FROM RECEIVERS TO SENDERS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS' SELF-DISCLOSURE LEADS TO POSITIVE WORD OF MOUTH FROM FOLLOWERS

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ABSTRACT

The social media industry is highly competitive, and positive word of mouth (PWOM) plays a key role in social media influencers (SMIs), that is, ordinary individuals who self-disclose personal experiences and opinions through social media platforms, gaining more followers. However, the relationship between self-disclosure (SD) and PWOM and the mechanisms underlying this relationship in the context of SMIs remain unclear. In this study, drawing from social penetration theory and the stimulus–organism–response paradigm, we developed a conceptual model to investigate the aforementioned mechanisms from the perspective of follower-perceived social relationships (i.e., transparency and psychological closeness). A total of 461 valid questionnaires were collected from SMI followers. Structural equation modeling was conducted to evaluate hypothesized associations. The results indicated that the SD of SMIs is associated with followers' perceptions of the transparency and psychological closeness of these SMIs. These factors are also associated with followers' PWOM. Mediation analysis confirmed that transparency and psychological closeness mediate the relationship between SD and PWOM; perceived transparency mediates the relationship between SD and perceived psychological closeness, and perceived psychological closeness mediates the relationship between perceived transparency and PWOM. By understanding the relationships between SD and followers' PWOM and the mechanisms underlying these relationships from the perspectives of transparency and psychological closeness, we provide theoretical insights into the literature on SD and PWOM and offer suggestions for how SMIs can modify their SD practices to elicit PWOM from their followers.

Keywords: Social media influencer (SMI); Self-disclosure (SD); Positive world of mouth (PWOM); Transparency; Psychological closeness

1. Introduction

The development of Web 2.0 has resulted in the creation of new digital tools, including social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn (Sashi et al., 2019). Social media are a wide range of Internet- and mobile-based services that enable users to participate in online communication and present content that they have created. With the rapid development of social media, everybody has been given the opportunity to become an influencer (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017) through self-production of engaging and appealing posts and content (Farivar et al., 2023). Social media influencers (SMIs) are individuals who have gained recognition through the Internet and have come to be well-known on social media (Al-Emadi & Imene, 2020). SMIs are recognized as socially influential individuals (Farivar et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2014) and influence the attitudes and behaviors of their numerous followers (Liu et al., 2020; Wu, 2015). The level of influence exerted by an SMI is determined by their number of followers (Wang &

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Hu, 2021; Farivar et al., 2023). Given that the number of SMIs has rapidly increased, which has enhanced the competitiveness of the industry, SMIs must continually remain aware of the number of followers that they have. Positive word of mouth (PWOM; Song & Kim, 2022) is essential for SMIs because it is one of the most powerful and trusted forms of marketing communication (Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2021). PWOM is a useful means of not only increasing the loyalty of current customers but also attracting new customers (Kalinić et al., 2020). Therefore, eliciting PWOM from the current followers of an SMI can attract new individuals to the SMI's social media page and thereby increase their number of followers (Taillon et al., 2020). Given the importance of PWOM in the future growth of audiences (Swanson & Davis, 2012), eliciting PWOM from current followers is a key challenge for SMI marketers.

SMIs frequently interact with their followers (Chia et al., 2021) by posting textual and visual narrations of their daily life (Taillon et al., 2020) and are particularly known to offer intimacy to their followers through self-disclosure (SD; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). In the context of SMIs, SD is the disclosure of personal experiences and opinions through social media channels (Wang & Hu, 2022). SMIs are ordinary people who self-disclose their personal experiences and opinions through social media; thus, SMIs employ SD as a means of prompting their followers to connect with them (Fernanda & de Paula Baptista, 2022). SD is an introspective and self-centered method of communication and plays a vital role in personal development and the formation of relationships (Knoll & Bronstein, 2014). SD is also key to maintaining interpersonal relationships (Lee et al., 2021a). Researchers investigating SMIs have found that an SMI's SD affects their followers' feelings of intimacy with the SMI (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022), parasocial interaction (Wang & Hu, 2022) and parasocial relationship with the SMI (Chung & Cho, 2017; Fernanda & de Paula Baptista, 2022), attachment to the SMI (Chen et al., 2021), and trust in the SMI (Huang, 2015). Given the essential role of SD in the development and maintenance of the social relationships between SMIs and their followers, SMI marketers must obtain deeper insights into the role of SD in eliciting PWOM from followers.

According to social penetration theory (SPT), the progression of a social relationship involves infiltration of interpersonal interaction (Lin & Chu, 2021). This theory is applicable not only to face-to-face interactions but also to online interactions among virtual members (Yang & Lin, 2023). SPT posits that this infiltration process can be manifested through evolutionary developments (Lin & Chu, 2021). It also posits that disclosure serves as the foundation of social relationships, with the relationships between two parties progressing from a nonintimate to an intimate level primarily through SD (Wu et al., 2022). According to the literature on SPT, SD affects perceptions of interpersonal relationships, including perceptions of transparency (Mohamed & Draz, 2020) and closeness (Posey et al., 2010). Multiple organizational researchers have indicated that opinion leaders use social media to maintain closeness and transparency with others (Ezema et al., 2015) and that leaders who value transparency and closeness with their organization's users can establish a strong presence on social media (Nicolini et al., 2015). Typically, relationships start with SD, and transparency and closeness in the relationship subsequently gradual increase. Transparency reflects the amount of relevant information disclosed in interpersonal interactions (Andrades et al., 2019; Oino, 2019), and closeness reflects the feeling of an individual regarding how close they are to someone (Hartley & Green, 2017). According to marketing researchers, the degree to which a brand is transparent on a social media platform positively affects the amount of PWOM the brand receives from the platform's users (Choi et al., 2018), and psychological closeness affects PWOM (Omer & Mothafar, 2022).

Although transparency and closeness play key roles in establishing social relationships (Errajaa et al., 2013), few empirical studies have examined the mediating roles of transparency and closeness in the relationship between SD and PWOM, particularly in the context of SMIs. According to the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) paradigm, when an individual is exposed to an external stimulus (S), a cognitive and affective state (O) is initiated that results in a behavioral response (R). In the SOR paradigm, the organism is regarded as a mediator of the effect of the stimulus on the response (Li et al., 2022; Asante et al., 2023). According to Lin et al. (2019), SD is an environmental stimulus that triggers an internal state of relationship perception in other individuals, which subsequently induces a behavioral response. To our knowledge, this is the first study to draw on SPT and the SOR paradigm to examine the relationship between SD and PWOM. Specifically, our goal was to develop a conceptual model for understanding the relationship between SD (stimulus) and PWOM (response) for SMIs through two interpersonal relationship factors (organism): perceived transparency and psychological closeness. Overall, our findings may provide SPT and SOR researchers with valuable insights into how SD affects PWOM for SMIs and how SMIs can elicit PWOM through SD strategies in the current, competitive SMI market.

2. Literature Review
2.1. SD, SOR Paradigm, and SPT

SD is defined as a process in which a person discloses information about themselves, such as their name, age, location, or education level (Knoll & Bronstein, 2014), or their experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Knoll & Bronstein, 2014; Lyu et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2019) to another person. According to the SOR paradigm, stimulating cues in an

environment (stimuli) may induce emotional and cognitive states among consumers (organism), consequently affecting their behaviors (response; Lin et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021b). This paradigm is grounded in environmental psychology and has been widely used in the field of consumer behavior to explain the effect of external stimuli on the internal states and behavioral responses of consumers (Shi et al., 2023). Yeh (2023) used the SOR paradigm to determine how interpersonal stimuli affect emotional cognition and response. Lin et al. (2019) also used the SOR paradigm to determine how SD affects perceived cohesion and intimacy. According to SPT, social penetration is a process of relationship development that is achieved through SD (Altman & Taylor, 1973). SD by an individual can lead to more frequent disclosures between the individual and a second party, which can strengthen their relationship (Lei et al., 2023). SPT posits that the strengthening of an interpersonal relationship is dependent on the magnitude and nature of the benefit–cost tradeoff (Posey et al., 2010). Benefits may take the form of reciprocal sharing with relational partners. Therefore, SPT indicates that the advancement of a relationship is dependent on the parties' SD (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social exchange occurs after SD, and subsequently, an intimate relationship is established (Lin & Chu, 2021). Additionally, SPT also holds that people present more of themselves to others when those others share more of their innermost feelings and thoughts with them (Lalatendu, 2022). When people communicate with each other more, they develop a stronger shared foundation of information (Pratt et al., 1999). When an individual discloses information about themself to others, their relationship becomes deeper and more personal (Hwang et al., 2015). In online scenarios, SD can enhance the quality of relationships with other individuals on social media platforms (Um, 2022).Using SPT as a foundation, researchers have found that SD positively affects the perceived enjoyableness of an interaction (Kim & Jang, 2023), the perceived similarity (Malloch & Zhang, 2019) and intimacy (Lin & Chu, 2021) between the two parties, identification (Malloch & Zhang, 2019), and perceived social support (Lei et al., 2023; Malloch & Zhang, 2019). According to the literature on SPT, SD is associated with perceptions of transparency (Mohamed & Draz, 2020) and closeness (Posey et al., 2010). SMIs who choose to disclose information about themselves on social media are generally perceived by their followers to be transparent and have closeness with the followers.

2.2. Transparency

Transparency is defined as openness and availability or the disclosure of relevant information (Palanski et al., 2011). Research indicates that relational transparency involves openly sharing information (Yang & Lin, 2023). From the information management perspective, transparency refers to the form in which information is visible, which can be improved by reducing or removing relevant obstacles (Turilli & Floridi, 2009). Some researchers discovered that transparency is affected by SD (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). Disclosing personal information is one of the key variables within this process and can be described as an active strategy that is employed to reduce uncertainty (Misoch, 2014). Researchers have confirmed that transparency affects brand authenticity (Busser & Shulga, 2019), satisfaction (Eggert & Helm, 2003; Kaura, 2013), trust (Busser & Shulga, 2019), and PWOM (Choi et al., 2018). In the present study, transparency refers to the transparency of SMIs and is defined as the extent to which SMIs share information openly and freely with their followers. Transparency is crucial for SMIs because it affects their credibility (Lee et al., 2022). SMIs' transparency affects the degree to which their followers perceive a product to effective and intend to purchase the product (Woodroof et al., 2020). In addition, transparency leads to a stronger emotional connection between the two parties (Mrad et al., 2022).

2.3. Psychological Closeness

SPT has been used to predict the outcomes of SD, such as relational closeness (Posey et al., 2010). Psychological closeness refers to the subjective closeness between a perceiver and a target object within their psychological space (Yang et al., 2022). Psychological closeness is defined as the subjective experience of closeness between two or more people (Tan & Lu, 2021). According to SPT, closeness is generated through SD (Deane et al., 2022). In SPT, the relational closeness of two parties can be explained by and predicted from the degree to which the SD between the parties is superficial or deep (Posey et al., 2010). Katadae (2008) suggested that SD affects psychological closeness and facilitates closeness in interpersonal relationships (Dutton et al., 2019). Jansz (2000) reported that refraining from SD leads to a greater psychological distance between one person and another. Edwards et al. (2009) discovered that psychological distance influences consumers' ability to process information about products and services. Studies have found that psychological closeness affects consumers' purchase behavior (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2011). Moreover, psychological closeness has been found to affect satisfaction (Omer & Mothafar, 2022), moral judgment (Eyal et al., 2008), attitude toward products (Alaoui et al., 2022), and PWOM (Omer & Mothafar, 2022).

3. Hypothesis Development

3.1. Effects of SD on Perceived Transparency and Psychological Closeness

SD is defined as the process of individuals sharing their feelings, thoughts, information, and experiences with others (Masrom et al., 2021). The strength of SD is the degree to which people are willing to share information with others regardless of their familiarity with them (Shen, 2015). In this study, SD refers to SMIs sharing their feelings or

opinions with their followers, whereas transparency refers to the openness, availability, or disclosure of information by SMIs (Palanski et al., 2011). Francis et al. (2003) reported that greater disclosure indicates less information asymmetry and greater transparency and that more detailed disclosure leads to greater perceived transparency in a relationship (Krouwer et al., 2020). Thus, maintaining an active dialogue helps to promote transparency among parties (Roberge & Alokha, 2022). Van Reijmersdal et al. (2023) indicated that disclosure positively affects perceived transparency. Researchers have therefore indicated that disclosure can be employed as a transparency management practice (Lee et al., 2022). Woodroof et al. (2020) stated that endorsement disclosure influences consumers' perceptions of an SMI's transparency. Transparency can be used to describe followers' feelings regarding an SMI's openness or disclosure of relevant information. Thus, when SMIs disclose more of their feelings and opinions to their followers, the followers may perceive the SMI to be more open.

Psychological closeness is the subjective present experience of an individual regarding how close something is to them (Hartley & Green, 2017). In the present study, psychological closeness is defined as the extent to which a person has a concrete image of another person's appearance and attributes (Darke, 2016). Researchers have reported that relational closeness is developed through SD (Posey et al., 2010) and that a person's SD to others reflects the closeness of their interpersonal relationship with those others (Jonna & Julkunen, 2022). When disclosers reveal information to other people, those people have a feeling of familiarity with and closeness to the self-disclosers (Lin & Chu, 2021). SD is crucial to developing closeness in relationships (Jaffé et al., 2023). If individuals decide to share or even actively share information, they may establish closeness between themselves and other people by facilitating contact with them. Thus, when SMIs disclose more of their personal feelings and opinions to their followers, the followers may perceive the SMIs as being closer to them. On the basis of this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: An SMI's SD positively correlates with perceptions of transparency among their followers.

H1b: An SMI's SD positively correlates with perceptions of psychological closeness among their followers.

3.2. Effects of Transparency on Psychological Closeness and PWOM

Transparency refers to the extent of openness and access to relevant information (Gamayuni et al., 2023) and is a key competency that must be acquired to reduce the psychological distance. One study indicated that perceived psychological distances become shorter as a sense of transparency becomes stronger (Pratt et al., 1999). Yi et al. (2017) reported that when leaders have high behavioral transparency, they establish closer ties with employees, and the psychological leader–employee distance is shorter. When interactions are more open and relevant information is shared, psychological distance is smaller. Any information asymmetry between two parties is likely to increase their psychological distance. When an SMI's followers observe that the SMI openly communicates with them, they may think that the SMI is sincere and psychologically close.

Transparency is considered a key facilitator of community members' active participation in that community (Gamayuni et al., 2023). One study found that service recovery transparency positively affects users' PWOM intention (Jens et al., 2019). Consumers are generally calling for greater informational clarity and transparency (LaMonica et al., 2021) to ensure they can be confident about recommending a product or service. Choi et al. (2018) discovered that the level of transparency of a brand's communications on a social media platform affects the level of PWOM of the platform's users. Thus, when an SMI is more open and provides more relevant information (i.e., exhibits greater transparency) to their followers, the followers' willingness to engage in PWOM is stronger. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Transparency positively correlates with psychological closeness.

H2b: Transparency positively correlates with PWOM.

3.3. Effects of Psychological Closeness on PWOM

Psychological closeness refers to the degree to which something subjectively feels close to the self in the present (Zhou et al., 2022). When consumers feel psychologically closer to another person, they are likely to have positive feelings about that person and not conclude that the person has an ulterior motive (Ren et al., 2018). In addition, the perception of psychological distance or closeness leads to an emotional response and affects purchase intention (Bose & Ye, 2020). When individuals think that they have a more concrete image in their mind about a person's appearance and attributes, they are more confident about recommending the person to others. Therefore, social-psychological distance may affect PWOM (Sands et al., 2022). Anik and Norton (2012) suggested that closeness affects PWOM intention. Other researchers indicated that psychological closeness affects PWOM behavior (Omer & Mothafar, 2022). Thus, when followers' psychological closeness to an SMI is greater, their willingness to recommend the SMI is higher. The following hypothesis is correspondingly proposed:

H3: Psychological closeness positively correlates with PWOM.

3.4. Mediating Roles of Transparency and Closeness in SD's Effect on PWOM

Lin et al. (2019) used the SOR paradigm to determine how perceived cohesion and intimacy mediate the relationship between SD and engagement. The mediating roles of transparency and closeness in the relationship

between SD on PWOM is based on the SOR paradigm. Followers exposed to the SD of an SMI in the environment of social media (S) experience an inner affective or cognitive state (O), such as perceived transparency and closeness, which subsequently leads to a behavioral response (R), such as PWOM. Transparency is essential to the development of positive relationships through communication between two parties (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). According to the literature on SPT, an individual's SD may contribute to others perceiving the individual to be transparent (Mohamed & Draz, 2020). Information disclosure can increase the transparency of the interactions between two parties, which consequently reduces uncertainty and psychological distance and fosters closeness between the two parties (Saffanah et al., 2023). Therefore, greater transparency is associated with shorter psychological distance (Pratt et al., 1999) and closer ties (Yi et al., 2017). When information transparency increases, that is, when information is adequate and understandable (Xiao et al., 2023), the purchasing willingness of consumers also increases (Celuch, 2021). In addition, research indicates that brand transparency has a positive effect on PWOM (Choi et al., 2018). Thus, this study reasoned that when an SMI discloses more of their feelings and opinions to their followers, those followers develop a clearer image of the SMI in their mind, which leads to the followers being confident about recommending the SMI to others. The following hypotheses are thus proposed:

H4a: Transparency mediates the relationship between SD and psychological closeness.

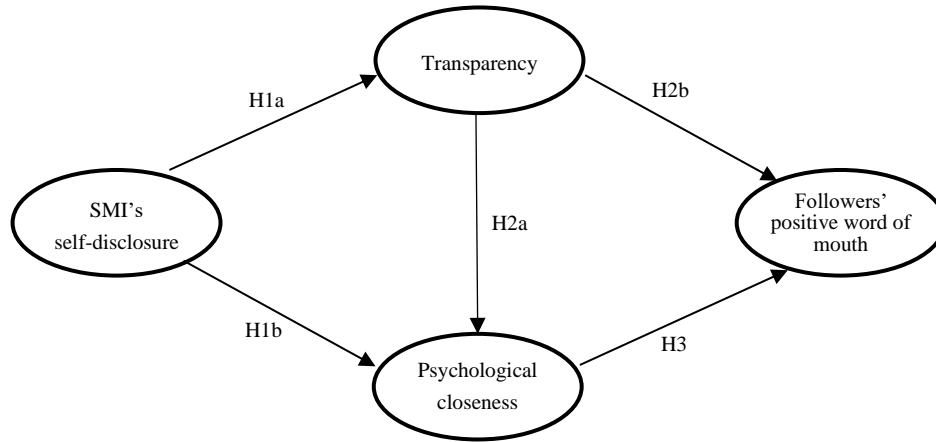H4b: Transparency mediates the relationship between SD and PWOM.

3.5. Mediating Roles of Psychological Closeness in SD's Effect on PWOM and Transparency's Effect on PWOM

In personal relationships, closeness is characterized by high levels of mutual understanding (Jürgen & Zhou, 2012), and SD plays a key role in the development of closeness in relationships (Jaffé et al., 2023). According to SPT, SD may result in relational intimacy, cohesion, and closeness (Yang & Lin, 2023). Given that individuals tend to confide more in psychologically close others than in psychologically distant others (Jaffé et al., 2023), the extent of SD can be considered a determinant of the degree of interpersonal closeness. Individuals who achieve greater closeness with others tend to share more PWOM about other people on social networks (Li et al., 2020). Therefore, in line with SPT, an individual's SD may contribute to others' perceptions of their closeness with that individual (Posey et al., 2010), and psychological closeness may elicit PWOM (Omer & Mothafar, 2022). Greater SD in an SMI leads to the SMI's followers feeling closer to the SMI and thus being more willing to share their opinion of or recommend the SMI to others. Additionally, greater transparency leads to a shorter psychological distance (Pratt et al., 1999). The higher behavioral transparency is, the shorter is the psychological distance (Yi et al., 2017), resulting in greater PWOM intention (Anik & Norton, 2012). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: Psychological closeness mediates the relationship between SD and PWOM.

H5b: Psychological closeness mediates the relationship between transparency and PWOM.

In this study, we investigated how SD among SMIs affects PWOM from their followers in terms of transparency and psychological closeness. The hypotheses and conceptual framework of this study are illustrated in Figure 1.

H4a: Transparency mediates the relationship between SD and psychological closeness.
H4b: Transparency mediates the relationship between SD and PWOM.
H5a: Psychological closeness mediates the relationship between SD and PWOM.
H5b: Psychological closeness mediates the relationship between transparency and PWOM.

Figure 1: Research framework

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

In January 2023, Taiwan reportedly had 20.20 million social media users, who account for 84.5% of Taiwan's total population (Kemp, 2023). OOSGA (2023) indicated that 89% of Taiwan's total population, namely 21.35 million people, is active on social media and that on average, each user spends 2 h and 4 min on social media each day. According to Taslaud (2022), the Asia-Pacific region is expected to become the largest Internet celebrity economy worldwide by 2024. The SMI economy in Taiwan thus has considerable development potential. Therefore, the present study selected Taiwan as its research area. An online questionnaire was distributed through Internet platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Sampling was performed through convenience sampling. Before completing the questionnaire, potential respondents were told that all answers were anonymous and that their names would not be collected. The respondents answered the questions in the questionnaire by considering their experiences with the SMIs who they viewed or watched most often. A total of 575 questionnaires were received, of which 461 were valid.

4.2. Measures

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part contained items on each construct investigated in the present study. All constructs were measured using multi-item scales employed in previous studies. This study used the three-item scale designed by Chung and Cho (2017) to measure SD. Transparency was measured using three items adapted from the study of Haesevoets et al. (2021). Psychological closeness was measured using a two-item scale modified from that used by Darke (2016). Finally, three items modified from those of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) were employed for measuring PWOM. The second part of the questionnaire collected the demographic information of the respondents, such as their gender, age, and education level. All items in the first part were measured using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 for completely disagree to 7 for completely agree. The questionnaire items are presented in Table 1.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1. Multivariate Normal Distribution and Multicollinearity Test

In this study, SPSS (version 20) was used to investigate the assumptions made in multivariate analysis, namely normality and multicollinearity. Skewness and kurtosis were employed to test normality, and if the absolute skewness and kurtosis values are less than 3 and 7, respectively, the assumption of a normal distribution is considered reasonable (Yonathan, 2021). Tolerance and the variance inflation factor (VIF) are widely used to determine the severity of multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007). If the tolerance value is greater than 0.10 and the VIF is less than 10, multicollinearity is not severe (Manurung et al., 2018). In present study, the ranges of the skewness and kurtosis values were −0.974 to −0.295 and 0.096 to 1.651, respectively, which are lower than 3 and 7; thus, normality was a reasonable

assumption. The ranges of the tolerance and VIF values were 0.442–0.556 and 1.798–2.261, respectively, which indicated that the multicollinearity between variables was not severe.

This study employed IBM SPSS AMOS 24, statistical software used for structural equation modeling, to evaluate the reliability, construct validity, hypothesized associations, and overall fit of the model. The standardized factor loadings (λ), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to evaluate reliability and convergent validity. When $\lambda > 0.50$, $CR > 0.60$, and $AVE > 0.50$, a model has favorable convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2017). In this study, the λ values ranged from 0.83 to 0.95, which are greater than 0.5. The CR values ranged from 0.90 to 0.93, which are greater than 0.6. Finally, the AVE values ranged from 0.76 to 0.83, which are greater than 0.5 (Table 1). Thus, the reliability and convergent validity of the model met the relevant criteria.

Table 1: Accuracy Analysis Statistics

Latent variables	Measurement items	λ	SMC	CR	AVE
Self-disclosure (SD)	This SMI reveals themselves to their followers.	0.83	0.69	0.90	0.76
	This SMI shares their personal feelings with their followers.	0.86	0.74		
	This SMI is honest about their feelings or opinions.	0.92	0.85		
Transparency (TP)	This SMI and their followers can communicate openly with each other.	0.86	0.73	0.93	0.82
	Relevant information is shared between this SMI and their followers.	0.95	0.90		
	Fans of this SMI can share relevant information with each other.	0.90	0.80		
Psychological closeness (PC)	I have a concrete image of this SMI's physical appearance in my mind.	0.90	0.80	0.91	0.83
	I have a concrete image of this SMI's attributes in my mind.	0.92	0.85		
Positive word of mouth (PWOM)	I "talk up" this SMI to my friends.	0.88	0.77	0.91	0.78
	I try to spread positive words about this SMI.	0.91	0.82		
	I promote this SMI by spreading considerable positive word of mouth for them.	0.85	0.72		

Discriminant validity is assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE for a variable with the coefficients of correlation between the variable and the other variables in the model (Henseler et al., 2015). In this study, the square roots of the AVEs for all variables were greater than the coefficients of correlation between the constructs, which indicated that discriminant validity was achieved (Table 2).

Table 2: Correlations between the Latent Variables

Research Constructs	Mean	S.D.	SD	TP	PC	PWOM
Self-disclosure (SD)	5.54	1.14	0.87			
Transparency (TP)	5.29	1.21	0.67	0.91		
Psychological closeness (PC)	5.25	1.25	0.58	0.56	0.91	
Positive word of mouth (PWOM)	4.68	1.49	0.42	0.48	0.50	0.88

Note: The gray cells present the square roots of the AVEs for the constructs, whereas the other values are the coefficients of correlation between each pair of constructs.

5.2. Structural Model

A structural model is used to measure the causal relationships between constructs in a model, and path analysis is performed to test the degree to which a structural model fits the latent variables. The structural model of the present study was tested using absolute-fit, incremental-fit, and parsimonious-fit measures (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The absolute-fit measures were chi-squared (χ^2), the number of degrees of freedom (df), χ^2/df, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the adjusted GFI (AGFI), and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). The values of χ^2/df and the GFI, AGFI, and RMSEA should be below 3.00, above 0.80, above 0.80, and below 0.08, respectively (Xu et al., 2022). The values of the comparative fit index (CFI) and normed fit index (NFI), which are incremental fit measures, should be greater than 0.90 (Siekpe, 2005). The parsimonious-fit measures were the parsimonious NFI (PNFI) and parsimonious GFI (PGFI). The values of the PNFI and PGFI should be higher than 0.5 (Wang & Chiu, 2011). In this

study, the following fit values were obtained: χ^2 = 95.9, df = 38, χ^2/df = 2.52, GFI = 0.96, AGFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.057, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, PNFI = 0.68, and PGFI = 0.56. Overall, the fit of the structural model was favorable.

5.3. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Path analysis revealed that SD positively correlated with transparency and psychological closeness and thus supported H1a and H1b. In addition, transparency positively correlated with psychological closeness and PWOM, thus supporting H2a and H2b. In addition, psychological closeness positively correlated with PWOM, thus supporting H3. H1, H2, and H3 were supported at the P < 0.001 significance level. In addition, the results revealed that the developed model explained 51%, 45%, and 35% of the variance in transparency, psychological closeness, and PWOM, respectively. The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of Hypothesis Testing (H1–H3)

Path between		Path coefficients	Finding
H1a	Self-disclosure → Transparency	+0.75***	Supported
H1b	Self-disclosure → Psychological closeness	+0.47***	Supported
H2a	Transparency →Psychological closeness	+0.33***	Supported
H2b	Transparency →Positive word of mouth	+0.35***	Supported
H3	Psychological closeness →Positive word of mouth	+0.42***	Supported

Notes: *** P < 0.001

5.4. Mediation Analysis

This study explored the mediating effects of transparency and psychological closeness on the relationship between SD and PWOM. IBM SPSS AMOS 24 was used for bootstrap analysis to test the mediation effects; this approach was also used in a previous study (Wien, 2019). Preacher and Hayes (2008) proposed that all indirect relationships should be evaluated using a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. If the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval does not contain 0, the indirect effect is significant; otherwise, the indirect effect is not significant. According to the results of our mediation tests (Table 5), transparency mediated the relationship between SD and psychological closeness and PWOM. In addition, psychological closeness mediated the relationship between SD and PWOM and the relationship between transparency and PWOM. Thus, H4 and H5 were supported at the P < 0.01 significance level.

Table 4: Mediating Effects (H4 and H5)

Indirect effect		Estimate	p-value	Confidence Interval
H4a	Self-disclosure →Transparency →Psychological closeness	0.220	0.001	[0.113~0.334]
H4b	Self-disclosure →Transparency →Positive word of mouth	0.206	0.000	[0.111~0.310]
H5a	Self-disclosure →Psychological closeness →Positive word of mouth	0.154	0.000	[0.095~0.231]
H5b	Transparency →Psychological closeness →Positive word of mouth	0.115	0.000	[0.050~0.201]

6. Discussion

In this study, we drew on SPT to analyze the relationship between SD and PWOM. We also investigated the mediating effects of transparency and psychological closeness on this relationship. Our empirical results indicated that SD among SMIs positively correlates with their followers' perceptions of their transparency. We also discovered that followers' perceived psychological closeness with an SMI positively correlates with the followers' PWOM. In addition, transparency positively correlates with psychological closeness. According to our mediation analysis, transparency and psychological closeness mediate the relationship between SD and PWOM, and transparency mediates the relationship between SD and psychological closeness. In addition, psychological closeness mediates the relationship between transparency and PWOM.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Considering the vital roles of followers' PWOM in SMIs' acquisition of new followers, this study makes three contributions to the literature. First, SPT is a theory that describes the infiltration process that occurs during interpersonal interaction and the crucial role of SD in the initial stage of a social relationship. However, the mechanism underlying the relationship between an individual's SD and PWOM from others remains unclear. To the best of our knowledge, no study has yet investigated how an individual's SD affects PWOM from others, particularly in the context of SMIs. Although empirical studies have indicated or found individual associations between SD, transparency, psychological closeness, and PWOM (e.g., Andrades et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2018; Katadae, 2008;

Omer & Mothafar, 2022), few have integrated all associations among those variables; thus, the relationships among the variables remained unclear. In this study, we discovered that SD in an SMI positively correlates with followers' perceptions of the SMI's transparency and their psychological closeness with the SMI, which in turn positively correlates with PWOM. In addition, the transparency perceived by followers positively correlates with their perceived psychological closeness with SMIs. These findings bridge the knowledge gap regarding the relationship between SD and PWOM by elucidating the role of interpersonal relationship factors (i.e., transparency and psychological closeness). Overall, this study contributes to the literature on SPT by linking SD to PWOM.

Second, few studies have investigated the mediating effects of interpersonal relationship factors on the relationship between SD and PWOM, and therefore, the empirical evidence available regarding these mediating effects is limited. In this study, we used the SOR paradigm to determine the relationship between SD, transparency, and PWOM. Mediation analysis revealed that interpersonal relationship factors (i.e., transparency and psychological closeness) mediate the relationship between SD and PWOM. In addition, transparency mediates the relationship between SD and psychological closeness, and psychological closeness mediates the relationship between transparency and PWOM. In summary, in this study, we drew on SPT and the SOR paradigm to develop a conceptual research model for understanding the mediating effects of transparency and psychological closeness on the relationship between SD and PWOM. We developed a conceptual model to determine how SD among SMIs elicits PWOM from followers as interpersonal relationship factors, such as transparency and psychological closeness, evolve.

The findings of this study have several practical and managerial implications that can benefit SMI marketers by helping them in effectively utilizing significant factors that, from the perspective of SD, facilitate followers' PWOM. Our empirical results revealed that transparency and psychological closeness positively correlated with PWOM. The model based on these three predictors explained 35% of the variance in PWOM. To increase followers' PWOM, this study recommends that SMIs 1) communicate openly and share relevant information with their followers in a way that is transparent and 2) present a clear image such that followers can create a concrete image of the SMI in their minds, which reflects psychological closeness. When followers perceive that an SMI's information is transparent, they perceive psychological closeness to the SMI. Our findings also revealed that SD among SMIs positively correlated with perceptions of transparency and psychological closeness. Thus, SMIs should share their personal feelings and experiences with their followers and honestly express their opinions to ensure that their followers perceive them to be transparent and psychologically close. In addition, our results indicated that transparency positively correlates with psychological closeness. Creating a distinctive appearance can help an SMI by giving their followers a strong image of the SMI and thus a sense of who the SMI is. To increase psychological closeness, SMIs should communicate openly and share relevant information with their followers.

6.2. Limitations and further research

First, the cross-sectional design of this study meant that causality between variables could not be inferred. Therefore, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design or experiment to investigate the causality in our research model. Second, a previous study found that transparency directly affects consumers' trust and attitude and indirectly affects their positive PWOM (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). In future research, scholars can consider incorporating additional variables into our research framework. Third, Levin and Arluke (1985) reported that women are more likely to disclose information about themselves than are men. Bond (2009) discovered that women self-disclose on a wider range of topics on their social networks than men do. Therefore, future research should explore the moderating effect of an SMI's gender on SD's influences on perceived transparency and psychological closeness. Finally, the research sample was limited to Taiwan. Tominaga et al. (2018) suggested that cultural background affects SD and privacy issues. Thus, the generalizability of the present results to other countries might be limited. To provide evidence of generalizability, future research must replicate our findings in other countries and cultural settings.

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