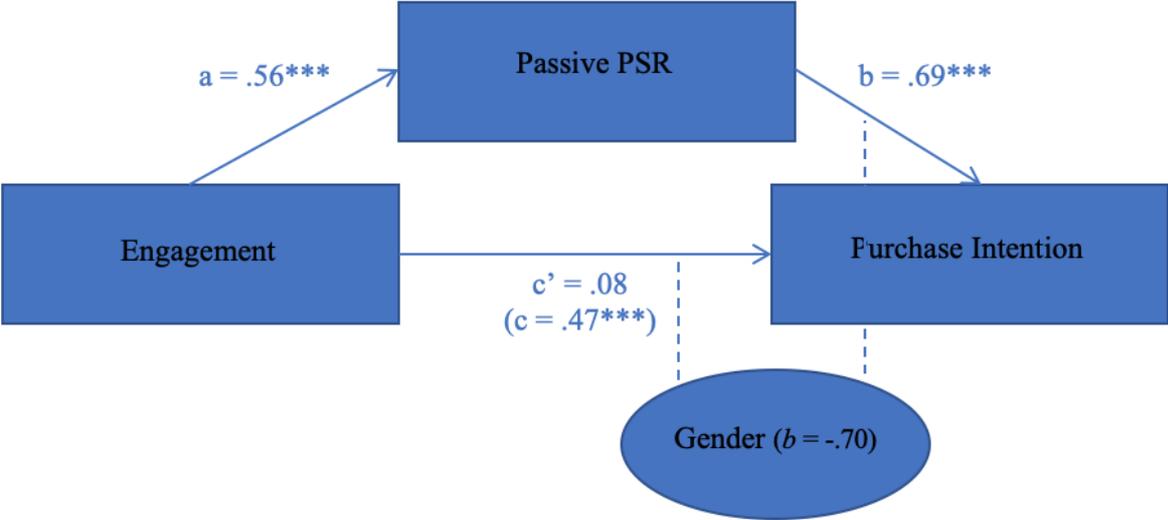
**Appendix IV – Mediation H7a**



**Appendix V – Mediation H7b**



**Appendix VI – Mediation H8a**



**Appendix VII – Mediation H8b**

