Exploring Generation Z's Susceptibility to Social Media Influencers: The Role of Personality Traits and Influencer-Generated Constructs

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Abstract

In the digital age, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have become influential figures, shaping the consumption patterns and behaviours of the younger generation, particularly Generation Z. This study delves into the complex dynamics of susceptibility to SMI influence, considering the formation of parasocial relationships, consumer trust, and individuals' perceptions of SMIs. The study employs the HEXACO framework, which categorises personality traits into six dimensions, to understand their influence on susceptibility to SMI influence. The research formulates and tests two hypotheses: (1) the constructs derived from the Susceptibility to Social Media Influencers Scale (SUSIS) effectively represent SMI influence, and (2) certain HEXACO personality traits correspond significantly to SMI influenceability, as represented by SUSIS Questionnaire constructs. HEXACO personality traits "Honesty-Humility" and "Conscientiousness" were found to be inversely related to susceptibility to SMI influence, while personality traits "Emotionality," "Extraversion," "Agreeableness," and "Openness to Experience" did not show a significant correspondence with susceptibility to SMI influence. The study demonstrated a relationship between personality traits and susceptibility to SMI influence, indicating that individuals high in Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness were less susceptible to SMI influence. This research fills a significant gap in the literature by providing insights into the interplay between personality traits and susceptibility to SMI influence in the context of Generation Z, paving the way for a deeper understanding of influencer marketing and its impact on young consumers.

Keywords: Personality Traits, Social Media Influencers, Generation Z, Susceptibility, Parasocial Relationships, Consumer Trust, SMI Influence, Irish Context.

Introduction

In the digital age, the emergence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) has transformed the dynamics of information dissemination and consumption (Breves *et al.,* 2021). These SMIs, often young and relatable individuals, have harnessed the power of social media to gather a large number of followers, making them influential figures, particularly among the Generation Z demographic (Acoba *et al.,* 2018). Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has grown up in the era of pervasive social media, actively engaging with various online platforms and becoming a primary target for SMI influence (Breves *et al.,* 2021; Ki *et al.,* 2020).

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SMIs use their digital presence to share content, promote products, and shape public discourse on various subjects. As SMIs continue to ascend in the digital realm, it becomes essential to examine the extent and nature of their influence on Generation Z. This study seeks to comprehensively explore Generation Z's susceptibility to SMI influence, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics that underlie this phenomenon (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Susceptibility to SMI influence is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including the formation of parasocial relationships, consumer trust, and individuals' perceptions of SMIs (Yuan *et al.,* 2016). Parasocial relationships, traditionally studied in the context of celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956), have evolved within the digital landscape as young individuals form deep connections with SMIs through their online content (Adamopoulos, Ghose & Todri, 2018). Influencers now build what Lou (2022) terms "trans-parasocial relationships," characterised by increased interactivity and perceived intimacy. These connections are especially strong among young audiences who often perceive influencers as friends or trusted confidants (Pretorius *et al.,* 2022). As Hudders & Lou (2023) emphasise, these parasocial dynamics function as both emotional bridges and commercial mechanisms, leading followers to ascribe authenticity and benevolence to influencers' recommendations. In fact, the levels of consumer trust might be enhanced; this is a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing and plays a role in shaping the impact of SMIs on young individuals (Breves *et al.,* 2019). This study aims to investigate how these factors compose the SMIs influence, examining the interrelationship between trust, parasocial relationship, and SMI influence (De Veirman *et al.,* 2017; Eyal, 2018).

At the same time, the dual nature of SMIs must be acknowledged. While they inspire, entertain, and inform, their portrayal of idealised lifestyles and curated content may foster unrealistic comparisons, negative self-evaluations, and even psychological harm (De Veirman *et al.,* 2019; Hudders & Lou, 2023). As such, the influencer's role is not solely one of benign promotion; it encompasses a "bright and dark side," demanding greater scholarly attention to the ethical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of influence (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the intricate relationship between personality traits and susceptibility to influence by social media influencers. Specifically, it aimed to shed light on the personality traits, including 1 - Honesty-Humility, 2 - Emotionality, 3 - Extraversion, 4 - Agreeableness, 5 - Conscientiousness, and 6 - Openness to Experience, that helps in determining an individual's vulnerability to the persuasive impact of social media influencers (Janis, 1954). To address this research problem comprehensively, the study formulated two hypotheses grounded in an extensive literature review and theories encompassing personality, para-social relationships, and consumer trust. These hypotheses sought to validate the effectiveness of the SUSIS questionnaire in representing SMI influence constructs, as well as to ascertain the specific personality traits that significantly correlate with susceptibility to SMI influence (Alves de Castro, 2023). In essence, this research sought to elucidate the underlying mechanisms driving influencer susceptibility, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon's significance in contemporary society.

To comprehensively address these aspects, this research employs Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to validate the "SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social Media Influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire" (Available in Supplementary Material). Through SEM analysis, the study seeks to ascertain the validity and reliability of constructs representing SMI influence, specifically, SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, as derived from the SUSIS questionnaire (Vagias, 2006; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

Furthermore, this study fills a crucial gap in the literature by focusing on the Irish context, where limited research has explored the impact of SMIs on young people and their susceptibility to influence. The research not only offers insights into the marketing implications of SMI influence but also sheds light on its broader societal implications concerning youth identity formation, socialisation, and consumer behaviour (Pradhan *et al.,* 2022).

In summary, this research contributes to the evolving field of personality research, providing a comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's susceptibility to SMI influence, and unveiling the determinants and nuances of this influence (Janis, 1954). These findings have implications not only for marketing professionals but also for scholars and policymakers, offering valuable insights into a phenomenon that is shaping contemporary youth culture (Breves *et al.,* 2019).

Theoretical Background of the Study

The rise of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) has significantly reshaped how information is consumed and shared, particularly among digital-native cohorts like Generation Z. These influencers, known for their accessible personas and highly engaging content, exert a profound effect on the attitudes and behaviours of their followers (Breves *et al.,* 2019). With their pervasive involvement in social networks, Generation Z users are especially responsive to influencer-driven content (Kim & Kim, 2021).

To understand SMI influence in depth, it is essential to examine the underlying psychological mechanisms that facilitate it. A key factor is the development of parasocial relationships, one-sided emotional attachments traditionally observed between media consumers and celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the context of social media, these relationships have evolved into what Lou (2022) defines as trans-parasocial relationships, marked by heightened interactivity, perceived intimacy, and emotional closeness. These connections are intensified by the continuous exposure to influencers' personal content, leading audiences to experience a sense of familiarity and trust (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Pretorius *et al.,* 2022). Such trust is important in shaping followers' receptivity to influencer messages, particularly in marketing contexts (Breves *et al.,* 2019; De Veirman *et al.,* 2017; Eyal, 2018). As a result, parasocial ties not only enhance engagement but also mediate the persuasive potential of influencers (Adamopoulos, Ghose & Todri, 2018; De Veirman *et al.,* 2019).

The HEXACO framework, a relatively recent categorisation of personality traits, offers valuable insights into understanding the influence of personality on various aspects of human life (Ashton & Lee, 2007; De Vries, 2013). HEXACO encompasses six dimensions: 1 - Honesty-Humility, 2 - Emotionality, 3 - Extraversion, 4 - Agreeableness, 5 - Conscientiousness, and 6 - Openness to Experience (Ashton *et al.,* 2014). These dimensions provide a nuanced view of personality, shedding light on how personality traits may influence susceptibility to SMI influence (Ashton *et al.,* 2006).

Previous research has indicated that personality traits can affect workplace behaviours, including risk propensity, sexual harassment, workplace delinquency, psychopathy, and egoism (Lee *et al.,* 2005; Van Gelder & De Vries, 2012). As the recognition of the HEXACO framework grows in explaining human behaviour, this study applies the HEXACO framework to assess its validity in understanding susceptibility to SMI influence. This susceptibility might happen not only regarding regular content but also related to potentially harmful content that SMIs can promote. In addition to that, the theory of personality might recognise vulnerable traits that can be more influenced than others.

While SMIs have emerged as powerful agents of connection, branding, and consumer engagement, it is equally critical to examine their potential to negatively impact followers' psychological and emotional well-being. Recent research emphasises this duality: while SMIs foster authenticity and connection, they may also contribute to heightened social comparison, materialism, body dissatisfaction, and mental health struggles, particularly among vulnerable audiences (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020; Hudders & Lou, 2023). The curated nature of influencer content, frequently portraying idealised lifestyles and unattainable standards, can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and foster unrealistic aspirations (Huber *et al.,* 2022). De Veirman *et al.* (2019) argue that this dual role positions influencers as both authentic peers and strategic marketers, thereby complicating followers' ability to critically evaluate persuasive content. Consequently, the influencer phenomenon embodies a paradox: it simultaneously empowers, endangers, connects, isolates, informs, and misleads. Recognising these contradictory effects is essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of SMI influence and for designing interventions that mitigate harm while preserving engagement.

Literature Review

The concept of personality, deeply rooted in human history, plays a fundamental role in shaping individual behaviour and responses (Janis, 1954). Its etymology, stems from the Greek words "Per" and "Sonare," eventually culminating in the term "Persona," which originally referred to the masks worn by actors to represent different characters in ancient Greek theatre. These masks symbolised two facets of personality: one, the actor's portrayal of character traits, and two, the notion that an individual's actions may not always align with their inherent personality (Cooper, 2002; Maltby, Day, & Macaskill, 2017).

Personality, as per the American Psychological Association (APA), encompasses two broad dimensions: understanding individual differences in specific personality characteristics and comprehending how these individual traits combine to form a complete personality profile (American Psychological Association, 2022). It is, therefore, a multifaceted and intricate field of study, with one's personality often classified into two primary categories: optimism and pessimism. Optimistic individuals tend to exhibit positive thinking and hopeful attitudes, while pessimistic individuals are characterised by excessive self-awareness and a reluctance to engage in challenging situations (Cooper, 2002; Maltby, Day, & Macaskill, 2017).

Warr (1999) defines personality as the enduring trait of an individual that influences long-term emotional responses and visceral reactions. Personality traits are enduring patterns of behaviour, emotion, motivation, and cognition that manifest consistently in individuals (Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002). These traits are instrumental in shaping an individual's internal life, impacting aspects such as social boldness, sincerity, humanity, modesty, and forgiveness, all of which contribute significantly to their overall personality (Abu-Raiya, 2014).

The HEXACO personality model, central to our study, expands upon the well-established Big Five-Factor model by introducing the "H" factor, which pertains to honesty-humility (Mata *et al.,* 2021). The HEXACO model encompasses six distinct factors for assessing an individual's personality traits, as per the descriptions below.

Honesty-Humility: Individuals scoring high in this dimension are characterised by their honesty-humility, refraining from exploiting others for personal gain or success. They adhere to ethical standards and do not seek pretentious status (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014).

Emotionality: This factor encompasses traits such as fearfulness, anxiety, dependence, and sentimentality. Individuals high in emotionality are emotionally sensitive and value emotional connections in their relationships (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014).

Extraversion: This factor represents positive traits like self-confidence, sociability, and a preference for social interaction. Extraverted individuals are energetic, enthusiastic, and enjoy social gatherings (Hakimi, Hejazi, & Lavasani, 2011).

Agreeableness (versus Anger): Individuals high in agreeableness exhibit gentleness, forgiveness, flexibility, and patience. They are empathetic, willing to cooperate, and treat others with respect (Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014).

Conscientiousness: Conscientious individuals are organised, diligent, and exhibit a high degree of self-discipline. They are goal-oriented, deliberate, and excel in decision-making (Ashton & Lee, 2010).

Openness to Experience: This dimension reflects traits such as aesthetic appreciation, inquisitiveness, creativity, and unconventionality. Open individuals are receptive to new experiences, often exploring innovative avenues in various aspects of life (Hakimi, Hejazi, & Lavasani, 2011).

The HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (HEXACO-PI-R), a 60-item scale developed by Ashton & Lee (2009), serves as the measurement instrument for assessing these six dimensions of personality. It comprises four underlying facets for each domain, resulting in a total of 24 observed variables/facets. These facets are scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

Studies have shown that an individual's susceptibility to interpersonal influence is intricately linked to their personality (Hoffmann & Broekhuizen, 2009). Janis (1954) highlighted that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to persuasion, underscoring the impact of personality on vulnerability to influence. However, when examining the influence of personality traits on word-of-mouth (WoM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM), there is still a gap in understanding this relationship (Tapanainen, Dao & Nguyen, 2021). Recent research conducted by König *et al.* (2022) sought to bridge the gap in understanding how personality traits affect susceptibility to social media influencers (SMIs). Their study was grounded in the Big Five personality trait model, which includes Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. König *et al.* found that individuals with higher levels of emotional stability, openness to new experiences, and conscientiousness tended to be less susceptible to SMI influence, as these traits contribute to more autonomous and deliberate decision-making.

To support and contrast these findings, Adamopoulos, Ghose, & Todri (2018) reported that introverted individuals, often assumed to be less socially engaged, were actually more responsive to electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) and influencer content than their extroverted counterparts, suggesting that extraversion alone may not consistently predict susceptibility.

The concept of emotional stability, as defined in the Big Five model, refers to individuals who are calm, resilient, and less prone to anxiety or mood swings. This differs from the HEXACO model's "Emotionality" trait, which includes a greater focus on empathy and sentimentality. While the two traits share similarities, the HEXACO's Emotionality places greater emphasis on affective attachment, making the distinction crucial for theoretical clarity.

Further supporting the notion of trait-based differences in susceptibility, Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky (2010) found that individuals with lower emotional stability are more likely to use the internet as a tool to reduce loneliness and seek social validation, making them more open to influencer guidance. Likewise, Butt

& Phillips (2008) observed that individuals high in openness to new experiences tend to explore novel content independently and are less reliant on external recommendations, potentially lowering their susceptibility to SMI persuasion.

Regarding conscientiousness, the findings are more nuanced. Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky (2010) suggest that conscientious individuals, who value order and self-discipline, may perceive social media as a distraction and therefore be less influenced by SMIs. However, Hughes *et al.* (2012) noted that some conscientious individuals use social media for information-seeking purposes, which may still expose them to influencer content, though likely with a more critical mindset.

In summary, while König *et al.* (2022) assert that high levels of extraversion, emotional stability, openness to experience, and conscientiousness generally buffer against susceptibility to SMIs, a broader body of research reveals that personality traits may influence susceptibility in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, depending on contextual and platform-specific factors.

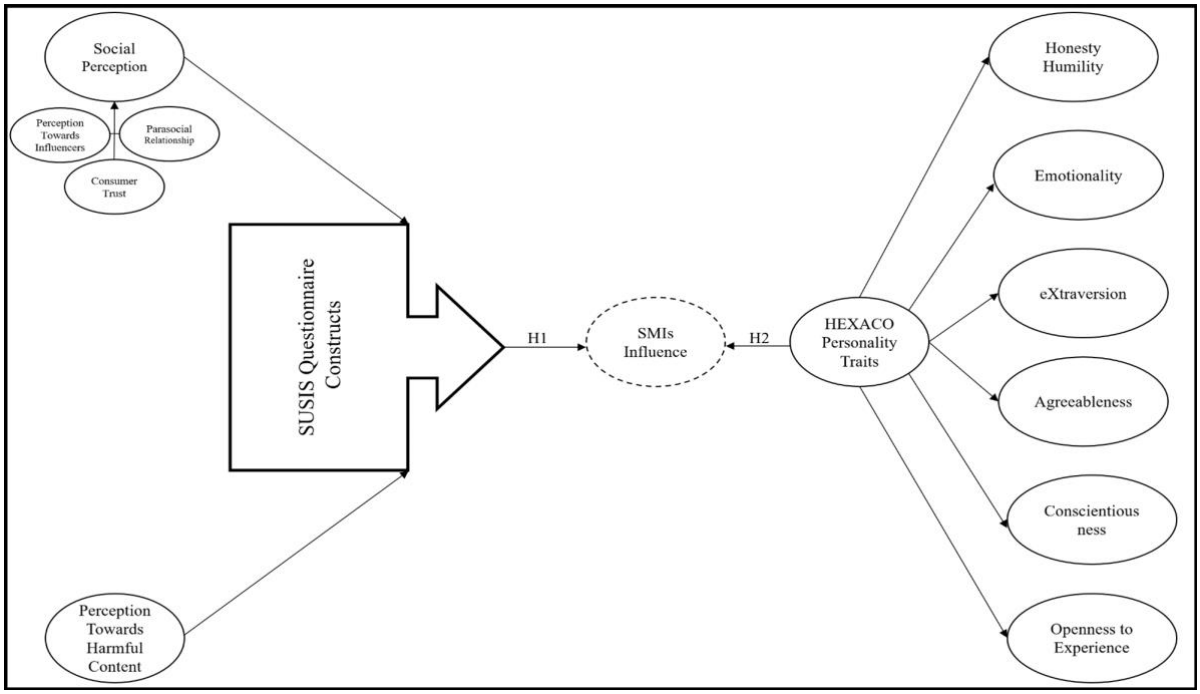
Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the model underpinning this investigation. It highlights the intricate interplay between SOCIAL_PERCEPTION, HARMFUL, and HEXACO personality traits.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the model that was tested in this investigation, which aims to understand the personality traits associated with susceptibility to influence by social media influencers. The framework includes constructs such as social perception (related to perception towards influencers, parasocial relationships, and consumer trust) and harmful content.

It suggests that personality traits, specifically those from the HEXACO model (1 - Honesty-Humility, 2 - Emotionality, 3 - Extraversion, 4 - Agreeableness, 5 - Conscientiousness, and 6 - Openness to Experience), may correspond to susceptibility to SMIs' influence.

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework



Source: Elaborated by the Author

The construct of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION encompasses individuals' intricate web of perceptions regarding SMIs. These perceptions encapsulate the extent to which individuals admire, identify with, or are influenced by SMIs. It revolves around the image, values, and persona projected by SMIs on various social media platforms (Chung & Cho, 2017).

SMIs wield substantial influence, largely derived from their adeptness at projecting compelling personas on social media. These personas resonate with their followers, who often perceive SMIs as relatable, aspirational, or trustworthy. The ability of SMIs to create and maintain these personas hinges on several factors, including authenticity, relatability, and credibility (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Authenticity is a cornerstone of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION. Followers are drawn to SMIs who present their genuine selves and authentic experiences. When SMIs share personal stories, challenges, and vulnerabilities, followers perceive them as more authentic, fostering a deeper sense of connection and trust (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004).

SMIs who effectively mirror the experiences, interests, or aspirations of their followers enhance their relatability. Such relatability forms the basis for individuals to perceive SMIs as role models, thereby increasing their susceptibility to influence (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Credibility is another component of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION. SMIs often collaborate with brands or endorse products, and their credibility can be a driver in the success of these partnerships. When SMIs are perceived as credible and knowledgeable in their niche, their recommendations hold more sway over their followers (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Therefore, in the context of this research and based on previous research, the influence of SMIs can be understood through these two distinct constructs: SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, each representing opposite poles of the influencer effect. The SOCIAL_PERCEPTION construct refers to the positive or no harm impact of SMIs on followers, encompassing attributes such as credibility, authenticity, attractiveness, and expertise (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Yuan & Lou, 2020). These perceived qualities enhance trust and emotional engagement, encouraging followers to view influencers as relatable, persuasive figures (Hudders & Lou, 2023).

In contrast, the HARMFUL construct captures the negative consequences associated with exposure to certain types of influencer content (Alves de Castro, 2022). This dimension assesses the extent to which content shared by SMIs may influence attitudes and behaviours in detrimental ways (Yuan & Lou, 2020). While SMIs are often admired for inspiring or entertaining their audiences, their content may also have unintended adverse effects.

The psychological impact of harmful SMI content is particularly concerning. Studies have shown that continuous exposure to highly curated, idealised portrayals of life can lead to negative social comparison, fostering emotions such as envy, low self-esteem, and even depression (Vogel *et al.,* 2014). This harm is intensified when followers internalise unrealistic standards portrayed by influencers, potentially damaging their self-image and emotional well-being.

Additionally, the behavioural dimension of the HARMFUL construct refers to how followers may adopt unhealthy or risky practices modelled or endorsed by influencers. Examples include the promotion of fad diets, excessive alcohol consumption, or dangerous stunts and games, all of which may inadvertently encourage followers, especially impressionable youth, to engage in behaviours that compromise their physical or mental health (Coates *et al.*, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

By explicitly distinguishing SOCIAL_PERCEPTION as a positive influence and HARMFUL as a negative one, this study acknowledges the dual role of SMIs. They simultaneously operate as sources of motivation and risk, shaping followers' lives in both constructive and detrimental ways. Understanding this balance is essential to unpacking the nuanced nature of SMI influence and its implications for young audiences.
Given the multifaceted nature of SMI influence and the roles of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL constructs, we posit the following hypotheses:
H1: The set of constructs formed by the SUSIS questionnaire sufficiently represents SMI's influence.

This hypothesis (H1) suggests that the SUSIS questionnaire, which incorporates dimensions related to SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL constructs, comprehensively captures the spectrum of SMI influence, including both its positive and negative aspects.

H2: There are HEXACO personality traits that significantly correspond to SMI's influence, representable by the constructs obtained by the SUSIS questionnaire.

This hypothesis (H2) postulates that HEXACO personality traits, 1 - Honesty-Humility, 2 - Emotionality, 3 - Extraversion, 4 - Agreeableness, 5 - Conscientiousness, and 6 - Openness to Experience, play a substantial role in shaping susceptibility to SMI influence, as measured by the constructs within the SUSIS questionnaire. These personality traits interact with SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL constructs to influence the extent to which individuals are susceptible to SMI influence. Additionally, this research aims to answer the following research question: *"What personality traits are associated with susceptibility to influence by social media influencers?"*

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Data Collection

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate the relationships, if any, between susceptibility to Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and personality traits among a young population in Ireland. This research was carried out between September 2020 and September 2024, and the data was collected between 2021 and 2022. It is worth noting that the global COVID-19 pandemic imposed several challenges in collecting data, such as accessing a larger sample.
A cross-sectional survey approach was employed to collect data, enabling the analysis of multiple variables measured at a single point in time (Dillman *et al.*, 2014). Participant selection was performed using homogeneous purposive sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process, and no personally identifiable information was collected.
Personality traits were measured using the HEXACO Personality Inventory, 60 Items Version (Ashton *et al.*, 2014), a method previously validated in the literature and widely used worldwide for this purpose. The HEXACO Personality Inventory includes six dimensions: 1 - Honesty-Humility (HHUM), 2 - Emotionality (EMOT), 3 - eXtraversion (EXTRV), 4 - Agreeableness (AGREE), 5 - Conscientiousness (CONS), and 6 - Openness to Experience (OPEX). Participants responded to 60 items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

To measure the influence, data were collected using a structured questionnaire - SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social media influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire (Alves de Castro, 2023). The questions and variables in the SUSIS Questionnaire were meticulously crafted by drawing upon insights from extensive literature reviews, with the primary objective of comprehending the susceptibility of young individuals to the influence of SMIs. Questions were also specifically designed to address gaps identified in the existing literature and the full questionnaire can be found in the Supplementary Material.

In constructing the SUSIS questionnaire, we leveraged well-established and validated sources (Vagias, 2006; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021), thoughtfully adapting questions to ensure their relevance and reliability, as suggested by Saunders *et al.* (2019).

Questions were then rigorously reviewed and refined to align with the research objectives (Bryman, 2004). Central to the questionnaire is the utilisation of Likert scales, a valuable tool for assessing respondents' attitudes, behaviours, and opinions, where respondents express their level of agreement with specific statements (De Vaus, 2014), chosen for their functionality and appropriateness to the situation.

The conceptual model (Figure 1) of this study comprises two constructs directly related to the SUSIS Questionnaire: Social Perception and Perception Towards Harmful Content. Social Perception encompasses three elements: Perception Towards Influencers, Parasocial Relationships, and Consumer Trust; Perception Towards Harmful Content encompasses 28 distinct categories of harmful content posted online, as categorised in a previous comprehensive critical review analysis (Alves de Castro *et al.,* 2022).

At this stage, the HEXACO inventory was added to the conceptual framework, since personality theory is a vital element in this study. It is crucial to emphasise that the HEXACO questionnaire, a well-established instrument, has already undergone a rigorous validation process. Therefore, there was no need for additional factor analysis or validation procedures for this particular instrument.

The SUSIS Questionnaire and the HEXACO Inventory 60 Items version were printed, handed out in educational institutions, and applied face-to-face. The decision to meet participants in person and distribute the forms was influenced by the nature of the sample population (De Vaus, 2014).

The brain continues to mature throughout an individual's early- to mid-20s (Johnson *et al.*, 2009; Sowell *et al.*, 2001), particularly in regions responsible for executive functions (Johnson *et al.*, 2009; Sowell *et al.,* 2001), leading some to be easily sidetracked in educational settings (Dumontheil *et al.*, 2010).

Direct interaction with the researcher and a paper-based questionnaire could thereby enhance concentration; moreover, this may also create a rapport between the students and the researcher, potentially reducing fraudulent responses resulting from the length and intricacy of the questionnaires (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This approach also allowed the researchers to ensure that the questionnaire was entirely and correctly filled in, bolstering reliability and completeness (Therapy, Speech and Language Department NHS, 2020).

Construct Validation and Statistical Analysis

The validation process of the SUSIS questionnaire involved a rigorous statistical approach. First, an extensive factor analysis was conducted using SPSS, encompassing the full, original questionnaire, comprising 112 indicators. To determine the suitability of data for factor analysis, measures such as the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were applied.

The KMO index, ranging from 0 to 1, recommends a minimum value of approximately 0.6 for a robust factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996), while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirms the significance of the data ($p < 0.05$). Items failing to meet these criteria were eliminated. Subsequently, a Principal Component Analysis scrutinised the commonalities of the remaining items, revealing notably high commonality values. Only items with a total variance approximating 0.70 were retained, whereas 25 of the original 112 indicators were used for subsequent analyses. These indicators underwent Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to fortify the validity and reliability of the refined SUSIS questionnaire.

The relationship among the variables was established using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which encompasses various modelling techniques, including Covariance Analysis of Structure (CAS), Latent Variable Analysis (LVA), Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA), and Path Analysis (PA). SEM allows for the simultaneous analysis of multiple dependency relations, making it particularly valuable when a dependent variable becomes independent in subsequent dependency relations (Mueller, 1997; Maciel *et al.*, 2014).

Construct quality was measured through reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Reliability measures the strength of the relationship between latent variables and observable indicators. For this study, we considered factor loadings as indicators of reliability.

According to Hulland (1999), factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.708 are considered strong. Internal consistency examines how well the indicators within a construct are interrelated.

Two criteria, RhoC and Cronbach's α, were employed to assess internal consistency. According to Diamantopoulos *et al.* (2012), reliability is acceptable when RhoC is between 0.6 and 0.95, and Cronbach's α is greater than 0.7. Convergent validity assesses the extent to which a construct adequately converges to explain the variance of its indicators. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used to measure convergent validity. According to Hair *et al.* (2022), AVE values exceeding 0.5 are considered acceptable.

Discriminant validity evaluates the extent to which a construct is distinct from others. Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2015) suggest that discriminant validity is achieved when the heterotrait/monotrait ratio (HT/MT) is less than 0.9.

Results

Participants and Evaluation of the Sample Size

The inverse square root method was created by Kock & Hadaya (2018). This method assumes a normal distribution and is suitable for models with continuous variables.

The formula used to calculate the minimum sample size is:

$$N > (Z\alpha/2 + Z\beta)^2 / \Delta 2$$

A confidence interval of 95% was used, therefore $Z\alpha/2 = 1.96$; and a power level of 80% was chosen, which means that $Z\beta = 0.84$. We used a previously calculated value for Δ, which is 0.377. This value is above the threshold for a meaningful effect size to detect in the context of the Structural Equation Model (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). Therefore, the minimum sample size of 55 is to ensure adequate power for the analyses based on the chosen confidence interval, power level, and effect size, below the sample size in this study of 91.

$$N > (2.486/0.377)^2$$

$$N > 55 \text{ (sample size)}$$

No missing data points were present in this study, so no corrections for missing values were necessary. The Structural Equation Model was analysed considering 4 aspects: Reliability, Internal Consistency, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity.

The study's participants consisted of 91 young students (aged 18-26) living in Ireland. This age group was chosen as it represents Generation Z, a demographic known for its extensive use of social media and susceptibility to SMI influence. The sample included individuals from diverse backgrounds and locations across Ireland to enhance the generalisability of the findings. The demographic profile of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 – Demographic Data of Survey Respondents, N=91

General Features	**(*N=91*)**	**%**
Sex		
Female	57	62.6
Male	34	37.4
Age range		
16 - 20 years old	65	71.4
21 - 25 years old	20	22.0
26 years old	6	6.6
What school are you at?		
Secondary School	59	64.8
Private Higher Education Institution	32	35.2
What course of study are you attending?		
Leaving Certificate	35	38.5
Secondary School	17	18.7
Transition Year (TY)	7	7.7
Undergraduate Course	26	28.6
Postgraduate Course	6	6.6

Source: Elaborated by the Author

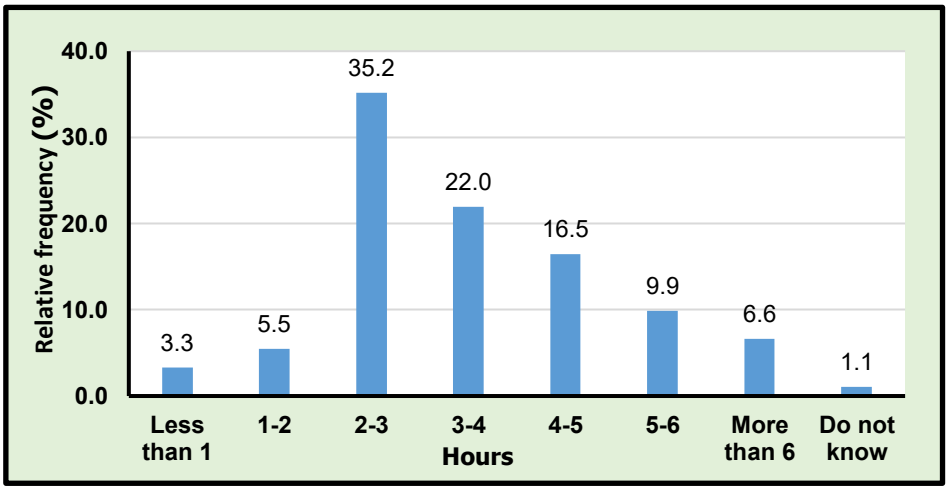
Participants' social media usage patterns were examined through the following aspects: Frequency of Social Media Visits, Daily Time Spent on Social Media and Favourite Social Media Platform.

In terms of the time spent on social media channels visited at least once a week:

- 35.2% of participants reported spending 2-3 hours per day,
- 22% spent 3-4 hours,
- 16.5% spent 4-5 hours,
- 9.9% spent 5-6 hours, and
- 6.6% spent more than 6 hours per day.

Additionally, 5.5% reported spending 1-2 hours, 3.3% spent less than 1 hour, and 1.1% did not know (Graph 1).

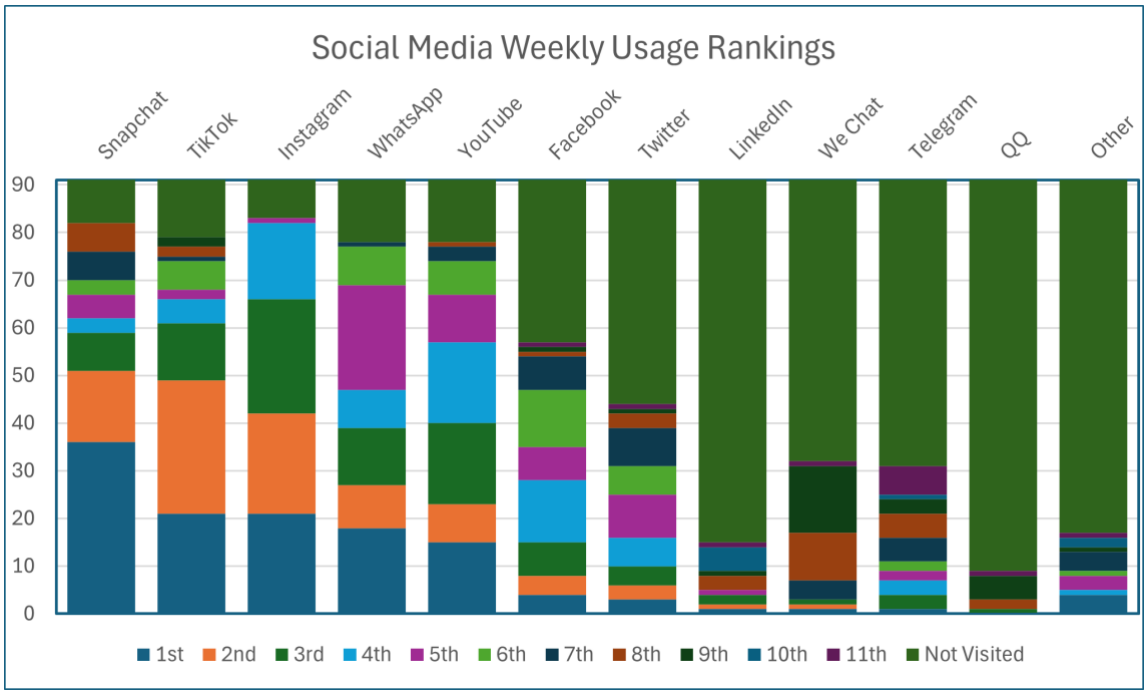
Graph 1 - Daily Time Spent on Social Media



Source: Elaborated by the Author

Participants were then asked to rank the social media channels they most frequently visit at least once a week. The top five most frequently visited channels are Snapchat (39.6%), TikTok (23.1%), Instagram (23.1%), WhatsApp (19.8%), and YouTube (16.5%). Facebook (4.4%) and Twitter (3.3%) were less frequently visited by this group, and LinkedIn (1.1%), WeChat (1.1%), Telegram (1.1%), and other channels (4.4%) also received mentions.

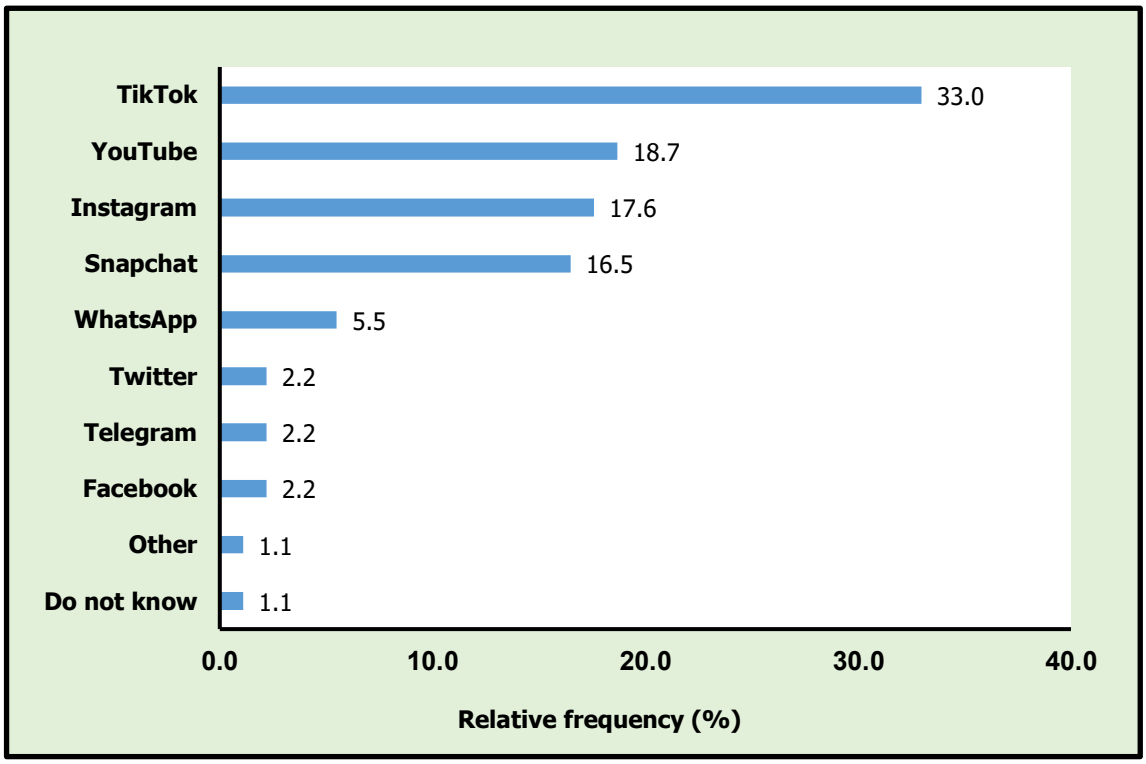
Graph 2 - Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms with at Least Weekly Access by Respondents



Source: Elaborated by the Author

Finally, when asked about their favourite social media platform by overall preference, 33% of participants cited TikTok, followed by YouTube (18.7%), Instagram (17.6%), Snapchat (16.5%), and WhatsApp (5.5%). Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, other platforms, and "Do not know" were responses by less than 5% of respondents each (Graph 3).

Graph 3 - Favourite Social Media Platform



Source: Elaborated by the Author

The demographic and social media usage information provided above serves as a foundation for understanding the sample characteristics and investigating their relevance to susceptibility to SMI influence, as examined in the study.

Data Analysis and Results

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed to analyse the relationships between susceptibility to SMI influence (measured by SUSIS) and personality traits (HEXACO dimensions), testing the research hypotheses and evaluating the associations among variables. Hypotheses were tested by examining path coefficients and p-values from the SEM analysis. Hypothesis 1 examined whether the constructs formed by the SUSIS questionnaire sufficiently represented SMI's influence, while Hypothesis 2 investigated the correspondence between HEXACO personality traits and SMI's influence (Section 4).

Table 2 shows data regarding which constructs passed the threshold of acceptability for reliability by factor loading values greater than 0.708; internal consistency by RhoC values between 0.6 and 0.95 and Cronbach's α values greater than 0.7; convergent validity by AVE values above 0.5; and discriminant validity by HT/MT

ratios over 0.9 (Table 2). While all constructs presented acceptable reliability, internal consistency, and discriminant validity, SOCIAL_PERCEPTION, HARMFUL, and INFLUENCE_SMIs displayed relatively lower convergent validity, suggesting the need for careful interpretation when analysing these constructs.

Table 2 - Rho C values and Cronbach's α

Construct	Rho C	Cronbach's α	AVE	HT/MT
C1_Perception	0.761	0.743	0.670 (acceptable)	
C3_Parasocial	0.794	0.776	0.689 (acceptable)	
C4_Trust	0.920	0.918	0.859 (acceptable)	
H_ADDICTIVE	0.966	0.948	0.906 (acceptable)	
H_WRONGFUL	0.832	0.831	0.747 (acceptable)	
H_FRAUDULENT	0.852	0.830	0.750 (acceptable)	
H_NOXIOUS	0.815	0.795	0.709 (acceptable)	
H_DELUSORY	0.803	0.802	0.717 (acceptable)	
SOCIAL_PERCEPTION	0.837	0.829	0.429 (low)	0.879 (acceptable)
HARMFUL	0.913	0.907	0.407 (low)	1.013 (above acceptable)
INFLUENCE_SMIs	0.920	0.912	0.311 (low)	0.528 (acceptable)

Source: Elaborated by the Author

Exogenous variables are the independent variables, while endogenous variables are the dependent variables in the SEM model – please see the supplementary materials section for more information.

The final SUSIS questionnaire consisted of 25 indicators and 2 convergence areas.

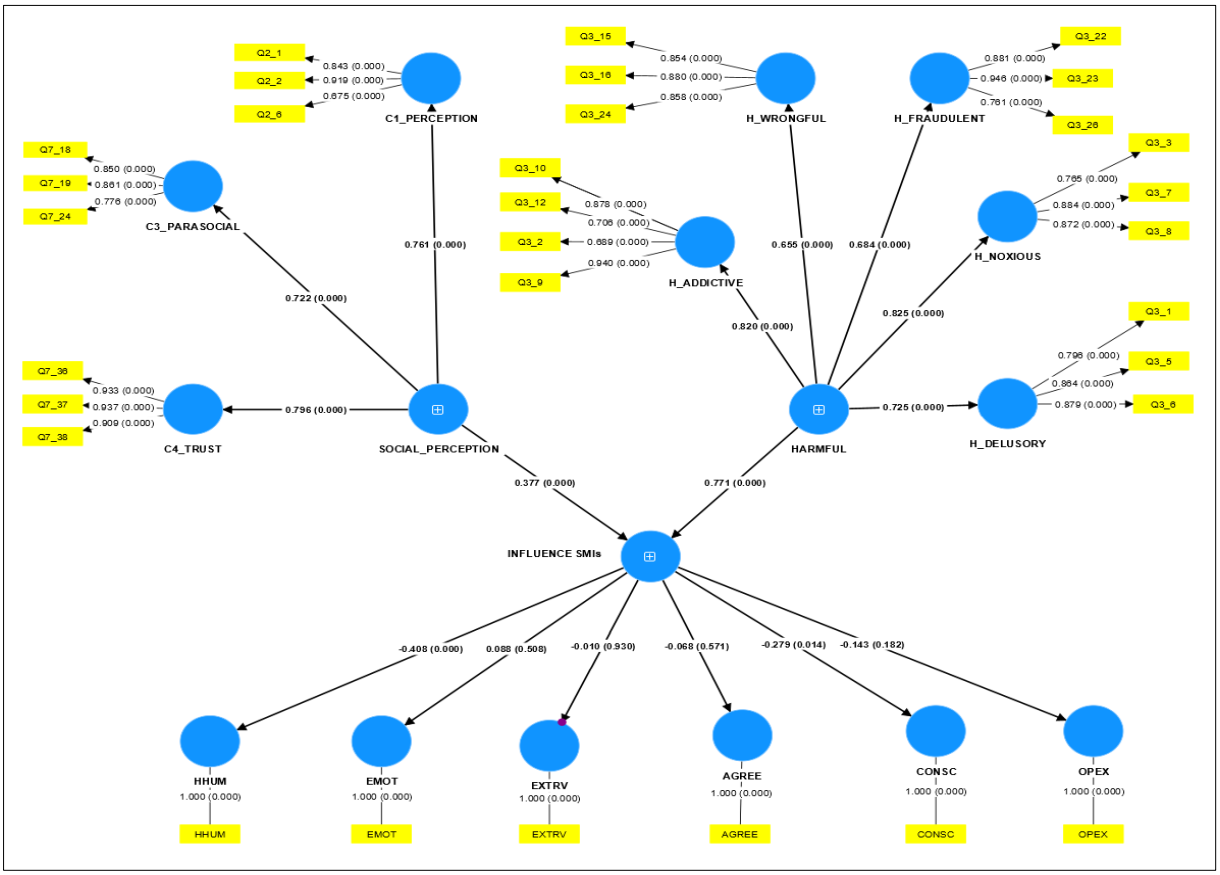
Additionally, the integration of HEXACO personality traits into the model demonstrated a strong association, confirming that the results of the HEXACO PI 60 items can be integrated into the model.

In SEM models, measurement theory specifies how measured variables represent latent constructs logically and systematically. It defines a series of relationships that explain how measured variables represent latent constructs that are not directly measured (Mueller, 1997; Maciel *et al.*, 2014).

The results of the SEM analysis, including path coefficients and p-values, are visualized in Figure 2.

All p-values were generated by SmartPLS and were found to be less than 0.0005, indicating high statistical significance and were shown as 0.000 in this figure.

Figure 2 - Overview of the SEM, with Path Coefficients and p-values



Source: Elaborated by the Author

Analysis of Hypothesis 1:

a) Premise X: The relationship between SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and INFLUENCE_SMIs is indicated by path coefficient = 0.377 and p < 0.0005, highly significant, thereby confirming the confidence of this relationship.

b) Premise Y: The relationship between HARMFUL and INFLUENCE_SMIs is indicated by path coefficient = 0.771 and p < 0.0005, highly significant, thereby confirming the confidence of this relationship.

Since premises X and Y are confirmed above, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Analysis of Hypothesis 2:

a) The relationship between HHUM and INFLUENCE_SMIs presented a path coefficient of -0.408, indicating an inversely proportional relationship, and p = 0.000, indicating statistical significance. Therefore, this personality trait holds interdependence with INFLUENCE_SMIs scores.

b) The relationship between CONS and INFLUENCE_SMIs presented a path coefficient of -0.279, indicating an inversely proportional relationship, and p = 0.014, indicating statistical significance. Therefore, this personality trait holds interdependence with INFLUENCE_SMIs scores.

c) Personality traits EMOT (path coefficient = 0.088; p = 0.508), EXTRV (path coefficient = -0.010; p = 0.930), AGREE (path coefficient = -0.068; p = 0.571), and OPEX (path coefficient = -0.143; p = 0.182) presented low path coefficients and non-significant p-values (p > 0.05), indicating that these personality traits do not correspond with INFLUENCE_SMIs scores.

The SEM analysis demonstrated that two constructs, namely SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, which are composed of twenty-five questions from the SUSIS questionnaire, significantly represent susceptibility to SMI influence. When these constructs were associated with HEXACO personality dimensions, the study confirmed that personality traits Honesty-Humility (HHUM) and Conscientiousness (CONS) were significantly interrelated with INFLUENCE_SMIs scores. On the other hand, the personality traits Emotionality (EMOT), eXtraversion (EXTRV), Agreeableness (AGREE), and Openness to Experience (OPEX) did not correspond with INFLUENCE_SMIs scores.

In conclusion, the SEM analysis provided insights into the relationships among the constructs in the proposed conceptual framework. The path coefficients and p-values indicated statistically significant relationships, contributing to a better understanding of the factors influencing INFLUENCE_SMIs and which personality traits might be more susceptible to this influence.

Discussion

The recent findings from the study delineate the intricate relationship between specific personality traits and susceptibility to Social Media Influencers (SMIs) influence. Upon setting these findings in the context of existing literature, we see both continuities and novel insights.

A key revelation is the significant association between susceptibility to SMI influence and the traits of Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness. Those with elevated levels of these traits displayed reduced vulnerability to the influence of SMIs, resonating with the broader literature that has explored the relationship between personality and susceptibility to external influences (Orchard & Fullwood, 2010; Orchard *et al.*, 2014).

Since Honesty-Humility has associations with increased ethical, moral, and societal awareness, we hypothesise that this overall increase in awareness might serve as a protective buffer against SMI influence. Indeed, individuals with higher moral reasoning levels can resist conforming to external influences more effectively (Helwig, 2006). Conversely, a diminished Honesty-Humility score also correlated with a heightened receptiveness to SMIs, potentially due to an attenuated or underdeveloped ethical framework.

The trait of Conscientiousness, marked by self-discipline and more targeted focus, appears to act as another bulwark against SMI susceptibility. Those high in Conscientiousness may therefore be innately predisposed to treat social media and its swathes of influencer content as secondary or generally inferior sources of information, if not entirely negligible. In another study, conscientiousness was negatively correlated with overall time spent on social media platforms (Lachmann *et al.*, 2018), indicating, at the very least, that social media holds a lesser priority.

Other personality facets, such as Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience, were found to be inconsequential in dictating SMI susceptibility in this study. This is a point of divergence from other studies which have highlighted, for instance, the role of extraversion in predicting social media use (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Nonetheless, this divergence may be explained by the way that social media is used, rather than its simple use or lack thereof.

This study presents some limitations, as the participant data were collected exclusively from Gen Zers in Ireland. This could affect the generalisability to other regions and populations. Moreover, susceptibility to external influences is a difficult concept to measure; it is possible that unconscious and subconscious influences may exist that are not able to be measured by this study's tools. Lastly, other sociodemographic data that were not collected for this study could also influence SMI susceptibility. Regardless, as the intent of this study was to focus on a more global perspective of SMI influenceability, and since the data were collected without any exclusion criteria from the various schools, the conclusions in the current manuscript should be, at minimum, a basic representation of the reality of the sampled population.

This research contributes richly to our understanding of how personality traits intersect with susceptibility to SMI influence. By elucidating the roles of Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness, this study refines our broader comprehension of how SMIs impact youth and navigates the nexus between intrinsic personality factors and SMI influence. Furthermore, this study's importance is accentuated by its emphasis on Ireland, a context often overlooked in prior research, and its concentrated examination of Gen Z, a demographic distinguished for their persistent interaction with social media and resulting possible vulnerability to SMI influence.

Implications and Future Directions

The implications of this research are far-reaching. For marketers, understanding the factors contributing to susceptibility is crucial to efficient marketing strategies and creating more targeted advertising. The role of parasocial relationships and consumer trust in influencing young consumers' behaviour underscores the importance of selecting credible and relatable SMIs for influencer marketing campaigns.

In contrast, in educational contexts, the insights provided by this study can inform the development of media literacy and critical thinking programmes to reduce excessive influence from SMIs and questionable marketing campaigns. Educators can empower young individuals to navigate the digital landscape critically and make informed decisions about the content they encounter.

From a societal perspective, this study highlights the evolving role of SMIs in shaping contemporary youth culture. Policymakers and stakeholders concerned with youth well-being and digital literacy can use these insights to develop initiatives that promote responsible and informed online engagement.

This study also opens the door to further research in the field of susceptibility to SMI influence. Future studies can explore the applicability of the HEXACO personality framework in different cultural contexts and age groups, expanding our understanding of how personality traits interact with SMI influence. This would also provide more information about the possibility of generalising these conclusions to other populations, revealing what personality traits are most important for SMI susceptibility in individuals belonging to different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic regions.

Lastly, investigating the long-term effects of SMI influence on behaviour and decision-making can provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Exploring the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing and the potential consequences of excessive susceptibility are other avenues for future research.

To conclude, this research contributes to the evolving field of personality research by providing a comprehensive understanding of Generation Z's susceptibility to SMI influence in Ireland. By unveiling the determinants and nuances of this influence, this study offers valuable insights for marketing professionals, educators, policymakers, and scholars. It underscores the importance of responsible and informed online

engagement in an era where SMIs have become undoubtedly influential figures shaping contemporary youth culture.

Conclusions

In the digital age, where social media has become an integral part of daily life, the influence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on Generation Z individuals has taken centre stage. This study sets out to comprehensively investigate the susceptibility of young people to SMI influence, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics that underlie this phenomenon. By employing the SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social media influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire (available in supplementary materials) and integrating the HEXACO personality framework, this research has provided valuable insights into the factors shaping SMI influenceability among Generation Z.

One of the central findings of this study is the confirmation that Generation Z individuals are indeed susceptible to SMI influence and that the level of susceptibility is dependent on certain measurable personality traits. The SUSIS Questionnaire, constructed based on relevant theories and constructs from the literature, was found to effectively measure this susceptibility. The measured constructs of SOCIAL_PERCEPTION and HARMFUL, each composed of a subset of questions in the SUSIS Questionnaire, were both found to significantly represent the extent of SMI influence. This validation underscores the importance of considering perception towards influencers, parasocial relationships, consumer trust, and potential harmful content when assessing susceptibility to SMI influence.

Integrating the HEXACO personality framework into the analysis revealed that two specific traits, Honesty-Humility (HHUM) and Conscientiousness (CONS), significantly correspond to susceptibility. Participants who scored higher in HHUM and CONS demonstrated lower susceptibility to SMI influence. These findings suggest that individuals characterised by high inherent levels of honesty-humility, self-discipline, and focus are less likely to be influenced by SMIs.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its comprehensive exploration of susceptibility to SMI influence, particularly among Generation Z individuals. This study delves deeper by focusing on a specific demographic and using the SUSIS questionnaire, which was validated to effectively measure susceptibility. By doing so, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how young individuals perceive and respond to SMI content.

Finally, it is important to mention that this study is subject to limitations. The cross-sectional design does not establish causality, and the findings are limited to a single point in time. The use of self-reported measures may also introduce response biases. Additionally, the sample primarily represents young adults in Ireland, limiting the generalisability of findings to other age groups or regions. These limitations reveal other important lines of research to replicate and reinforce the current findings with other geographical regions and populations to determine how these findings are translatable to the general population and how they differ.

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Supplementary Data 1: Rank data for most frequently used social media platforms at least once weekly (N=91 respondents)

Platform	**Snapchat**		**TikTok**		**Instagram**		**WhatsApp**		**YouTube**		**Facebook**		**Twitter**		**LinkedIn**		**We Chat**		**Telegram**		**QQ**		**Other**	
Rank	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
1st	36	39.6	21	23.1	21	23.1	18	19.8	15	16.5	4	4.4	3	3.3	1	1.1	1	1.1	1	1.1	0	0.0	4	4.4
2nd	15	16.5	28	30.7	21	23.1	9	9.9	8	8.8	4	4.4	3	3.3	1	1.1	1	1.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
3rd	8	8.8	12	13.2	24	26.4	12	13.2	17	18.7	7	7.7	4	4.4	2	2.2	1	1.1	3	3.3	1	1.1	0	0.0
4th	3	3.3	5	5.5	16	17.6	8	8.8	17	18.7	13	14.2	6	6.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	3.3	0	0.0	1	1.1
5th	5	5.5	2	2.2	1	1.1	22	24.2	10	11.0	7	7.7	9	9.9	1	1.1	0	0.0	2	2.2	0	0.0	3	3.3
6th	3	3.3	6	6.6	0	0.0	8	8.8	7	7.7	12	13.2	6	6.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	2.2	0	0.0	1	1.1
7th	6	6.6	1	1.1	0	0.0	1	1.1	3	3.3	7	7.7	8	8.8	0	0.0	4	4.4	5	5.5	0	0.0	4	4.4
8th	6	6.6	2	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	1.1	3	3.3	3	3.3	10	11.0	5	5.5	2	2.2	0	0.0
9th	0	0.0	2	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	1.1	1	1.1	14	15.4	3	3.3	5	5.5	1	1.1
10th	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	5.5	0	0.0	1	1.1	0	0.0	2	2.2
11th	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	1.1	1	1.1	1	1.1	6	6.6	1	1.1	1	1.1
Not Visited	9	9.9	12	13.2	8	8.8	13	14.2	13	14.2	34	37.4	47	51.6	76	83.5	59	64.8	60	65.9	82	90.1	74	81.3

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Appendix 1 - Overview of the SEM, with path coefficients and p-values


Q2_1
Q2_2
Q2_6
0.843 (0.000)
0.919 (0.000)
0.675 (0.000)
C1_PERCEPTION
Q7_18
Q7_19
Q7_24
0.850 (0.000)
0.861 (0.000)
0.776 (0.000)
C3_PARASOCIAL
Q7_36
Q7_37
Q7_38
0.933 (0.000)
0.937 (0.000)
0.909 (0.000)
C4_TRUST
SOCIAL_PERCEPTION
Q3_15
Q3_16
Q3_24
0.854 (0.000)
0.880 (0.000)
0.858 (0.000)
H_WRONGFUL
Q3_22
Q3_23
Q3_26
0.881 (0.000)
0.946 (0.000)
0.761 (0.000)
H_FRAUDULENT
Q3_10
Q3_12
Q3_2
Q3_9
0.878 (0.000)
0.706 (0.000)
0.689 (0.000)
0.940 (0.000)
H_ADDICTIVE
Q3_3
Q3_7
Q3_8
0.765 (0.000)
0.884 (0.000)
0.872 (0.000)
H_NOXIOUS
Q3_1
Q3_5
Q3_6
0.798 (0.000)
0.864 (0.000)
0.879 (0.000)
H_DELUSORY
HARMFUL
0.761 (0.000)
0.722 (0.000)
0.796 (0.000)
0.377 (0.000)
0.655 (0.000)
0.684 (0.000)
0.820 (0.000)
0.825 (0.000)
0.725 (0.000)
0.771 (0.000)
INFLUENCE SMIs
-0.408 (0.000)
0.088 (0.508)
-0.010 (0.930)
-0.068 (0.571)
-0.279 (0.014)
-0.143 (0.182)
HHUM
1.000 (0.000)
HHUM
EMOT
1.000 (0.000)
EMOT
EXTRV
1.000 (0.000)
EXTRV
AGREE
1.000 (0.000)
AGREE
CONSC
1.000 (0.000)
CONSC
OPEX
1.000 (0.000)
OPEX