The Impact of Emotional Storytelling on Narrative Transportation, Parasocial Interaction and Engagement Intentions in Influencer Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of emotional storytelling (ES) by social media influencers on audience engagement intentions, focusing on narrative transportation and parasocial interaction (PSI), as sequential mediators that explain how emotionally engaging stories first draw people into the narrative, then help them feel connected to the influencer, and in turn, increase their willingness to engage. Although previous studies have emphasised the impact of PSI on outcomes such as trust, authenticity and purchase intention, little attention has been given to how PSI is activated, particularly through emotionally immersive narratives by social media influencers. Furthermore, there is an empirical gap in the psychological process from emotional storytelling to engagement intentions, and investigating how influencer popularity moderates this process. Based on Narrative Transportation Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory and Influencer Marketing, this study proposes a sequential mediation model in which emotional storytelling enables narrative transportation, thereby increasing PSI. This study also investigates whether the type of influencer (micro vs. macro) moderates this process, based on the assumption that micro-influencers may build stronger relationships. The following research question is explored: How does emotional storytelling by micro vs macro social media influencers affect engagement intentions through narrative transportation and parasocial interaction? A 2×2 between-subjects online experiment was conducted using a fictional influencer called “Zara”. Participants were shown either an emotionally charged or a storytelling absent Instagram post from a micro- or macro-influencer version of Zara. Narrative transportation, PSI and engagement intentions were measured using validated multi-item scales. Hayes' PROCESS macro was used to conduct the main analyses: Model 6 tested sequential mediation and Model 7 tested moderated mediation. The results indicated that emotional storytelling significantly improved narrative transportation and PSI. Narrative transportation also consistently predicted PSI, which in turn positively influenced engagement intentions. Emotional storytelling didn't directly impact engagement intentions, which suggests that the effect is completely mediated by narrative transportation and PSI. Contrary to expectations, moderated mediation was not significant; that is, the influencer type (micro vs. macro) did not significantly moderate this indirect effect. Although PSI and engagement scores were descriptively higher in the micro-influencer condition, these differences were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that emotional storytelling affects engagement through narrative immersion and parasocial interaction regardless of the reach and popularity of the influencer. This study builds on influencer marketing research by showing how emotional storytelling increases engagement intentions and addresses PSI as a dynamic, situational process that is activated when people get absorbed in a story and feel personally connected to the influencer.

KEYWORDS: *Emotional Storytelling (ES), Parasocial Interaction (PSI), Engagement Intentions (EI), Narrative Transportation, Micro- & Macro-Influencers*

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1. Introduction

Imagine coming across a social media post from an influencer. They are sharing a story about overcoming challenges in their career or personal life and balancing them. Their story details, late nights, and small victories, are drawing you into their experience. This process is called narrative transportation. It happens when a story immerses people in so much that they connect emotionally with the storyteller and imagine themselves in their situation (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). At the same time, you start feeling like you truly know the influencer and start connecting emotionally. This one-sided, personal connection that you start building with an influencer, which is neither real nor mutual, is called parasocial interaction (PSI) (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754).

Influencers are important for a brand's marketing, but they are also valuable for building long-term relationships with their audiences (Masuda et al., 2022, p. 1). They often use emotional storytelling (ES) in order to make the connections with their followers stronger and their content more relatable and engaging (Farivar & Wang, 2022, p. 4). Research shows that emotionally charged posts drive higher engagement than neutral content (Gross et al., 2023, p. 392), highlighting the importance of storytelling in enhancing PSI and driving engagement intentions.

Despite being extensively reported on in communication and media studies, PSI remains theoretically ambiguous (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 1), which sparked the interest for further investigation. PSI and parasocial relationships (PSR) are often used interchangeably despite theoretically varying on the basis of how long they last and how intense they are (Sheng et al., 2025, pp. 1–2). Sheng et al. (2025) dispel such ambiguity by redefining PSI as a brief, media-created feeling of closeness, emphasizing that it is situational, in the moment, and founded on one-to-many communication incorrectly thought to be one-to-one (p. 14).

Even though PSI is getting more attention in digital and influencer marketing, most studies look at what it leads to, like trust or purchase intentions, or behavior, rather than what actually causes it, such as emotional storytelling or other mechanisms that trigger it. One mechanism that remains not fully explored is narrative transportation. Although it has been studied in the context of persuasion and media effects, its role as a trigger for PSI, particularly in the context of influencers, is not yet fully clear. Tukachinsky et al. (2020) highlight the need for dynamic research approaches, calling for future studies to be capable of exploring how short-term experiences such as PSI and identification relate to longer-term parasocial relationships (PSRs) (p. 887). Our study fills that gap because it shows how emotional narratives facilitate narrative transportation, leading to temporary PSI and influencing engagement intentions towards influencers.

Moreover, according to Levesque and Pons (2021), engagement is stated in terms of five dimensions: self-presentation, interactive engagement, emotional attachment, content consumption, and content creation (p. 1754, Figure 5). To capture the complexity of engagement intentions, the study draws on widely used multidimensional measures and applies structural equation modelling

(SEM) to explore the factorial structure, but the model did not exhibit acceptable fit and results were not interpreted further.

This study fills these theoretical gaps by examining the sequential mediating roles of narrative transportation and parasocial interaction, determining how story absorption creates perceived intimacy that creates engagement. Through this approach, the study tackles PSI as not a static product but a dynamic psychological process. Furthermore, it applies moderated mediation analyses to test influencer type, how micro vs macro influencers can moderate the effect of storytelling on PSI and engagement.

Although previous studies have examined the impact of PSI on consumer trust, purchase intention and brand attitudes (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 1), few have investigated how PSI is activated, particularly through emotional storytelling and narrative immersion. Lim and Lee (2023) emphasise the importance of influencer narratives in forming emotional bonds that can intensify PSI (p. 2). Similarly, Dessart (2018) shows that story-driven content fosters emotional resonance and strengthens long-term engagement intentions more effectively than factual advertising (p. 290). However, there has been little empirical work connecting the full pathway from emotional storytelling through to narrative transportation, PSI and engagement intentions in a unified model.

This study addresses the lack of understanding surrounding how ES enhances PSI and influences engagement intentions in influencer marketing. Although research has examined the impact of PSI on consumer behaviour, the role of ES in strengthening PSI, particularly among micro- and macro-influencers, has not been widely explored. As Conde and Casais (2023) point out, there is a lack of research on how PSI varies across different types of influencers, particularly in relation to their level of popularity (p. 2). Gross et al. (2023) emphasise the need to research how ES impacts social media engagement; however, the comparison between micro- and macro-influencers remains under-researched (p. 389).

Narrative transportation, by design, reduces resistance to persuasion and makes audiences more receptive (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). From the societal perspective, when consumers become absorbed in an influencer's story, they may stop thinking critically about their content or questioning it (Dessart, 2018, p. 301). This is can be a problem because people can lose their self-awareness and start seeing themselves in the influencer's story (Dessart, 2018, p. 301). This loss of self-awareness can lead individuals to see themselves in the influencer's narrative, blurring the boundary between fiction and personal reality.

On the other side, PSI has been referred to as a "vehicle for advertising," (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 3), as influencer endorsements are accepted as reliable by followers predicated on perceived closeness (p. 3). It affects how people evaluate content, impacting perceived authenticity, engagement, and even purchase intentions (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 1). Therefore, marketers today seek influencers with the potential to create strong emotional bonds with audiences. As Bhattacharya (2023) argues, influencers with the capacity to create parasocial connections are more effective than

traditional advertising messages in connecting emotionally with consumers (p. 285). This highlights the need to better understand how emotional storytelling in influencer marketing contributes to PSI and how this can, in turn, affect engagement-related behavior.

As brands use influencers to build stronger emotional connections with consumers, it is important to understand how SMIs use ES enhanced with PSI and this dynamic finally affects engagement intentions, especially when comparing micro- and macro-influencers. This study will investigate the following research question: *How does emotional storytelling by micro vs macro influencers affect engagement intentions through narrative transportation and parasocial interaction?*

To answer the main research question, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

- How does ES by social media influencers influence the engagement intentions?
- Does narrative transportation predict higher parasocial interaction?
- Does parasocial interaction mediate the relationship between emotional storytelling and engagement intentions?
- Does influencer type (micro vs. macro) moderate the effect of storytelling on PSI and engagement? Is the effect stronger for micro-influencers?
- Do narrative transportation and PSI sequentially mediate the effect of emotional storytelling on engagement intentions?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Impact of Storytelling on Engagement Intentions

Feng et al. (2021) argue that influencer posts are engaging narratives designed to attract followers and enable them to experience the influencer's lifestyle and product recommendations (p. 975). Building on this, Dong et al. (2024) explain that their study examines the impact of narrative elements in influencer-created content on audience engagement, particularly via live commentary (p. 2). They found that real media characters, nice titles, and concrete details are linked to an increase in live comments (p. 1) and that non-fictional characters and concrete details were positively correlated with live comments (p. 13). Similarly, Feng et al. (2021) note that when viewers take on the feelings of characters in a narrative advertisement, they show empathy and are motivated to feel positive affect (p. 977). They also add that posts combining expert advice with selfies or with friends were the ones that received the most likes (Feng et al., 2021, p. 983).

Further supporting this, Atiq et al. (2022) discuss that storytelling content communicates facts through emotional appeal, which enhances audience engagement and inspires them to act or influence their environment (p. 1). Instagram's "Stories" feature has had a specific impact on influencer marketing by providing an active and emotionally stimulating method of reaching people (p. 1). According to Atiq et al. (2022), relatability and trust are essential in creating a significant relationship between storytelling and audience engagement (p. 1). They describe storytelling as a long-standing part of human life and define storytelling content as emotionally driven communication that encourages people to engage and take action (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 3). Structured with a beginning, middle, and end, it is commonly used in digital formats such as Instagram stories, where influencers share short videos to connect with viewers (p. 3). Digital storytelling provides a real-time, immersive experience and is considered more engaging than static content, according to reactance theory (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 3).

According to Atiq et al. (2022), audience engagement involves emotional and cognitive interaction with media content, which can result in greater involvement or increased content sharing (pp. 3–4). The Narrative Paradigm identifies storytelling as an important form of human interaction (p. 4). As competition for audience attention grows, storytelling has become an essential strategy for sustaining interest in short-form digital content (p. 4). In their empirical findings, they found that storytelling content increased both audience engagement and the overall impact of the message. Since storytelling is a human-specific way of sharing ideas that supports memory and imagination, it helps make complex content easier to understand and more engaging. They also showed that storytelling improved how relatable the content felt, which is supported by earlier research on how digital storytelling strengthens consumer relationships (p. 13).

Kang et al. (2020) also underline that storytelling is an effective advertising method because it uses narrative elements like plots and characters to deliver messages in a way that feels connected to real life. People tend to imagine how a product fits into events rather than assess its usefulness,

and narrative formats are easier to process than informational ones. These stories combine reasoning with emotion, leading audiences to respond emotionally when they engage with the ad (Kang et al., 2020, p. 48). Their study found that these emotional responses were critical in encouraging people to talk about the ads, aligning with previous research in narrative persuasion. However, they also showed that storytelling alone did not lead to intended behavioral effects unless it generated emotional engagement from the audience, with emotional influence proving more effective than logical argumentation (p. 53).

A related concept is ES, which refers to the use of emotional narratives in influencer-sponsored posts, specifically those that communicate either emotions or moods related to brands and products (Gross et al., 2020, p. 390). These affective experiences are characterized by two key dimensions: pleasantness, which expresses how positive or negative the emotional tone is, and arousal, which reflects the strength and intensity of the emotion conveyed (Gross et al., 2020, p. 389). Posts are categorized based on these two dimensions, with most emotionally expressive content rated as both highly pleasant and highly arousing (Gross et al., 2020, pp. 391–392). These emotional cues are typically conveyed through captions, which supplement the visual content with narrative context and serve as interactive prompts to encourage user response (Gross et al., 2020, p. 390).

While advertisers may suggest generic subjects for captions, influencer content control is employed to establish context with personal, affective experiences, e.g., to describe the reasons they liked or disliked a product (Gross et al., 2020, p. 390). Emotionally charged content has been shown to increase attention, memory, and purchase intentions, providing an effective tool for persuasion (Gross et al., 2020, p. 390). For the influencers, it helps to form parasocial relationships, where the followers regard them as credible and genuine sources of information (Gross et al., 2020, pp. 390–391). Feeling authentic is important, as users will likely respond more favorably to those who present themselves as authentic. These interactions are explained by social exchange theory, which holds that people are likely to reciprocate when someone invests in a relationship, like influencers sharing personal emotions, which leads users to like or comment on the post in return (Gross et al., 2020, pp. 391–392).

Lastly, Gross et al. (2020) refer to engagement as a two-way, mutual communication, where branded content is prompted by influencers and customers respond via interacting, usually through actions such as liking, commenting, or sharing (pp. 391–392). Empirical support confirms that emotional storytelling increases this type of engagement: in a study of 6,122 Instagram posts, Gross et al. (2020) confirmed that emotional storytelling posts received more likes and comments than neutral posts (p. 388). The statistics' findings also confirmed this through a significant positive effect, demonstrating that emotional content becomes enhanced social media engagement (p. 399). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Exposure to a branded social media post that includes emotional storytelling will lead to higher engagement intentions than exposure to a post that does not include emotional storytelling.

2.2 Emotional Storytelling and PSI

Storytelling creates stronger emotional bonds with consumers and improves how audiences connect with brands, because people naturally understand and relate to information presented in a narrative form (Dessart, 2018, p. 289). Storytelling occurs through three stages: story-making, storytelling, and story-receiving (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 137). The story-receiving stage is the most relevant for this study because it focuses on how audiences process and interpret the story, which is influenced by factors such as attention, familiarity with the topic, and an individual's tendency to engage with narratives (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 137).

Unlike factual ads, storytelling ads focus on creating engaging stories that connect with people emotionally (Dessart, 2018, p. 290). These stories draw audiences in narrative transportation, which helps build long-term positive feelings and intentions toward a brand or an influencer (Dessart, 2018, p. 290). As audiences immerse themselves in the storytelling, they develop perceived personal relationships with influencers, increasing intimacy and accessibility (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). Storytelling helps create connections by letting the audiences understand the influencer's story based on their own knowledge, personality, and background (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 4). Influencers use storytelling to share personal, emotionally driven stories that feel real and relatable, strengthening their connection with followers (Gross et al., 2023, p. 392). By using emotions in their storytelling, influencers make their content more interesting and encourage the audience to get involved and respond (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 1). Social media makes people feel closer to influencers by allowing different kinds of interactions, which can build parasocial interaction between the influencer and the followers (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2).

Influencers' impact relies significantly on their perceived expertise and role as opinion leaders in specific domains like fashion, food, fitness, health, or gaming but may not extend to unrelated topics (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334). Additionally, influencers establish unique personal brands to differentiate themselves and appeal to both followers and marketers. They craft their identities through carefully managed narratives on social media, though overly obvious self-promotion can harm their authenticity (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334). Influencers further enhance their persuasiveness with their followers through regular interactions and personal content sharing, creating feelings of similarity, familiarity, and likability (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334).

Certain antecedents influence this parasocial connection, including the influencer’s physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Bhattacharya, 2023, pp. 273–276). Bhattacharya (2023) found that physical and social attractiveness were both significant predictors of PSI, with social attractiveness having a stronger influence and was found to be associated with perceived similarity and the usefulness of content rather than physical appeal alone (pp. 283–284). Trustworthiness also showed a significant positive relationship with PSI, whereas source expertise was not a significant predictor. These findings suggest that PSI may be affected by the influencer's perceived interpersonal attributes, but the present study shifts the focus from these

stable, trait-based antecedents to emotional storytelling to examine whether PSI can be dynamically activated during a single exposure.

Additionally, Green and Appel (2024), describe PSI as the mental simulations audiences create, feeling like they are truly interacting with media characters or personalities (p. 10). Parasocial relationships (PSR), on the other hand, represent deeper and more lasting feelings of friendship or emotional connection to these characters, even though such relationships are one-sided, the character does not reciprocate or even know the viewer exists (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 10). Polichak and Gerrig (2002), describe narrative audiences as "side participants," who are emotionally involved yet remain separate from the characters themselves (as cited in Green & Appel, 2024, pp. 10–11). The audience might mentally participate in events, like wanting to warn characters about danger or help solve their problems, and these emotional and cognitive responses shape how they remember and are influenced by the story (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 11). People often build parasocial connection with influencers by engaging with the stories they share on their platforms (Lim and Lee, 2023, p. 3). Lim and Lee (2023) highlight that when influencers share personal narratives, they create emotional connections that strengthen parasocial bonds (p. 2). Based on all this, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H2a: Exposure to an influencer's social media post that includes emotional storytelling will result in higher parasocial interaction than exposure to a post that does not include emotional storytelling.

2.3. Narrative Transportation as a Precursor to PSI

Narrative transport is the experience of being completely immersed in a story where people tend to concentrate all their mental processes, including attention, emotion, and imagery, on the action within the story (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4). When individuals are transported, they emotionally respond to what happens in the story and form vivid mental images of its setting and characters (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4). The experience is not limited to one medium because it is possible through verbal stories, written texts, and audiovisual materials (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4).

According to Narrative Transportation Theory, which takes place in the story-receiving stage, when people become fully immersed in a story, it can shift their emotions, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, intentions and the way they view their own reality (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). Narrative transportation happens when consumers empathize with characters and activate their imagination, temporarily detaching from reality (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). As a result, audiences become less likely to counter-argue the message, making them more receptive to the story's influence (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). Gerrig (1993) introduced the concept of transportation as a framework for explaining how people move into worlds of fiction in their minds and come out changed, similar to how travel can transform an individual, bringing new memories or perspectives (cited in Green &

Appel, 2024, p. 4). Green and Brock (2000) expanded upon this by developing a scale to measure the extent to which a person becomes absorbed in a narrative (cited in Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4).

Although earlier descriptions of narrative transportation suggested that people completely leave the external environment and have their minds completely devoted to the narrative, later research points out that transportation is a developing process in which a person's attention can shift over time and real-life experiences can be incorporated into the narrative (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 5). Even if individuals receive real-world information or their level of focus changes within the virtual narrative, they still sit there largely engaged within the story world (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 5). Strange and Leung (1999), brought the concept of "remindings," or the relations individuals establish between the narrative and their own experiences or previous exposure to other media (cited in Green & Appel, 2024, p. 5). Similarly, "dual empathy," and they explained how readers feel sympathetic towards characters in the story and themselves simultaneously because the story evokes their own experiences and memories (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 6). Green and Appel (2024) also noted that personal experiences can be used to increase immersion when they align with the story (p. 6).

There are several factors that may shape the degree to which a person experiences transportation. Narrative transportation is shaped by three antecedents: storyteller characteristics (e.g., plot and character details), consumer characteristics (e.g., individual differences, states of mind, and consumer judgments), and medium characteristics (e.g., interactivity or visual presentation), all of which are capable of affecting the degree of narrative transportation (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1809). Storyteller characteristics, particularly storytelling style, exert significant effects on transportation. Specifically, emotional storytelling versus non-narrative presentation can strongly boost narrative transportation (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1809). Transportation is influenced by consumer characteristics (like traits, mental states, and perceptions) and medium features (such as type, presentation, and interactivity) (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1809).

Moreover, narrative transportation effects can be divided into cognitive, affective, attitudinal, or behavioral outcomes (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1811). Cognitive consequences are impacts on memory, reflection, evaluation, beliefs, and reduced counterarguing (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1811). Emotional or affective consequences include feelings like happiness, guilt, or general positive affect (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1811). Persuasive impact typically persists even once the story is over, with effects on attitudes and intentions to act, say, to purchase, visit a destination, exhibit prosocial actions, or share word-of-mouth (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1811). Furthermore, Escalas (2004) explains that stories are persuasive due to their design, which presents events in chronological and cause-and-effect sequences that guide mental simulations, emphasizing goals, action, and outcome in a way that facilitates message understanding and activation for members of the audience (p. 38).

The role of narrative transportation is increasingly relevant in digital media environments, such as social media, virtual reality, and immersive storytelling formats (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1812). On these platforms, audiences do not passively consume stories but actively interpret and sometimes influence them (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1813). During narrative transportation, audiences empathize with the character in the story (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135), and therefore start building PSI with them.

2.4. PSI and Engagement Intentions

In marketing, PSI is described as an "illusionary experience" where consumers feel as if they are engaged in real relationships with a media figure despite the absence of real interaction (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754). Originally, PSI was defined as the "illusion of a face-to-face relationship" between audiences and media figures (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754). PSI behaviors include seeking guidance, imagining friendships, and feeling a part of the influencer's world (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754).

Extensive research across both traditional and digital media has addressed PSI and PSR, though many studies still do not clearly differentiate between them (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 1). Specifically, some researchers, as we saw also in the original definition with the use of the word *relationship*, define PSI using relational language or conflate it with PSR, while others use the two terms interchangeably (Sheng et al., 2025, pp. 1–2). This ambiguity has contributed to unclear conceptualizations, which in turn have produced measurement issues and created biased outcomes in empirical studies (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 2). Sheng et al. (2025) identify cases where studies on PSI have used measurement instruments that were originally created for PSR, raising issues about the validity of those findings (p. 2).

In order to address this confusion, the two constructs are presented as distinct, with PSI based on a viewer's perception of conversational interaction, and PSR involving a long-term connection characterized by intimacy (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 2). PSI is described as occurring first and contributing to the strength of PSR, which is supported by meta-analytic and empirical research cited in the review (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 2). According to Sheng et al. (2025), PSI refers to a perception of one-to-one communication that is direct and immediate, while PSR represents a lasting psychological connection (p. 1).

PSI describes the unique, one-sided connection between influencers on social media and their followers, where followers experience an emotional sense of intimacy toward media personalities without reciprocal interaction (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 273). Such interactions differ significantly from traditional word-of-mouth communication, as followers develop an imagined friendship with the influencer (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 273). Furthermore, PSI creates intimacy, making audiences feel they "know and understand" influencers as if they were real-life friends (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754). With repeated exposure the relationship between the audience and the

influencer becomes stronger, leading audiences to see them as trusted sources of information or role models or companions (Chen et al., 2021, p. 489). Over time, these parasocial interactions can evolve into PSR, creating long-term trust and engagement (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754). This trust strengthens emotional bonds and reinforces audience loyalty (Lu et al., 2023, p. 171).

PSI only lasts while someone is exposed to media, while PSR can continue afterward (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 12; Figure 5). PSI requires media and cannot happen without it (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 14). It includes either initial or repeated interactions that take place while consuming media content (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5). In contrast, PSR emerges as the result of repeated interactions and does not rely on continuous media use (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5). To reduce confusion, Sheng et al. (2025) redefine PSI as “an individual's perception of direct, instantaneous, and one-to-many communication with another party through media as one-to-one” (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 14). They also identify seven structural elements, such as involved party, time, and media context, that help distinguish PSI from PSR (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5).

These differences between PSI and PSR are also visible when comparing offline and online platforms. Offline PSI involves viewers engaging with media characters through formats like TV or radio, focusing on imagined connection and situational closeness (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5). Online PSI, made possible by social platforms, includes frequent media-based interactions with influencers or digital figures. These interactions often feel close but do not involve direct contact. PSR, on the other hand, is an enduring emotional connection (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5). Offline PSRs develop with famous or fictional celebrities and continue beyond media use (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5). Online PSRs are always in touch with characters like streamers or influencers and are defined by intimacy, attachment, and high-quality contact, even without an ongoing use of the media (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 10, Figure 5).

PSI has been described as a "vehicle for advertising," as audiences interpret influencers’ recommendations as reliable due to their perceived closeness and access to the influencer’s personal life (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 3). According to Bhattacharya (2023), marketers should collaborate with influencers capable of creating and maintaining strong parasocial bonds, as this strategy can engage target audiences emotionally more effectively than traditional forms of advertising (p. 285). Chen et al. (2021) explain that when influencers share their daily lives and actively communicate their experiences, audiences perceive a sense of social presence, which enhances parasocial connections (p. 488). Social media platforms encourage these interactions through frequent engagement opportunities, such as live streams and comments, which create the illusion of reciprocity and emotional closeness (Chen et al., 2021, p. 485). Fazli-Salehi et al. (2022) highlight that sharing personal details, strengthens PSI by fostering emotional connections and audience investment (p. 243).

Although PSI is based on immediate media experiences, it is associated with intermediate factors such as perceived value, which can lead to outcomes including well-being, identification with

media figures, and behavioral intentions related to brands (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 6). Within marketing contexts, PSI is described as important for understanding how consumers respond to media figures such as influencers or AI chatbots, and it can affect outcomes like perceived authenticity, engagement, brand likability, and purchase intention (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 1). Studies have shown that PSI plays a critical role in shaping consumer behavior, as higher PSI levels contribute to increased perceptions of authenticity and stronger purchase intentions, even though they do not necessarily reduce the perception of manipulative marketing efforts (Gong & Holiday, 2023, p. 380). Additionally, PSI fosters trust, which can counteract the negative effects of persuasion knowledge, the audience's awareness of marketing tactics (Gong & Holiday, 2023, p. 375). Consequently, social media users often engage more with content that creates parasocial connections.

In summary, narrative transportation is when the readers are totally transported into the story, employing their mind, feelings and imagination. The experience depends on the narrative style, the personality traits of the reader, and the medium. It has the power to influence a person's thinking, attitudes and action by overcoming resistance and causing identification with characters. When social media consumers of digital narratives view emotional stories, they form PSIs, conceived as one-way connections between audience members and personality media characters. PSIs are brief and media-specific in contrast to more extensive PSRs, which are sustained by repeated use and imagined intimacy. In social media contexts, PSI is facilitated by influencer's personal and emotional content and interactive functions, so that audiences are both emotionally and socially present. These encounters are emotionally significant and impactful in marketing terms, with PSI being linked to perceived authenticity, trust, and positive consumer outcomes. Lastly, PSI can potentially influence identification with media characters and encourage engagement, such as liking, sharing, following or purchasing from involved brands. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2b) Exposure to an influencer's post that includes emotional storytelling will result in higher narrative transportation than exposure to a post that does not include emotional storytelling H2c) which, in turn, will lead to participants who experience higher parasocial interaction with the social media influencer, and H2d) this will ultimately result in increased engagement intentions with the influencer.

2.5. The interaction effect of ES and Influencer Type on PSI

There are various types of social media influencers and the most frequently used categorization is based on the number of followers (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 335). Conde and Casais (2023) note that micro-influencers have 1,000 to 100,000 followers and macro-influencers have 100,000 to 1 million followers (p. 2). Influencers can be categorized as mega-influencers (over one million followers), macro-influencers (100,000 to one million), micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000), and nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000). Unlike celebrity influencers who gained fame

externally, the others became well-known specifically through social media (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 335).

Influencer reach includes both direct followers and indirect connections through social networks effectively (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334). Even influencers with relatively few followers, like nano-influencers and micro-influencers can have substantial influence if their indirect reach is large effectively (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334). Influencers often attract niche or specialized audiences who share common interests and are particularly characteristic of micro- and nano-influencers, as their smaller followings tend to be more focused and community-driven, enabling brands to engage otherwise hard-to-reach segments effectively (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334).

While macro-influencers have larger, more diverse audiences and are more accessible, micro-influencers have higher engagement rates because of the close relationships and interaction with their community (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). Micro-influencers' content is viewed as more trustworthy, and is considered similar to word of mouth (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). As a result, their sponsored content appears more authentic, while macro-influencers endorsements seem more commercial (Gross et al., 2023, p. 394). Similarly, Hudders et al. (2020) highlight that macro-influencers typically have stronger follower engagement within their specific domains compared to mega-influencers. In contrast, micro-influencers, although limited in geographic reach and partnerships, are considered more authentic and intimate, thus potentially more persuasive than macro-influencers (p. 335).

Although brands initially favored mega- and macro-influencers due to their extensive follower numbers, marketers have progressively turned to favoring micro-influencers because of their higher authenticity, greater engagement, and superior engagement rates (Gong & Holiday, 2023, p. 374). Micro-influencers are particularly valued for their expertise in specialized domains, which helps them reach a broader audience compared to nano-influencers, even though nano-influencers tend to be viewed as more genuine and authentic, often achieving higher engagement rates (Gong & Holiday, 2023, p. 374). Despite having less visibility than macro-influencers, micro-influencers are more effective in fostering engagement and influencing purchasing behavior due to the intimate bonds they establish with their followers (Sheng et al., 2023, p. 850). Additionally, Sheng et al. (2023), highlight that consumers who purchase products recommended by micro-influencers often experience a sense of emotional fulfillment, strengthening their emotional connections with the influencers (Sheng et al., 2023, p. 851). Regular interactions with micro-influencers also increase psychological satisfaction, motivating continuous enthusiasm and active participation among followers (Sheng et al., 2023, p. 851).

The effectiveness of micro-influencers is closely associated with PSI, the one-sided, yet immersive, relationships followers develop when engaging with influencer content. Parasocial attributes in influencer videos should primarily determine how authentic an influencer is perceived to be (Gong & Holiday, 2023, p. 374). The role of PSI is particularly significant for micro-influencers,

because micro-influencers strengthen PSI by sharing personal aspects of their lives, making followers feel a sense of closeness and familiarity (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 3). Studies also show that micro-influencers build stronger parasocial relationships with followers than macro-influencers (Gross et al., p. 394).

In addition, parasocial connections are especially significant for micro-influencers, as followers often perceive them as close friends, even if the relationship is one-sided and imagined. As a result, micro-influencers exert a strong influence on their followers' brand preferences and purchasing decisions, as audiences tend to align their behaviors with those of the influencers they admire. This alignment fosters deeper connections, enhancing positive attitudes and increasing purchase intentions toward endorsed brands (Sheng et al., 2023, p. 851).

The impact of ES on PSI might also be influenced by influencer type. Since ES enhances social media engagement by creating emotional connections with audiences, micro-influencers' ability to drive meaningful interactions makes them especially effective (Gross et al., 2023, p. 389). Gross et al. (2023) analyzed over 6,000 sponsored Instagram posts and found that while sponsored posts featuring ES drive more engagement than neutral ones, this increase is stronger for micro-influencers than for macro-influencers (p. 389). Micro-influencers positively impact influencer marketing by building strong PSI with their followers, leading to increased social media engagement (Gross et al., p. 389). Since ES relies on emotional connection, micro-influencers' stronger PSI may explain why their ES content has stronger engagement compared to macro-influencers. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Influencer type (micro vs. macro) will moderate the effect of emotional storytelling on parasocial interaction, such that the effect will be stronger for micro-influencers than for macro-influencers.

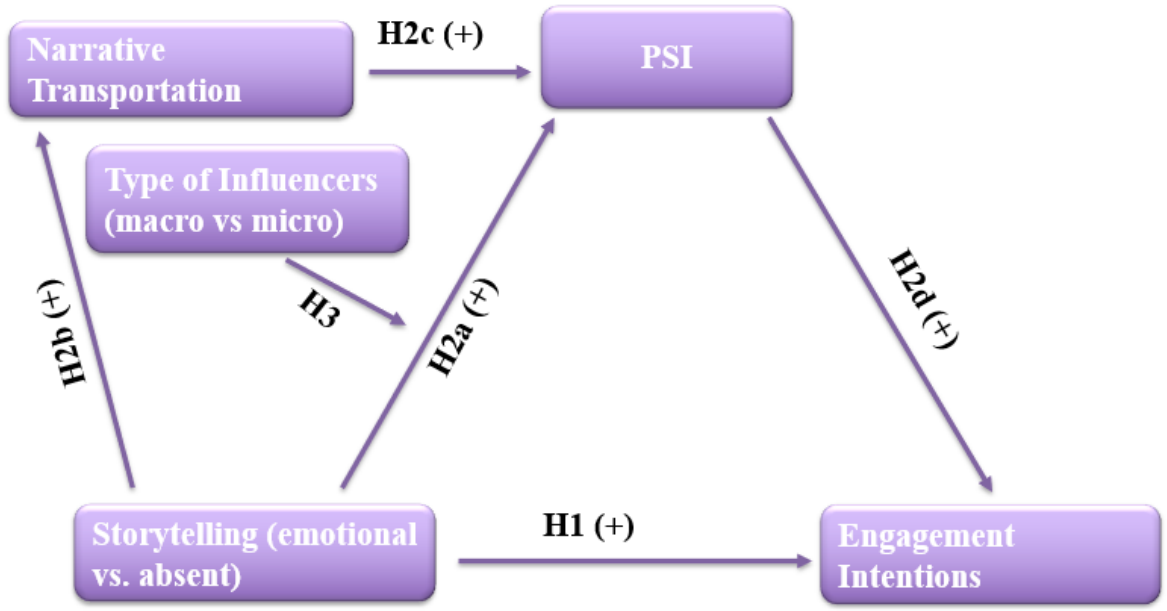

Figure 1: The hypothesized conceptual model

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

To test the hypotheses, a 2 (emotional storytelling: present vs. absent) x 2 (influencer type: micro vs. macro) factorial experiment, with two sequential mediators (narrative transportation and parasocial interaction) and engagement intention as the dependent variable, was designed. Emotional storytelling, the independent variable, was manipulated in this study by including or excluding emotional storytelling in the influencer post. Influencer type was defined by follower count: micro-influencers had 10,000–100,000 followers, while macro-influencers had 100,000–1 million.

Factorial designs are useful for studying how multiple independent variables interact (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 111). To begin, this design helps determine the main effects, whether storytelling and influencer type matter individually (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 111). Then the design allows us to examine the interaction effects, whether their combination creates a unique influence on PSI and engagement (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 111). This method provides a structured way to explore how these factors interact in shaping audience responses (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 111). In this 2×2 structure, each variable has two levels, leading to four different conditions:

1. Micro-influencer with storytelling
2. Micro-influencer without storytelling
3. Macro-influencer with storytelling
4. Macro-influencer without storytelling

Experimental design was chosen as reliable way to show cause-and-effect relationships, making them a good fit for this study (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 101). By adjusting and controlling independent variables while observing their effects on dependent variables, experiments help researchers reduce outside influences that might interfere with the results. This control is what makes experiments the strongest method for proving causation (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 101). This aligns with Neumann (2014) who states that experiments provide the strongest test of causal relationships by ensuring that changes in one variable come before changes in another, proving an association, and ruling out alternative explanations (p. 282). Since this study looks at individual behaviors and interactions, experiment is a good choice because they are designed to study small-scale psychological and social processes (Neuman, 2014, p. 283).

3.2. Sampling Method & Procedure

This study uses random assignment to allocate participants into one of the four experimental conditions, ensuring balanced groups for comparison. When the sample size is small, random assignment does not work as well because the groups may differ more, making it harder to ensure they are evenly balanced (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 109). With a large enough sample, this method ensures that characteristics such as mood, socioeconomic status, and other factors are evenly

distributed across conditions, making the groups nearly identical on average (Vargas et al., 2017, p. 108).

Random assignment sorts participants into groups within the study (Neuman, 2014, p. 288). Although random assignment does not create perfectly identical groups, it remains a simple and effective method for addressing natural differences among participants (Vargas et al., 2017, pp. 108-109). This approach is important because it helps form groups that are almost the same, making comparisons between them more reliable (Neuman, 2014, p. 288). It also keeps the process fair by preventing bias, so neither the researcher's expectations nor the participants' choices influence their group placement (Neuman, 2014, p. 288).

Participants in the experimental study were informed in advance about the aim, procedures, and their rights concerning the study, and specific informed consent was requested before participating. A pretest with 10 participants was conducted before publishing the survey to test question clarity, technical issues, and general survey flow. The pretest revealed several technical issues, which were resolved before uploading the final version. These pretest participants did not take part in the final study. In addition, recruitment for the main survey was carried out through Instagram and through university community outreach to target audiences with the same interests as required by the study. Furthermore, to replicate a realistic browsing time and keep attention on the stimulus, participants were instructed to look closely and read the Instagram post for 15 seconds before moving on to the questionnaire. This exposure time was intended to reflect the typical stopping time users would have when going through content on social media platforms like Instagram.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

This study follows the ethical guidelines of the 'Methodological Guidelines for Thesis Research' in Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2024, p. 4). First of all, the participants were informed that the research was conducted by a student for a master's thesis. In order to avoid misrepresentation, no official university logos, letterheads or other formal identifiers were used (p. 4). Furthermore, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without facing any consequences. They were also informed of any potential risks involved in participating, including issues relating to anonymity or identification in research outputs (p. 4).

Every effort was made to minimise any potential discomfort or harm to participants (p. 4). It was very important that the people taking part in the study had filled out the informed consent. Participants were briefed on the nature and aim of the study, and their anonymity was respected to ensure privacy (p. 4). A formal consent form based on the university's recommended template was provided and signed before participation commenced (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2024, p. 4). In some cases, researchers may temporarily mislead participants with deception, but only if absolutely

necessary for the study's goals and must be kept to a minimum. Following that, at the end of the survey, researchers must debrief and disclose the actual purpose of the study as soon as possible and explain any deception used (Neuman, 2014, p. 310). If deception was part of the experimental design, which it was partly because of the fictional influencer, it was limited, justified, and followed by immediate debriefing at the end of the questionnaire (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2024, p. 4). The participants of the present study were debriefed about the real purpose of the study and any deception used, they all viewed one of four versions of a fake Instagram post from a fictional influencer by the name Zara.

3.4. Sample Description

A total of 166 participants took part in the study and 154 provided complete demographic data. The sample was young, with 89.0% aged 18–29, 7.1% aged 30–49, and 3.9% aged 50–64 years. There were no participants aged 65 or above. For gender, the sample included 65.6% females, 33.1% males, and 1.3% who reported being non-binary/third gender. For social media usage, the participants had reported following an average of 3.08 Instagram influencers (*SD* = 1.30). 11.0% of the participants followed no influencer, 27.3% followed 1–5, 24.7% followed 6–10, 16.9% followed 11–20, and 20.1% followed more than 20. Most (41.6%) had reported spending 1 to 2 hours per day on social media. This was followed by 31.2% of them spending 3 to 4 hours per day on social media. The descriptive statistics can be observed in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Social Media Engagement Patterns

Category	Subgroup	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-29 years	137	89.00%
	30-49 years	11	7.10%
	50-64 years	6	3.90%
Gender	Female	101	65.60%
	Male	51	33.10%
	Non-binary / Third Gender	2	1.30%
Influencers Followed	None	17	11.00%
	1-5 Influncers	42	27.30%
	6-10 Influencers	38	24.70%
	11-20 Influencers	26	16.90%
	More than 20	31	20.10%
Social Media Time	Less than 15 min	3	1.90%
	Half hour - 1 hour	23	14.90%
	1-2 hours	64	41.60%
	3-4 hours	48	31.20%

	5-6 hours	11	7.10%
	7-8 hours	5	3.20%

The study employed a 2 × 2 between-subjects design and manipulated two independent variables (IVs): Storytelling Style (*StoryTyp*: 0 = Absent, 1 = Emotional) and Influencer Type (*InflTyp*: 0 = Micro, 1 = Macro). These conditions were evenly distributed across the sample: 55.4% (n = 92) of participants were exposed to no storytelling and 44.6% (n = 74) to emotional storytelling; 51.2% (n = 85) viewed content from a micro-influencer and 48.8% (n = 81) from a macro-influencer.

3.5. Operationalization

The independent variable, emotional storytelling, was operationalized through a stimulus constructed to represent an Instagram post by a fictional influencer, Zara. In advertising experimental research, there are times when it is necessary to use an influencer to present realistic stimuli (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 86). To avoid participant bias from knowing real influencers, it is recommended that fictional or unknown ones be used (p. 86). There are likely to be existing opinions, attitudes, or emotional predispositions toward well-known influencers among viewers that can influence the measurement of intended effects (p. 86). These prior associations can bias outcomes like memory, persuasion, or attitude change, and the impact of the experimental manipulation will be difficult to separate (p. 86). Hence, fictional influencers should be used in order not to induce unintended recognition or biased response (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 86). The posts were created using Canva, matching an image and caption that was tailored to fit the given condition (Appendix A). The captions were adjusted to have either emotional storytelling or no storytelling with a neutral tone describing the product pictured in the post, and the influencer's perceived size, with the number of followers and likes, was altered to show either a micro or macro influencer (Appendix A).

To measure participants' level of engagement, parasocial interaction and narrative transportation by the social media influencers, this study adapted existing scales and used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". Although prior researches and measurements that were selected and adapted to be applied in this survey all use 7-point Likert scales, a 5-point scale instead will be used for this study. Revilla et al. (2014) point out that 5-point scales provide data of higher quality than 7- and 11-point counterparts and are therefore to be preferred when agree-disagree response formats are employed (p. 89). Further evidence is given to this view by research outcomes that 5-point scales are less confusing for the respondents and can be used to increase test response rates, particularly in European survey contexts (Bouranta et al., 2009, p. 280). Similarly, Jenkins and Taber (1977) found that adding more than five response options didn’t meaningfully improve the strength of correlations (p. 392). They also noted that any benefits gained from increasing the number of categories tend to level off after five (p. 394), ultimately

concluding that five options strike the best balance for designing effective questionnaires (p. 396). Furthermore, Wakita et al. (2012) reported that participants on a 7-point scale evaded extreme categories and gravitated towards negative options, suggesting that more response options can generate response bias (p. 543).

To measure the mediator, Narrative Transportation, we adapted the Green and Brock (2000) transportation scale (p. 704). This measure consists of 11 Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). The scale includes items such as “The influencer's story affected me emotionally” and “I wanted to learn how the narrative ended”, assessing mental involvement and emotional reaction. Three negatively worded items of the Narrative Transportation Scale, like "I was finding my mind wandering while reading the post" were reverse-coded to avoid inconsistency and lack of focus in the response and for a more consistent directional interpretation (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 704). In the original scale by Green and Brock (2000), the negatively worded items were marked with an *R* (p. 704). Such items—*Manip_ActivityAround*, *Manip_PostOutMind*, and *Manip_WanderingMind*—were recoded as *Manip_ActivityAround_R*, *Manip_PostOutMind_R*, and *Manip_WanderingMind_R*, respectively.

The 11-item Narrative Transportation Scale was initially tested for internal consistency. Overall scale reliability for the entire scale was moderate with Cronbach's alpha = .617, less than that which is commonly accepted at .70. For subsequent inquiry, an item-level analysis was conducted. One of the items, *Manip_ActivityAround_R* contained a negative corrected item-total correlation (r = –.324) and made overall scale reliability increase significantly when it was deleted. Following this, the reliability of the scale was reestimated, excluding this problematic item, and a revised 10-item version was attained. Internal consistency of the new scale increased to α = .701, which met the threshold for minimum reliability. This version was employed in further analyses, and a composite *TransportationScore* variable was created by computing the mean of the 10 items that remained. The 10-item composite was retained according to Green and Brock (2000), who state that even though the subscales of the Transportation Scale (cognitive, affective, imagery) have satisfactory internal consistency, they do not always predict differentially (p. 704). Hence, they suggest reporting a total transportation score (Green &Brock, 2000, p. 704). Therefore, the unidimensional *TransportationScore* variable was used in all subsequent analyses, with higher scores indicating stronger narrative transportation (M = 2.44, SD = 0.61) (Table 5).

Moreover, to measure the second mediator, PSI was assessed adapting Hartmann, Masur, and Schramm's Parasocial Processing Short Scale (2023). The nine-item scale assesses three significant dimensions of parasocial interaction: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Hartmann et al., 2023, pp. 6-7). The cognitive dimension reflects the degree participants considered Zara in their mind, for example, by considering what happens to her or what she might do next. The emotional measure assessed the degree to which participants were emotionally impacted by Zara's emotions or actions. Finally, the behavioral measure measured participants' inclination to speak to or respond to

Zara, even though interaction was one-way and mediated (Hartmann et al., 2023, pp. 6-7). Participants responded to 9 statements and the scale was adapted with an agreement five-point Likert scale from (1 = Strongly Disagree) to (5 = Strongly Agree), as suggested by the authors (Hartmann et al., 2023, p. 5).

A PCA was conducted on the nine items of PSI scale to examine the dimensionality of parasocial interaction. Sampling adequacy was established using a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of .868, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(36) = 568.65$, $p < .001$), showing that the data is suitable for factor analysis. Three components were derived employing Eigenvalues greater than one and inspection of the scree plot. The three factors together explained 69.7% of variance. Varimax rotation was employed for increasing interpretability.

The initial factor was interpreted as *PSI_Affective* with Cronbach's alpha of .8 and encompassed the items: *PSI_FeelingsContagious, PSI_InfectedByMood*, and *PSI_BehaviorInfluence*. This factor included items related to emotional responsiveness to the influencer. The second factor, *PSI_Behavioral* (α = .79), included *PSI_WantedToSpeak, PSI_LikedToGetTouch*, and *PSI_ExpressingThoughts*. This shows expressive intentions and communicative behaviors towards the influencer. The third factor, *PSI_Cognitive* (α = .7), consisted of *PSI_ThinkingAboutZara*, *PSI_GuessingZara*, and *PSI_ThinkingSituation*. This factor included items that include mental engagement in the influencer's content.

Items were assigned to components based on the highest rotated loading of items with a cutoff of .50. All items loaded very cleanly on a single component, validating a three-dimensional model of parasocial interaction consistent with expectations in PSI literature (Hartmann et al., 2025 pp. 6-7). Composite scores were also computed by taking the mean of the items across every factor and as variables *PSI_Cognitive*, *PSI_Affective*, and *PSI_Behavioral*. The factor loadings and the Cronbach's alphas of each factor are presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha during reliability analysis was .86, reflecting high internal consistency. Hence, the PSI questions were averaged to create a composite variable, *PSICB*, to measure parasocial interaction, which was also recommended as a decision from the authors of the original scale (Hartmann et al., 2025, p. 9), with higher scores representing greater parasocial interaction (M = 2.23, SD = 0.82).

Table 2: Factor Analysis PSI

Items	PSI Affective	PSI Behavioral	PSI Cognitive
Zara's feelings were sometimes contagious	.827		
When Zara appeared, I forgot my own feelings and let myself be infected by her mood.	.816		

The behavior of Zara had a strong influence on my own mood.	.713		
Sometimes I would have liked to say something to Zara.		.780	
At some moments, I would have liked to get in touch with Zara.		.758	
I was close to expressing my thoughts about Zara with appropriate facial expressions and gestures.		.740	
I kept thinking about the situation of Zara.			.821
I kept thinking about the situation of Zara			.672
Over and over, I tried to guess what Zara was going to do or say next.			.667
Cronbach's α	.80	.79	.70
Eigenvalue	2.33	2.15	1.80

The dependent variable of the study, engagement intention with the influencer, was measured using the Influencer Engagement Scale (IESM) of Levesque and Pons (2023), which measures the cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement with the social media influencers (p. 1750), but they predict five dimensions (p. 1754). Participants responded to 21 statements and the scale was adapted with an agreement scale from (1 = Strongly Disagree) to (5 = Strongly Agree). For example, "I create stories about my influencer" or "I comment on my influencer's posts" (Levesque & Pons, 2023, 1751). Levesque and Pons (2023) argue that the IESM scale captures distinct cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of follower engagement as a second-order multidimensional construct, and this addresses gaps between theoretical and empirical understandings (p. 1755). Therefore, a factor analysis was also carried out to determine what could be the underlying dimensions of the 21-item measure.

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted on 21 items assessing user engagement with influencer Zara. The data set included 166 valid cases. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .877, showing that the data can be used for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant $\chi^2(210) = 2420.71$, $p < .001$, confirming the item correlations were sufficient for factor analysis. Based on the eigenvalues of greater than 1 and the scree plot, five factors were extracted with a cumulative variance of 72.07%. As there were more than one factors, a Varimax (orthogonal) rotation was applied for improved interpretability. Items were sorted into components based on their highest rotated loading, a cutoff of .50. Five-component fit was excellent with previous conceptualizations by Levesque and Pons (2023) and was interpreted

as follows: Self-Presentation, Interactive Engagement, Content Consumption, Emotional Attachment, and Content Creation.

Self-Presentation factor α =.88 contained six items: *IESM_GoodImpression*, *IESM_IdentityDefined*, *IESM_ConveyIdentity*, *IESM_ImprovePerception*, *IESM_ImageToOthers*, and *IESM_EnergyWithZara*. These items reflect identity expression and impression management in public interaction with Zara. The Interactive Engagement factor α = .82 was made up of three items: *IESM_CommentPosts*, *IESM_CommentLive*, and *IESM_StoryAboutLife*, which reflect active social interaction of Zara's posts. The Content Consumption factor α = .9 was made up of four items: *IESM_PositiveFeelings*, *IESM_LookAtPhotos*, *IESM_ReadPosts*, and *IESM_WatchVideos*, which reflect consumption of media. The Emotional Attachment factor α = .77 was made up of three items: *IESM_WorryZara*, *IESM_MissZara*, and I*ESM_IfNoZara*. Finally, the Content Creation component α = .89 was made up of five items: *IESM_VisualPosts*, *IESM_TextPosts*, *IESM_TagZara*, *IESM_HopeShare*, and *IESM_HopeLike*. These items track activities in which individuals generate and share information related to Zara, often with aspirations of being noticed or responded to.

All subscales showed acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from α = .77 (Emotional Attachment) to α = .90 (Content Consumption). Composite scores across all factors were determined by the mean of items that loaded on each factor. This five-factor structure was used in subsequent analysis, including structural equation modelling (SEM), to ascertain the multidimensionality of engagement intentions with theoretical guidance from the structure obtained by the original scale developers, Levesque and Pons (2023), who conceptualize engagement as a multidimensional construct (p. 1755). The factor loadings and the Cronbach's alphas of each factor are presented in Table 3.

Subsequent to this, reliability tests for all of the main constructs were conducted. The items measuring engagement intention using the full scale composite score (*IESMCB*) had extremely high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha = .93. As a consequence of this very high reliability, the items were combined into a single composite variable named *IESMCB*, indicating aggregate engagement intention. Therefore, a composite engagement intention score was computed using all scale items, with higher scores representing greater Instagram engagement (M = 1.92, SD = 0.69) (Table 5).

Table 3: Factor Analysis IESM

Items	Self-Presentation	Emotional Attachment	Content Consumption	Interactive Engagement	Content Creation
By interacting publicly with Zara, I	.766				

could make a good impression on others.				
Part of me could be defined by my interactions with Zara.	.684			
Interacting publicly with Zara would allow me to convey who I am to others.	.792			
By interacting publicly with Zara, I could improve others' perception of me.	.837			
Interacting publicly with Zara would allow me to portray the image of who I want to be to others.	.788			
I would be bursting with energy if I interacted with Zara.	.529			
If Zara didn't post for some time, I would get worried.		.646		
I would miss Zara if she were not posting.		.796		
My days wouldn't be the same without Zara.	.343	.368*	.328	.400
Positive feelings about Zara would come to mind regularly.			.598	
I would look at Zara's photos.			.895	
I would read Zara's posts.			.895	

I would watch Zara's videos.			.894		
I would comment on Zara's posts.				.614	
I would comment on Zara's life.				.713	
I would create stories about Zara's life.				.743	
I would create visual publications (photos or videos) about Zara.					.782
I would create text-based publications about Zara.					.815
I would tag Zara in my publications (text, images or stories).					.769
I would create posts about Zara and hope she would share them.					.797
I would create posts about Zara and hope she would like them.					.778
Cronbach's alpha	.88	.77	.90	.83	.89
Eigenvalue	4.04	1.69	3.36	2.08	3.96

Note: *The item *"My days wouldn't be the same without Zara"* loaded moderately across several components but was conceptually retained in the Emotional Attachment factor, in line with the original theoretical framework.

Additionally, to test how different types of influencers affect PSI, participants were randomly assigned to watch content from either a micro-influencer or a macro-influencer. This study is testing whether people actually perceive the influencer's popularity as expected, which is why we used a slightly modified version of a manipulation check by De Veirman et al. (2017) to confirm this. Participants indicated the popularity and reach of Zara based on the Instagram post they viewed (Appendix B). This included the number of followers Zara had, whether she reached more people than an average influencer, and whether she appeared generally popular. These items were used to determine whether manipulations of micro versus macro influencers worked. One of the questions

asks, “The influencer has a … amount of followers” with answer choices ranging from 1 (Very Small) to 7 (Very Large) (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 824). In addition to these key constructs, the scale assessing participants' perceptions of the influencer's reach was used as a manipulation check and combined into a single composite variable labelled *PerceivedReach (α =.86, M* = 4.23, *SD* = 1.14) (Table 5). This variable measures participants' perceptions of Zara's follower count and social influence, since it had very good internal consistency. The manipulation check also included *Popularity_Zara* (*M* = 4.16, *SD* = 1.26), which was rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Unpopular) to 7 (Popular).

For differences between individuals that may affect an individual's reaction to an experiment, demographic and social media usage information were collected from each participant. Participants indicated their gender, with responses listed as follows: female, male, non-binary, non-specified, and prefer not to respond. These were adapted from measures by Hartmann et al. (2023, p. 13) to be inclusive in research practices. Next, respondents selected their age range from among four pre-defined categories: 18–29, 30–49, 50–64, and 65+. The categorization is the same format as used by Pew Research Center to illustrate generations of social media usage (Auxier & Anderson, 2021, p. 2). The respondents were also asked to indicate the number of social media influencers (SMIs) they are following on Instagram, none, 1–5, 6–10, 11–20, or more than 20. This was adapted from existing research on influencer marketing and exposure levels by Conde and Casais (2023, p. 162). To assess overall digital behavior, participants reported how much time they spent on social media per day. The choices were less than 15 minutes, half an hour to one hour, 1–2 hours, 3–4 hours, 5–6 hours, and 7–8 hours. These categories were adapted from the Social Networking Sites Usage & Needs (SNSUN) scale (Ali et al., 2019, p. 155), a validated online use behavior measure.

3.6. Data Analysis

All the analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) and the PROCESS macro (Version 4.2; Hayes, 2022, p. 188; p. 480), whereas structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed in AMOS. Descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the study were estimated, and scale reliabilities were computed using Cronbach's alpha. To examine the direct effect of storytelling style (emotional vs. absent) on engagement intentions (*IESMCB*), a linear regression was performed. A sequential mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 6 tested whether the effect of storytelling type on engagement was mediated by narrative transportation (*TransportationScore*) and PSI (*PSICB*), with 5,000 bootstrap samples used to estimate indirect effects.

To test for moderation, PROCESS Model 7 was used to determine whether influencer type (micro vs. macro) moderated the relationship between storytelling style and PSI. This enabled us to test whether the effect of emotional storytelling on PSI differed depending on the type of influencer. In addition, SEM was used to examine the overall fit of the hypothesized relationships with more dimensions. Analyses adhered to a significance threshold of $p < .05$, and effect sizes such as R^2 and

standardized path coefficients were reported. All model assumptions were checked and reasonably met.

3.7. Data Cleaning & Preparation

The original dataset consisted of responses from 361 participants. A total of 195 cases were excluded because the responses were incomplete. More specifically, participants who did not answer at least 50% of the survey items, especially those related to the key variables of PSI and engagement intentions. These cases were considered invalid due to early dropout, and they were removed listwise. This finally left an analytic sample of 166 participants. Of these, 143 participants completed the entire survey, while 23 participants only completed part of it. However, only 19 cases contained missing values, and these were retained because the missing responses were minimal and did not affect the core variables. Interestingly, four participants did not press the final 'submit' button, but their data were recorded in full and thus included.

The dataset was cleaned and standardized before the analyses. All relevant variables were renamed, and appropriate variable labels and value labels were given for better clarity and interpretability in the analysis (see Appendix D). Descriptive statistics for all individual scale items are reported in Appendix D. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Influencer Type: Micro vs. Macro) × 2 (Storytelling: Emotional vs. Absent) between-subjects design. Based on their condition, two group variables were calculated to capture the experimental manipulations. The first, *InfluencerType*, divided participants into seeing content from a micro-influencer or a macro-influencer. The second, *StorytellingType*, divided those who viewed emotional storytelling content from those who did not. Participants were assigned to these conditions according to their block in the experimental manipulation. All cases not assigned to a condition due to missing responses were defaulted into the baseline group (i.e., 0 = Micro or Absent) for purposes of maintaining consistency in the analyses.

3.8. Manipulation Checks

To evaluate if the experimental manipulations were successful, independent samples t-tests were conducted for both storytelling style and influencer type. Participants in the emotional storytelling condition reported significantly higher levels of narrative transportation (M = 2.57, SD = 0.62) than those in the storytelling absent condition (M = 2.34, SD = 0.58), $t(151) = -2.36$, $p = .020$. The effect size was moderate, $d = 0.60$, which indicated that the emotional storytelling manipulation effectively increased participants' immersion in the content.

Participants exposed to a macro-influencer perceived significantly higher audience reach (M = 4.61, SD = 1.12) compared to those shown a micro influencer (M = 3.85, SD = 1.03), $t(152) = -4.37$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 1.08$). Furthermore, macro-influencers were rated as significantly more popular (M = 4.49, SD = 1.13) than micro influencers (M = 3.83, SD = 1.30),

$t(150) = -3.34$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.22$), which confirmed that the influencer type manipulation was effective in shaping perceived reach and popularity of the influencer. Together, these findings showcase that both manipulations were effective, supporting the internal validity of the experimental design of the study (see Table 4).

Table 4: Manipulation Checks

Manipulation Check	Group	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(df)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Perceived Reach	Micro influencer	77	3.85	1.03	–4.37 (152)	<.001	0.60
	Macro influencer	77	4.61	1.12			
Perceived Popularity	Micro influencer	76	3.83	1.30	–3.34 (150)	.001	1.08
	Macro influencer	76	4.49	1.13			
Narrative Transportation	Storytelling Absent	83	2.34	0.58	–2.36 (151)	.020	1.22
	Emotional storytelling	70	2.57	0.62			

Note: Means and standard deviations reported per group. Cohen's *d* uses pooled standard deviation.

3.9. Randomization Tests

To check whether random assignment to condition was successful, a series of chi-square tests were conducted to see if there were differences in participant demographics and main measures across experimental conditions. Specifically, gender, age, social media use, and influencer following behavior were tested for differences between both storytelling type (emotional vs. absent) and influencer type (micro vs. macro).

Gender split was not meaningfully different between influencer and storytelling conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 2.83$, $p = .243$, or influencer and influencer type conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 0.27$, $p = .876$. Once more, age split was not meaningfully different between influencer groups, $\chi^2(2) = 0.77$, $p = .682$, or storytelling groups, $\chi^2(2) = 0.75$, $p = .689$ (See Appendix C, Table 2, Table 4, Table 6, Table 8).

Similarly, no significant group differences were observed in the number of influencers that were followed on Instagram in storytelling ($\chi^2(4) = 2.60$, $p = .626$) or influencer conditions ($\chi^2(4) = 2.52$, $p = .641$). Finally, daily time spent on social media was also similarly allocated across storytelling conditions, $\chi^2(5) = 2.01$, $p = .848$, and influencer conditions, $\chi^2(5) = 6.29$, $p = .279$. (See Appendix C, Table 1, Table 3, Table 5, Table 7).

In all analyses, *p*-values were not significant. This shows that random assignment was successful and participant characteristics were evenly distributed across experimental conditions.

Thus, no control variables (e.g., age, gender, or social media use) were included as covariates to the main analyses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Of the five engagement intention (DV) dimensions, content consumption received the highest average rating (*M* = 2.52, *SD* = 1.10), while content creation received the lowest (*M* = 1.42, *SD* = 0.72). The overall Instagram engagement composite score (*IESMCB*) was relatively low (*M* = 1.92, *SD* = 0.69). In terms of the mediator, parasocial interaction, cognitive PSI (*M* = 2.28, *SD* = 0.93) was rated slightly higher than affective (*M* = 2.26, *SD* = 1.00) and behavioral (M = 2.16, *SD* = 1.02) components, but the composite PSI score (*PSICB*) showed low-to-moderate levels overall (*M* = 2.23, *SD* = 0.82). Similarly, the mediator narrative immersion, as measured by the *TransportationScore* (α = .7), was moderate (*M* = 2.44, *SD* = 0.61), reflecting that participants were somewhat connected with the influencer content but not extensively immersed (Table 5).

Manipulation check variables revealed that the influencer was seen as relatively popular (*Popularity_Zara: M* = 4.16, *SD* = 1.26) and widely followed (*PerceivedReach*: *M* = 4.23, *SD* = 1.14), particularly in the macro-influencer condition. Internal consistency was high across all multi-item scales. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .70 (*PSI_Cognitive*) to .93 (*IESM_Composite*), indicating acceptable to excellent reliability. Scale-level descriptives for all key variables are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Key Variables Descriptives

Variable	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Cronbach's α	Min	Max
PSI_Cognitive	166	2.28	0.93	0.7	1	5
PSI_Affective	166	2.26	1	0.8	1	5
PSI_Behavioral	166	2.16	1.02	0.79	1	5
PSICB	166	2.23	0.82	0.86	1	5
IESM_SelfPresentation	166	2.22	0.95	0.88	1	5
IESM_InteractiveEngagement	166	1.56	0.78	0.83	1	5
IESM_ContentConsumption	166	2.52	1.1	0.9	1	5
IESM_EmotionalAttachment	166	1.75	0.87	0.77	1	5
IESM_ContentCreation	166	1.42	0.72	0.896	1	5
IESMCB	166	1.92	0.69	0.93	1	5
TransportationScore	153	2.44	0.61	0.7	1	5
PerceivedReach	154	4.23	1.14	0.86	1	7
Popularity _Zara	152	4.16	1.26		1	7

Note: Small differences in sample sizes reflect missing responses to some variables.

Table 6 shows the group-level means for the main outcome variables according to the experimental conditions. Participants in the emotional storytelling condition reported higher levels of

engagement (*IESMCB*), parasocial interaction (*PSICB*) and narrative transportation than those in the storytelling absent condition. They also perceived macro-influencers as being more popular and having broader reach than micro-influencers, thus validating the experimental manipulation.

Table 6: Group-Level Means and SDs by Experimental Condition

Variable	Condition	*Mean*	*SD*	*N*
IESMCB	Storytelling: Abesent	1.84	0.63	92
IESMCB	Storytelling: Emotional	2.03	0.74	74
PSICB	Storytelling: Absent	2.05	0.73	92
PSICB	Storytelling: Emotional	2.46	0.88	74
TransportationScore	Storytelling: Absent	2.34	0.58	83
TransportationScore	Storytelling: Emotional	2.57	0.62	70
PerceivedReach	Influencer: Micro	3.85	1.03	77
PerceivedReach	Influencer: Macro	4.61	1.12	77
Popularity_Zara	Influencer: Micro	3.83	1.30	76
Popularity_Zara	Influencer: Macro	4.49	1.13	76

Following Clement and Bradley-Garcia (2022), the assumptions of the linear regression analysis were examined to ensure its validity, including the normality of the residuals, linearity, homoscedasticity and the absence of multicollinearity (pp. 262–263). Assumptions of linear regression were tested and reasonably met. The residuals appeared approximately normally distributed, as suggested by a histogram and normal P–P plot (Appendix E, Figures A1–A2). Residual independence was confirmed using a Durbin–Watson statistic of 1.85 and multicollinearity was not present (VIF = 1.00, Tolerance = 1.00).

Linearity and homoscedasticity were tested using a scatterplot. Since the predictor was dichotomous, the predicted values were grouped at two points (0 and 1) and produced a vertically split residual plot. It is common for models with a binary predictor but does not violate assumptions. For both groups, residuals were randomly distributed without any observable pattern, validating the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity (see Appendix E, Figure A3).

4.2. Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression was employed to test H1, predicted that storytelling type (*Storytyp:* 0 = absent, 1 = emotional) positively predicted higher engagement intentions (*IESMCB*) for the social media influencer. The model included 166 participants. The overall model was not statistically significant, $F(1, 164) = 3.42$, $p = .066$, and explained 2.0% of the variance in *IESMCB*, $R^2 = .02$ (Table 7).

Table 7: Regression model predicting engagement intention ($N = 166$)

Items	Model 1 *b*
Constant	1.84***
Storytelling Type	0.20
R^2	.02
F	3.42
p	.066

Note: Storytelling Type coded 0 = absent, 1 = emotional.
Significance levels: $p < .05$ *, $p < .01$ **, $p < .001$ ***.

The type of storytelling regression coefficient was also not significant, $B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.11$, $\beta = .14$, $t(164) = 1.85$, $p = .066$, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.41], indicating that those in the emotional storytelling condition did not score higher on engagement intentions compared to those in the storytelling absent condition. Thus, H1 was not supported and emotional storytelling did not lead to a statistically significant increase in engagement intentions compared to no storytelling.

4.3. Sequential Mediation Model

To test a sequential mediation model, we conducted a PROCESS Model 6 analysis (Hayes, 2022, p. 188) using 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. The model evaluated the direct and indirect effect of storytelling type (*StoryTyp*, 0 = absent, 1 = emotional) on *IESMCB* via two mediators in sequence: Narrative Transportation (*Transpor*) and Parasocial Interaction (*PSICB*). The variable measuring the combined *TransporationScore* was renamed to *Transpor*, because of the PROCESS Model 6 needs.

The overall model explained a significant proportion of variance in *IESMCB*, $R^2 = .478$, 47,8% of the model with $F(3, 149) = 45.51$, $p < .001$, indicating that the combination of predictors (*StoryTyp*, *Transpor*, and *PSICB*) significantly predicted engagement intentions (Table 8).

Table 8: Model Summary for PROCESS Model 6 Predicting Engagement Intentions

Predictor Variables	*R*	R^2	*F*(df)	*p*
StoryTyp, Transpor, PSICB → IESMCB	.691	.478	F(3, 149) = 45.51	< .001

As expected, emotional storytelling significantly predicted higher transportation, $b = 0.231$, $SE = 0.098$, $t(151) = 2.36$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [0.037, 0.424], with a standardized coefficient of $\beta = .377$, supporting Hypothesis H2b. Storytelling also directly predicted higher parasocial interaction, $b = 0.246$, $SE = 0.109$, $t(150) = 2.25$, $p = .026$, 95% CI [0.030, 0.462], β = .297, supporting Hypothesis 2a. In turn, transportation strongly predicted parasocial interaction, $b = 0.766$, $SE = 0.089$, $t(150) = 8.57$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.589, 0.942], $\beta = .564$, therefore H2c was supported (See Table 9).

Both mediators were also significant predictors of higher engagement intentions. *Transpor* predicted *IESMCB* with $b=.311$, $SE=.082$, $t(149) = 3.78$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [.148,.473], β=.278, while *PSICB* was a strong predictor, $b=.412$, $SE=.062$, $t(149) = 6.70$, $p<.001$, 95% CI [.291,.534], β=.501. However, the direct effect of *StoryTyp* on *IESMCB* (the c′ path) was not significant, $b=-0.064$, $SE=.084$, $t(149) = –0.77$, $p=.442$, 95% CI [−.230,.101], indicating full mediation through the indirect pathways (See Table 9).

Table 9: Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients for Direct Effects

Path	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI	β
StoryTyp → Transpor	0.231	0.098	2.36	.020	[0.037, 0.424]	.377
StoryTyp → PSICB	0.246	0.109	2.25	.026	[0.030, 0.462]	.297
Transpor → PSICB	0.766	0.089	8.57	< .001	[0.589, 0.942]	.564
Transpor → IESMCB	0.311	0.082	3.78	< .001	[0.148, 0.473]	.278
PSICB → IESMCB	0.412	0.062	6.70	< .001	[0.291, 0.534]	.501
StoryTyp → IESMCB (Direct path)	–0.064	0.084	–0.77	.442	[–0.230, 0.101]	–.094

Bootstrapped indirect effect analyses confirmed that all three indirect paths were statistically significant (see Table 10).

Table 10: Indirect Effects of Emotional Storytelling on Engagement Intentions via Transportation and PSI

Indirect Path	Effect	*BootSE*	95% CI	Significant
StoryTyp → Transpor → IESMCB	.072	.036	[.011, .152]	Yes
StoryTyp → PSICB → IESMCB	.102	.055	[.012, .226]	Yes
StoryTyp → Transpor → PSICB → IESMCB (Full)	.073	.034	[.012, .143]	Yes
Total Indirect Effect	.246	.082	[.093, .408]	Yes

The total indirect effect was significant, *b*=.246, *BootSE*=.082, 95% CI [.093, .408] (See Table 10), with the partially standardized total indirect effect estimated at *b*=.360, *BootSE*=.115, 95% CI [.137, .589] (See Table 11).

Table 11: Partially Standardized Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Effect	*BootSE*	95% CI
StoryTyp → Transpor → IESMCB	.105	.055	[.017, .228]
StoryTyp → PSICB → IESMCB	.149	.077	[.018, .318]
StoryTyp → Transpor → PSICB → IESMCB (Full)	.107	.049	[.018, .209]
Total Indirect Effect	.360	.115	[.137, .589]

These findings provide strong support for H2a-H2d and confirm a full sequential mediation structure: Emotional storytelling significantly increases narrative transportation, which in turn creates more parasocial interaction and ultimately increases engagement intentions. The lack of a significant direct effect of ES and engagement intentions, alongside the significant indirect effects, suggests that storytelling influences engagement intentions entirely through its mediators. The full PROCESS Model 6 analysis can be found in Appendix F.

4.4. Moderated Mediation Model

To test the hypothesized moderated mediation model, Model 7 of PROCESS macro v4.2 for SPSS (Hayes, 2022, p. 480) was employed. Bootstrapping with 5,000 samples was used to estimate indirect effects and the analysis used 95% confidence intervals to assess statistical significance. The model examined whether the effect of storytelling type (X = *StoryTyp*) on engagement intentions (Y = *IESMCB*) was mediated by parasocial interaction (*M* = PSICB), and whether this indirect effect was moderated by influencer type (W = *InflTyp*; 0 = Micro, 1 = Macro). The total sample included 166 participants. The full PROCESS Model 7 analysis can be found in Appendix G.

The first regression model tested whether storytelling type and influencer type, as well as their interaction, predicted PSI. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(3, 162) = 4.81$, $p = .003$, with an $R^2 = .082$, indicating that approximately 8.2% of the variance in PSI was explained by the predictors (Table 12). More specifically, storytelling type significantly predicted PSI, $b = 0.558$, $SE = 0.177$, $t(162) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, with a 95% CI [0.209, 0.906] (Table 12). Participants exposed to emotional storytelling reported higher levels of parasocial interaction with the influencer compared to those exposed to no storytelling. This finding supports H2a, which predicted a positive effect of storytelling on PSI.

In contrast, the main effect of influencer type (micro vs. macro) was not significant, $b = –0.080$, $SE = 0.167$, $t(162) = –0.48$, $p = .633$, 95% CI [–0.410, 0.250], suggesting no overall difference in PSI based on influencer type (Table 12). Similarly, the interaction between storytelling type and influencer type was not significant, $b = –0.255$, $SE = 0.250$, $t(162) = –1.02$, $p = .310$, 95% CI [–0.749, 0.239] (Table 12). Thus, there was no evidence that the effect of storytelling on PSI was moderated by influencer type, and H3 was not supported.

Table 12: Moderated Mediation Analysis: Regression on Parasocial Interaction

Outcome Variable: PSICB	β	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Storytelling Type	0.558	0.177	3.16	.002	[0.209, 0.906]
Influencer Type	-0.080	0.167	-0.48	.633	[-0.410, 0.250]
Storytelling × Influencer	-0.255	0.250	-1.02	.310	[-0.749, 0.239]

Note: Model Summary $F(3, 162) = 4.81$, $p = .003$, $R^2 = 0.082$.

The second regression model assessed whether PSI mediated the effect of storytelling on engagement intention. The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 163) = 62.16$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .433, indicating that 43.3% of the variance in engagement intention was explained by the predictors (Table 13). PSI was a strong positive predictor of engagement intention, $b = 0.552$, $SE = 0.051$, $t(163) = 10.88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.452, 0.652] (Table 13). This supports H2d, which posited that parasocial interaction would positively predict engagement intention. However, the direct effect of storytelling type on engagement intention was not statistically significant, $b = –0.031$, $SE = 0.084$,

t(163) = –0.37, *p* = .715, 95% CI [–0.196, 0.135] (Table 13). This result indicates that the relationship between storytelling and engagement intention is not direct, but fully mediated by PSI.

Table 13: Mediation Analysis: Regression on Engagement Intention

Outcome Variable: IESMCB	β	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Intercept	0.706	0.117	6.03	<.001	0.475	0.937
Storytelling Type (X)	–0.031	0.084	–0.37	.715	–0.196	0.135
Parasocial Interaction (M)	0.552	0.051	10.88	<.001	0.452	0.652

Note: Model Summary $F(2, 163) = 62.163$, $R^2 = .433$, $p < .001$

To evaluate the moderated mediation, the conditional indirect effect of storytelling on engagement intention via PSI was estimated at each level of influencer type. For micro-influencers (coded 0), the indirect effect was statistically significant, *b* = 0.308, *BootSE* = 0.114, 95% CI [0.102, 0.544] (Table 14). For macro influencers (coded 1), the indirect effect was not statistically significant, *b* = 0.167, *BootSE* = 0.094, 95% CI [–0.012, 0.357] (Table 14). Thus, the moderation effect was only significant when the influencer was a micro-influencer, as illustrated in Figure 2. While this suggests potential differences in indirect effects depending on influencer type, the moderated mediation was not significant, *b* = –0.141, *BootSE* = 0.144, 95% CI [–0.436, 0.132], indicating that the difference between these conditional indirect effects was not statistically significant (Table 14; Figure 2). Therefore, H3 was not supported.

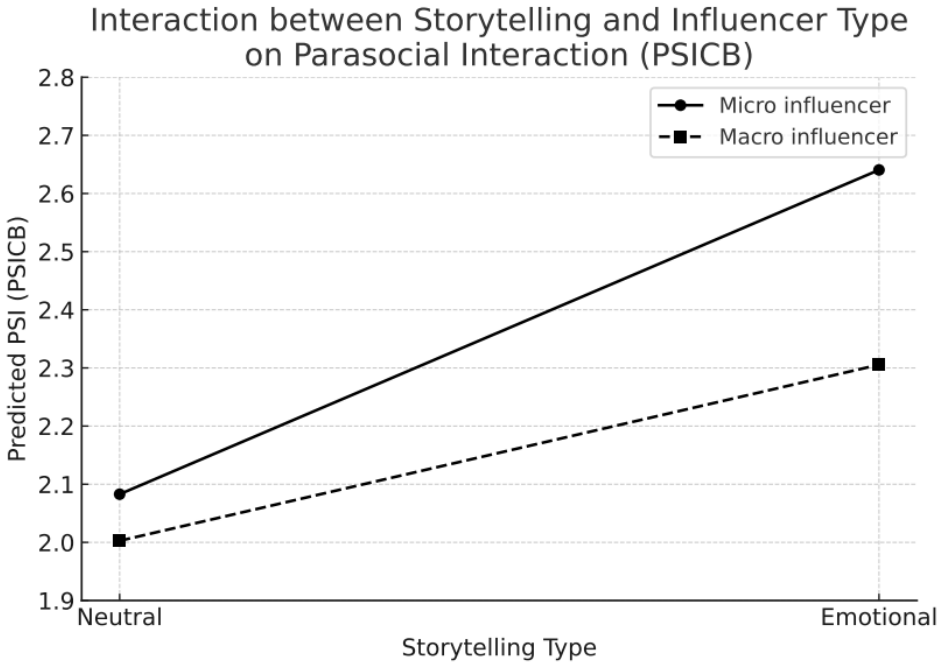

Figure 2: The interaction effect of storytelling style and influencer type on predicted parasocial interaction (*PSICB*). The figure shows that ES increases PSI and the increase is notably stronger for micro-influencers (*N* = 166).

Table 14: Bootstrapped Conditional Indirect Effects of Storytelling on Engagement via PSI

Influencer Type (W)	Indirect Effect (β)	Boot *SE*	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Significant?
Micro (0)	0.308	0.114	0.102	0.544	Yes
Macro (1)	0.167	0.094	–0.012	0.357	No

Note: Index of Moderated Mediation:

b = –0.141, *BootSE* = 0.144, 95% CI = [–0.436, 0.132] → Not statistically significant

4.5. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

A multi-group SEM was executed in AMOS 29 between micro-influencer (n = 85) and macro-influencer (n = 81) groups to test the proposed relationships. The model examined the direct and indirect effects of storytelling type (*StoryTyp*) on social media engagement (*IESM*) with Parasocial Interaction (*PSICB*) acting as a mediator and Influencer Type (*InflTyp*) as a moderator.

The hypothesized model demonstrated poor global fit. The chi-square value was $\chi^2(21) = 207.383$, $p < .001$. RMSEA was .233 with a 90% confidence interval ranging from .204 to .262, and the RMSEA test of close fit was also significant ($p < .001$). CFI was .571, GFI was .705, and RMR was .122. These measures indicate a strong misfit between the hypothesized model and observed data.

Hayes et al. (2017) argue that SEM is a large-sample technique and that its standard errors can be biased in small samples, giving a false impression of precision and they advise against its use for mediation with interaction terms (p. 79). These problems are largely applicable to traditional factor-based SEM procedures used in software like AMOS (as cited by Sarstedt et al., 2020, p. 290). Sarstedt et al. (2020) further note that PROCESS remains a valid method to estimate mediation and moderated mediation when using observed composite variables and it is more accessible to researchers who may not be high-level skilled in multivariate modeling (p. 291).

Although engagement intention was modeled as a latent variable in SEM analysis, the PROCESS analysis used a composite score from directly observable indicators. This is an important distinction since, as Sarstedt et al. (2020) explain, one of the key limitations of traditional SEM is that it is difficult to precisely estimate interaction effects using latent variables (p. 294). Since PROCESS uses observed variables, these limitations do not apply, supporting its use for moderated mediation in this study.

Because of the poor model fit and methodological limitations for SEM, no additional model interpretation was conducted. As Ryu (2014) emphasizes, interpreting and testing model parameters is only valid when the model fits the data well, because if the model shows a poor fit, it fails to reflect the true underlying structure of the variables (Ryu, 2014, pp. 1–2). Conversely, Hayes et al. (2017) discuss that in mediation analysis, in most cases it is more critical to place higher emphasis on the estimation of specific effect estimates, i.e., indirect or conditional effects, rather than achieving optimal global fit (p. 80). Consequently, no conclusions are drawn from the path coefficients estimated by this model. Nonetheless, for purposes of transparency and exploratory interest, the full results of the path analysis, are provided in Appendix F. These outputs are not interpreted within the main body of the text and should not be considered confirmatory.

Table 15: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Supported
H1	Exposure to an influencer's post that includes emotional storytelling will lead to higher engagement intentions than exposure to a post that does not include emotional storytelling	No
H2a	Emotional storytelling will increase parasocial interaction with the influencer	Yes
H2b	Exposure to an influencer's post that includes emotional storytelling will result in higher narrative transportation than exposure to a post that does not include emotional storytelling	Yes
H2c	Higher narrative transportation will increase parasocial interaction with the influencer	Yes
H2d	Higher parasocial interaction will increase engagement intentions with the influencer	Yes
H3	Influencer type (micro vs. macro) will moderate the effect of emotional storytelling on parasocial interaction, such that the effect will be stronger for micro-influencers than for macro-influencers	No

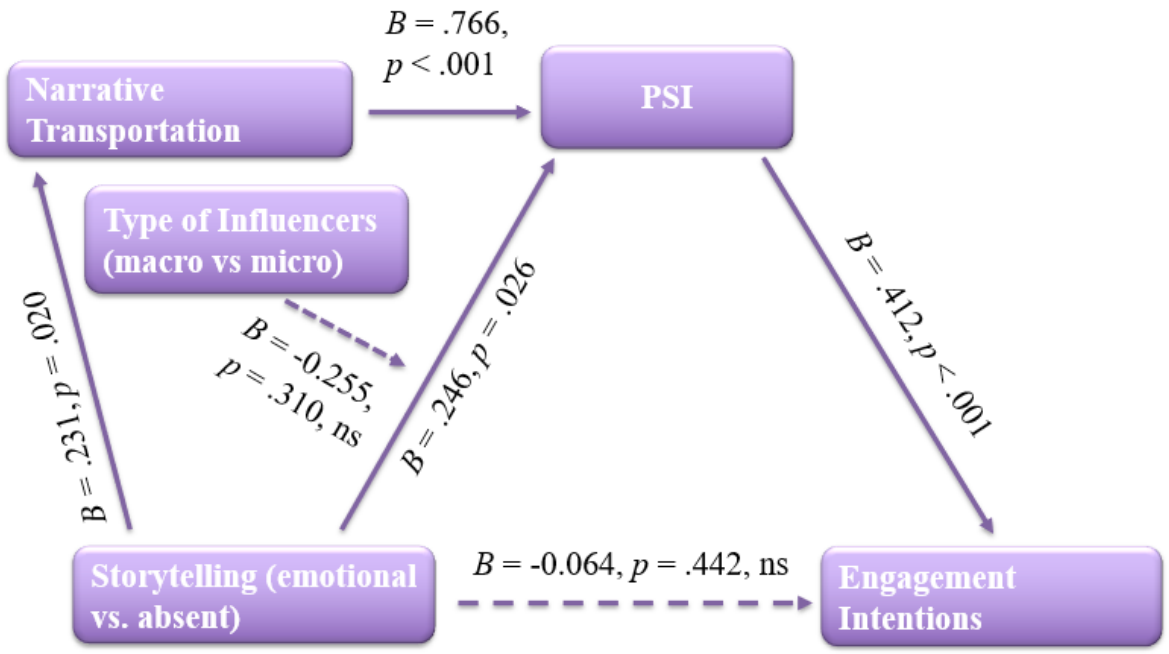

Figure 3: Final results model

5. Discussion

This current study examined the role of emotional storytelling (ES) in influencer marketing by testing its effect on engagement intentions through the mediating processes of narrative transportation and parasocial interaction (PSI). We also assessed whether the influence type (micro or macro) can moderate the ES-PSI relationship. The findings offer partial support for the proposed hypotheses and show how people respond to emotional narratives by social media influencers. Some of the expected relationships were confirmed, for instance, emotional storytelling increased both narrative transportation and parasocial interaction, and these in turn predicted higher engagement intentions. However, other results were more mixed. Emotional storytelling did not have a direct effect on engagement, and influencer type didn't significantly change how people with higher PSI responded to the story. The following section will examine each of these findings in more detail, seeing how they fit into or complicate the theories behind the research.

The first hypothesis, that ES would directly increase engagement intentions, was not supported. This result stands in contrast to existing literature, which shows that emotional storytelling increases user interaction and engagement intentions on social media (Gross et al., 2020, p. 399; Atiq et al., 2022, p. 13). For example, Gross et al. (2020) found that emotionally expressive posts received significantly more likes and comments than neutral ones, with emotional captions playing a key role in creating interaction (p. 388; p. 390). Feng et al. (2021) further mentioned that influencer posts that combined self-narrative with visual information like selfies or photos with friends received significantly more engagement than other types of posts (p. 983). Atiq et al. (2022) further describe digital storytelling on platforms like Instagram as a more interactive experience and more engaging than static ones, and this is accounted for by the lower resistance to persuasion explained by the reactance theory (p. 3). Dong et al. (2024) found that narrative within influencer videos, particularly those containing real characters, graphic information, and easily visualizable titles, led to a higher amount of live comments (p. 13). However, the present study used a static Instagram post featuring a hypothetical influencer, which did not have the dynamic features described above. This may explain the absence of a direct link between ES and engagement. The choice to use this influencer was intentionally made to reduce potential biases related to familiarity, existing opinions, or popularity of the influencer as much as possible.

Another explanation for the lack of a direct effect of ES on engagement intentions may lie in the absence of relational and emotional conditions, such as perceived authenticity, trust, and emotional resonance, which prior studies identify as important for storytelling to drive engagement. Gross et al. (2020) found that emotional content helps influencers develop parasocial interaction, where their viewers see them as authentic and trustworthy sources of information (pp. 390–391). According to social exchange theory, people will reciprocate when someone invests in them, like influencers sharing personal emotions, which leads users to like or comment on posts in return (pp. 391–392). However, Kang et al. (2020) note that storytelling will not have a behavioral effect unless

it also brings emotional engagement with the audience (p. 53). In line with this, Atiq et al. (2022) argue that relatability and trust are essential in forming meaningful links between storytelling and engagement (p. 1).

The absence of a direct effect of emotional storytelling on engagement intentions does not reduce the importance of indirect effects. While Baron and Kenny (1986) originally proposed that a variable mediates when the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable weakens or disappears once the mediator is taken into account (p. 1176), more recent perspectives offer a different view. Hayes (2022), for example, explains that a variable can have an indirect effect on another through a mediator even if there is no significant total effect (p. 123). He further explains that the strength of the total effect does not limit or determine whether the indirect effect is significant (p. 123). Therefore, researchers should evaluate mediation by testing the indirect effect directly rather than relying on the statistical significance of each individual path (Hayes, 2022, p. 122). He also explains that partial or full mediation can be achieved even when no direct effect appears to exist, as indirect effects may occur independently (Hayes, 2022, p. 126). In the present study, emotional narrative only indirectly affected engagement intentions. This occurred through parasocial interaction and narrative transportation and therefore, the results of this study align with Hayes' (2022) full mediation model, and H1 was logically not supported.

This leads to Hypothesis 2a, which was supported, ES by a social media influencer had a positive effect on PSI quite significantly. This aligns with Dessart (2018), noting that narrative can help strengthen emotional connections because audiences can relate better to stories than facts (p. 289). This emotional connection is developed at the stage of story-receiving, where receivers make sense of the story based on their attention, familiarity, and personal preferences to identify with stories (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 137). The immersion creates room for perceived nearness and closeness, thus increasing audiences' connection with influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). When their own experiences and identities are used by their followers to decode these stories, the followers develop a personal idea of the influencer's life (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 4), thus reinforcing PSI.

Moreover, influencers most often use emotional narratives to share relatable and authentic experiences that appear realistic to the followers, creating more familiarity and intimacy (Gross et al., 2023, p. 392). Such emotionally engaging narratives elicit interaction and reaction from the users (Atiq et al., 2022, p. 1). In addition, Green and Appel (2024) explain PSI as a fantasized interaction with media personas, where audiences imagine a real engagement with them (p. 10). The audience can even fantasize being included in the influencer's story events, becoming "side participants", emotionally connected but separated from the characters in the narrative (Green & Appel, 2024, pp. 10–11). These simulations enhance memory and perception of the influencer, which results in stronger PSI (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 11). Finally, personal stories shared by influencers on social media have been found to increase emotional connections that maximize parasocial interaction (Lim

& Lee, 2023, pp. 2–3). Thus, H2a is consistent with the theory that emotionally resonant stories on social media initiate parasocial engagement.

Hypothesis 2b was also supported: emotional storytelling generated significantly greater narrative transportation. Gerrig (1993) introduced the concept of transportation to describe how people mentally travel into story worlds and return transformed (cited in Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, the persuasive power of stories lies in their chronological, cause-and-effect structure, which enables mental simulations and helps the audience process actions, goals, and outcomes (Escalas, 2004, p. 38).

According to Narrative Transportation Theory, it is assumed that when individuals are transported into a narrative during the story-receiving stage, their emotions, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and even their reality sense are altered (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). This occurs when consumers appropriate characters and invite their imagination, temporarily suspending them from their immediate world (van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). Storytelling is one of the three antecedents for the level of transportation (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1809). More specifically, ES has been found to enhance narrative transportation above non-narrative presentations strongly (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1809). Thomas and Grigsby (2024) further confirm that such transportation is actually possible within digital media like social media that are increasingly becoming relevant as narrative spaces where consumers read intensively and sometimes rewrite the narratives they are subjected to (pp. 1812–1813).

Hypothesis 2c was that increased narrative transportation would lead to stronger PSI, and this was likewise supported. When people are transported and immersed in a narrative, they form vivid mental pictures and emotionally respond to what is happening in the story, which can give them a sensation of proximity to the narrative characters (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4). The findings also confirm the operation of dual empathy, whereby transported listeners empathize with the story characters and with themselves as well, since the narrative touches on their personal memories and experiences (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 6). Such personal connections, or *remindings*, as Strange and Leung (1999) call them, are where people make narrative content relate to what they know about themselves (cited in Green & Appel, 2024, p. 5). This blend of narrative and personal memory not only contributes to immersion but also to the emotional impact of the content, thus helping in creating PSI.

According to Thomas and Grigsby (2024), narrative transportation leads to cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, some of which may extend beyond the narrative itself (p. 1811). The effects persist after the moment of storytelling and have the potential to shape attitudes and relational orientations in the future, such as the readiness to trust or affiliate with a media character (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024, p. 1811). In the current study, participants who experienced more transportation reported higher PSI with the influencer. This is evidence that narrative immersion can create higher parasocial interaction.

The results also provide support for Hypothesis 2d, that higher PSI with an influencer is related to greater engagement intentions. PSI is the one-way interaction that occurs during the process of media consumption, making followers feel as if they know influencers on a personal level and understand them (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754; Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 273). This personal connection is leading audiences to perceive influencers as trusted sources of information, friends, or role models (Chen et al., 2021, p. 489). PSI has also been labeled a "vehicle for advertising" because the feeling of closeness it creates increases audience engagement (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 3). This is especially relevant for strong interactions, through posts, stories, or comments, that create feelings of reciprocity and social presence (Chen et al., 2021, p. 485). Sheng et al. (2025) emphasize that PSI can lead to behavioral outcomes such as engagement intentions and brand interactions by shaping perceived value and identification with the media figure (p. 6). Although PSI is distinct from Parasocial Relationships (PSR) (Sheng et al., 2025, pp. 1–2), it can play a critical role in influencing engagement during media consumption, especially when the interaction feels direct and reciprocal, even if it is not.

Even though Hypothesis 3 assumed that ES would be more effective on PSI with micro-influencers compared to macro-influencers, there was no significant interaction effect. One reason may be the blurred distinctions between influencer types. As Hudders et al. (2020) argue, influencer classification is often by number of followers, but number of followers alone does not necessarily reflect perceived authenticity or relational closeness (p. 334). Macro-influencers, even though often associated with more commercialized messages, can produce successful PSI when they show relatability or emotional vulnerability in their storytelling (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 394).

Furthermore, the parasocial attributes of an influencer, such as perceived emotional authenticity and trust, and not only followership, but they generate audience response, argue Gong and Holiday (2023, p. 374). Therefore, participants may have responded essentially to the emotional content and tone of narrative in the post rather than the number of likes and followers. Since both categories of influencers had the same emotional narrative, participants may not have perceived a difference regarding intimacy or familiarity, which is one of the primary antecedents of PSI (Conde & Casais, 2023, p. 2). Finally, the one-time, short-term exposure of the experiment to an imaginary influencer may not have provided enough relational information for participants to tell apart influencer types based on PSI., even though the manipulation checks were successful.

To answer the research question of this study, emotional storytelling indirectly influences engagement intentions through narrative transportation and parasocial interaction. While no direct effect of storytelling was observed, the indirect pathway was statistically significant, demonstrating sequential mediation. However, the effect of storytelling on parasocial interaction was not significantly moderated by influencer type (micro vs. macro), likely focused on the emotional storytelling itself rather than whether the influencer was “micro” or “macro,” since both used the same narrative, making it hard to see a difference in PSI between influencer types.

5.1. Implications

This study makes a contribution to Narrative Transportation Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory and Influencer Marketing. Firstly, ES does not directly influence engagement intentions (H1 is not supported), but rather indirectly via narrative transportation and PSI (H2a–d are confirmed). This indirect-alone pattern is consistent with Hayes' (2022) full mediation model, which conceives that there may be strong indirect effects even without a direct or full effect. This finding aligns with Narrative Transportation Theory, which explains that persuasive effects happen when individuals become mentally and emotionally immersed in a narrative world (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4; van Laer et al., 2019, p. 135). Thus, the finding that ES significantly increased transportation confirms that the emotional tone and story structure can trigger this immersive state.

Secondly, the study contributes to parasocial interaction theory by showing that parasocial interaction can be created with initial exposure, provided the material is emotionally engaging and immersive. Although prolonged exposure may be required for establishing Parasocial Relationships (PSR) in the long term (Sheng et al., 2025, p. 2), present findings demonstrate that a good narrative can induce immediate feelings of perceived imagined social presence and relatedness without prior experience.

Third, the non-significant influencer type moderation (macro vs. micro; H3 not supported) suggests that the number of followers or likes alone are not a reliable measure of engagement. This is contrary to the assumption that micro-influencers inherently produce greater PSI due to being thought of as closer (Sheng et al., 2023, p. 851) and is in favor of an influencer marketing towards perceived authenticity, similarity, likability, familiarity and emotional connection (Hudders et al., 2020, p. 334).

The findings of this study offer some implications for influencer and content marketing strategy. Marketers should not rely only on metrics such as follower count or number of likes. As Hudders et al. (2020) explain, follower numbers do not necessarily reflect authenticity or closeness (p. 334). Instead, they should find influencers who are emotionally open and honest, and can tell personally relevant narratives.

The way the content was presented may help to explain the low level of engagement found across all conditions. Although no significant differences were observed between influencer types, engagement intention scores were similarly low for both micro and macro influencers. This shows that neither type was particularly effective in creating user engagement. One possible explanation is that this study used a static image with a fictional influencer, while existing research sets that more interactive content types, such as videos or stories posted by real influencers, receive higher interaction, since they show higher emotional cues and higher immersion (Dong et al., 2024, pp. 1, 13). This suggests that marketers should start preferring platforms, types of content and real influencers with the ability to offer emotional depth and narrative expressiveness.

As regards influencers, findings show that a single emotionally involving post can construct PSI when it triggers a state of immersion and feeling of being relatable. Green and Appel (2024) describe transportation as a state in which one devotes attention and emotion toward a narrative (p. 4). They also determine that immersion is capable of leading to emotional connection with media personas (Green & Appel, 2024, p. 4). Therefore, introducing their followers to richly emotional, authentic stories enables influencers to connect with them without continually having to present themselves.

5.2. Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study has a couple of limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. One limitation concerns the use of a fictional influencer named Zara. Although fictional figures are useful for controlling pre-existing familiarity or bias, the name 'Zara' may have caused confusion or distraction as it is also the name of a well-known fashion brand. This might have led to lower ecological validity, considering that participants might not have responded to the character as they would if they were responding to an actual social media personality. Furthermore, it could have also affected participants' ability to perceive the figure as a believable, emotionally authentic individual. After data collection, some participants said that the name Zara was misleading, suggesting that the manipulation lacked clarity or real-world relevance. Future research should use either a completely neutral, invented name, or it should use a real influencer with minimal fame. This would preserve ecological validity and it would do so without introducing brand-related associations. Additionally, studies could incorporate real-life influencers, both micro and macro, in order to reflect on the real-world influencer marketing more accurately. Future research could also expand the model to cover different types of influencers for example mega or nano-influencers, but also aside from follower count, may be able to better explain their impact of influencers in the ES-PSI relationship.

Another major limitation relates to participant dropout. Low sample sizes in advertising tests can change group balance and reduce statistical power of the analysis (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 86). When statistical power is too low, it increases the risk of a Type II error, failing to detect a real effect that actually exists, leading researchers to incorrectly conclude that there is no impact when one is present (p. 86). To avoid this, it is generally recommended to recognize that while random assignment helps, it may not fully ensure group equivalence in smaller samples (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017, p. 86). A considerable number of participants did not complete the study, resulting in a smaller final sample size than intended, which might have influenced the results of the study differently if the sample size was bigger. While the sample size remained statistically adequate for most analyses, it nonetheless increases the risk of a Type II error, failing to detect a real effect due to insufficient power, which might have been the case for the not significant H3. The dropout rate may have been due to the length or perceived effort of the study, which suggests that future experiments should consider more concise formats or multi-part designs. Increasing the sample size and improving retention would reduce the risk of Type II error and produce more stable model estimates.

Although the investigation was adequately powered, the sample was skewed toward younger adulthood, limiting generalizability of the results to other age groups. The cross-sectional design also restricts analysis to the direct impact and is unable to account for the development of parasocial processes that may extend over more time, which could be interesting to investigate, especially for PSI. Follow-up studies could extend these limitations by using more global and diverse samples to

increase generalizability. Longitudinal would allow examining the degree to which PSI develops into PSR across time.

Finally, the format in which the influencer content was delivered in written rather than video format in an Instagram post or as a video, potentially not being representative of how influencer stories are typically consumed. Prior research shows that video content, Stories, or interactive formats often elicit stronger emotional responses and engagement intentions (Dong et al., 2024, p. 13). The written format may have limited emotional immersion and reduced perceived authenticity, thereby weakening the pathways to parasocial interaction and engagement. Future studies should replicate the current design, adding a video-based stimulus to introduce a presentation mode more similar to how individuals typically engage with influencer content and to test whether emotional storytelling has stronger effects in more immersive media environments.

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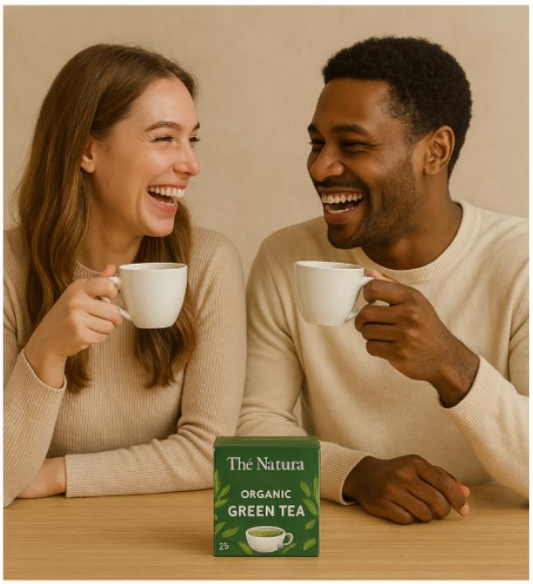
Appendices
Appendix A: Manipulation Stimuli

wellnesswithzara
Followers: 11,230



7,690 likes

wellnesswithzara I had the urge to share some thoughts I've been sitting with lately.
You know me and I've said it a million times, that I struggle so much balancing work, studies, relationships. I have realised that trying to actually enjoy my everyday life becomes harder and harder. Some days feel like a blur — deadlines, pressure, laughter, tears, overwhelm, joy again and just trying to hold it all together.
In the middle of all that noise, I forget something simple:
I need time for me.
Quiet time.
Gentle space.
And the company of people I truly want around.
So here's your reminder too, you need to put yourself and your needs first.
You matter. Your feelings matter.
And when you honor that, you show up better for your dreams, your people, your peace, and most importantly, yourself.
Lately, slowing down with a warm cup of tea has felt like a ritual I didn't know I needed. It's not just about the tea. It's about listening to me.
The pause... that's the real gift.
#sponsored #wellnesswithzara #theNatura #slowmoments #organic#greentea

wellnesswithzara
Followers: 11,230

7,690 likes

wellnesswithzara Taking a moment to reset with Organic Green Tea from @TheNatura.
· Made from 100% organic green tea leaves
· Naturally rich in antioxidants
· Supports focus and overall well-being
· Ideal for daily routines, whether you're starting the day or relaxing in the evening

Simple ingredients. No additives. Just pure green tea.

#sponsored #wellnesswithzara #theNatura #slowmoments #organic#greentea

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Start of Block: Consent Form

Q1 Dear participant, Thank you so much for your valuable contribution to this study. This research is part of my Master's thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam. In this study, we explore how people respond to social media posts from influencers. You'll view one Instagram-like post, and then answer a series of questions about your impressions, thoughts, feelings, and how likely you would be to engage with it. The survey takes approximately 7–10 minutes to complete. Your responses are entirely anonymous, and there are no right or wrong answers, because we are simply interested in your perspective. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. All data will be stored securely and confidentially, following the Erasmus University Rotterdam data protection guidelines. No identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address will be collected. Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email Eva Itimoudi, 667287ei@eur.nl, or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250). If you wish to participate, please select "Yes" to continue. Doing so confirms that you are 18 years or older, that you have read and understood the information above, and that you consent to take part in this study voluntarily. Do you consent to participate in this study?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Dear participant, Thank you so much for your valuable contribution to this study. This research i... = No

End of Block: Consent Form

Start of Block: Block 1: Micro + ES/

Start of Block: Block 2: Micro + No ES/

Start of Block: Block 3: Macro + ES/

Start of Block: Block 4: Macro + No ES

Q2 Below, you can see a social media post by Zara, a micro influencer. Please observe the post and read it carefully. After a few seconds, a black arrow will appear in the bottom right corner. Click it to continue to the questions.
Timing
First Click (1)
Last Click (2)
Page Submit (3)
Click Count (4)

End of Block: Block 1: Micro + ES/

End of Block: Block 2: Micro + No ES/

End of Block: Block 3: Macro + ES/

End of Block: Block 4: Macro + No ES

Start of Block: PSI

Q3 Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about the influencer you just saw, named Zara. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I kept thinking about the situation of Zara. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I kept thinking about what to make of Zara. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Over and over, I tried to guess what Zara was going to do or say next. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
When Zara appeared, I forgot my own feelings and let myself be infected by her mood. (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Zara's feelings were sometimes contagious. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
The behavior of Zara had a strong influence on my own mood. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Sometimes I would have liked to say something to Zara. (7)	○	○	○	○	○
At some moments, I would have liked to get in touch with Zara. (8)	○	○	○	○	○

I was close to expressing my thoughts about Zara with appropriate facial expressions and gestures. (9)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: PSI

Start of Block: IESM Model

Q4 Think about your experience with the influencer in the post, named Zara. How much do you agree with the following statements? (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
By interacting publicly with Zara, I could make a good impression on others. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Part of me could be defined by my interactions with Zara. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Interacting publicly with Zara would allow me to convey who I am to others. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
By interacting publicly with Zara, I could improve others' perception of me. (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Interacting publicly with Zara would allow me to portray the image of who I want to be to others. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I would be bursting with energy if I interacted with Zara. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
If Zara didn't post for some time, I would get worried. (7)	○	○	○	○	○
I would miss Zara if she were not posting. (8)	○	○	○	○	○

My days wouldn’t be the same without Zara. (9)	○	○	○	○	○
Positive feelings about Zara would come to mind regularly. (10)	○	○	○	○	○
I would look at Zara's photos. (11)	○	○	○	○	○
I would read Zara's posts. (12)	○	○	○	○	○
I would watch Zara's videos. (13)	○	○	○	○	○
I would comment on Zara's posts. (14)	○	○	○	○	○
I would comment on Zara's life. (15)	○	○	○	○	○
I would create stories about Zara's life. (16)	○	○	○	○	○
I would create visual publications (photos or videos) about Zara. (17)	○	○	○	○	○
I would create text-based publications about Zara. (18)	○	○	○	○	○
I would tag Zara in my publications (text, images or stories). (19)	○	○	○	○	○

I would create posts about Zara and hope they would share them. (20)	○	○	○	○	○
I would create posts about Zara and hope she would like them. (21)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: IESM Model

Start of Block: Manipulation Checks

Q5 Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about the Instagram post you saw with the influencer, Zara. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
While I was reading the post, I could easily picture the events in it taking place. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
While I was reading the post, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the post. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I was mentally involved in the post while reading it. (4)	○	○	○	○	○
After finishing the post, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I wanted to learn how the post ended. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
The post affected me emotionally. (7)	○	○	○	○	○
I found myself thinking of ways the post could have turned out differently. (8)	○	○	○	○	○

I found my mind wandering while reading the post. (9)	○	○	○	○	○
The events in the post are relevant to my everyday life. (10)	○	○	○	○	○
The events in the post have changed my life. (11)	○	○	○	○	○

Q6 Based on Zara's Instagram post, please indicate how would you rate the influencer's follower size and reach. (1 = Very Small, 7 = Very Large)

	Very small (1)	Small (2)	Somewhat small (3)	Neither small nor large (4)	Somewhat large (5)	Large (6)	Very large (7)
Zara has a _____ amount of followers. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Zara is followed by a _____ amount of people compared to the average influencer. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Zara reaches a _____ amount of people compared to the average influencer. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q7 Please rate how popular you think the influencer Zara from the Instagram post is. Please use the slider below to rate their popularity, from Unpopular (1) to Popular (7).

	Unpopular	Popular
	1	7
Do you find Zara _____ ()		

End of Block: Manipulation Checks

Start of Block: Demographics

Q8 What is your age?

- 18-29 years (1)
- 30-49 years (2)
- 50-64 years (3)
- 65+ years (4)

Q9 What is your gender?

- Female (1)
- Male (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer not to respond (4)
- Not specified (5)

Q10 How many social media influencers do you follow on Instagram?

- ○ None (1)
- ○ 1-5 (2)
- ○ 6-10 (3)
- ○ 11-20 (4)
- ○ More than 20 (5)

Q11 How much time do you spend on social media platforms per day?

- ○ Less than 15 min (1)
- ○ Half hour – one hour (2)
- ○ 1–2 hours (3)
- ○ 3–4 hours (4)
- ○ 5–6 hours (5)
- ○ 7–8 hours (6)

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Debrief

Q11 Thank you so much for your participation! The post you saw in this survey was entirely fictional. Both the influencer and the tea brand featured were created specifically for the purposes of this academic study. You were randomly shown one of four versions of an Instagram post designed for the study. This research explores how emotional storytelling and influencer type (micro vs. macro) influence people's engagement with social media content and their emotional connection to the influencer. Your responses will help us better understand how different types of influencer posts impact the way people feel, think, and engage online. If you have any questions about the study or would like to learn more, please feel free to contact: Eva Itimoudi – 667287ei@eur.nl

End of Block: Debrief

Appendix C: Randomization Checks

Table 1. Gender Distribution Across Storytelling Conditions (N = 154)

Gender	Absent Story (%)	Emotional Story (%)	Total (%)
Female (n = 101)	61.2	71.0	65.6
Male (n = 51)	36.5	29.0	33.1
Non-binary/third gender (n = 2)	2.4	0.0	1.3
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 2) = 2.83, *p* = .243			

Table 2. Gender Distribution Across Influencer Conditions (N = 154)

Gender	Micro Influencer (%)	Macro Influencer (%)	Total (%)
Female (n = 101)	63.6	67.5	65.6
Male (n = 51)	35.1	31.2	33.1
Non-binary/third gender (n = 2)	1.3	1.3	1.3
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 2)	0.27, *p* = .876		

Table 3. Age Distribution Across Storytelling Conditions (N = 154)

Age Group	Absent Story (%)	Emotional Story (%)	Total (%)
18–29 years (n = 137)	89.4	88.4	89.0
30–49 years (n = 11)	5.9	8.7	7.1
50–64 years (n = 6)	4.7	2.9	3.9
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 2)	0.75, *p* = .689		

Table 4. Age Distribution Across Influencer Type Conditions (N = 154)

Age Group	Micro Influencer (%)	Macro Influencer (%)	Total (%)
18–29 years (n = 137)	89.6	88.3	89.0
30–49 years (n = 11)	7.8	6.5	7.1
50–64 years (n = 6)	2.6	5.2	3.9
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 2)	0.77, *p* = .682		

Table 5. Instagram Influencer Following Across Storytelling Conditions (N = 154)

Influencers Followed	Absent Story (%)	Emotional Story (%)	Total (%)
None (n = 17)	9.4	13.0	11.0
1–5 (n = 42)	24.7	30.4	27.3

6–10 (n = 38)	27.1	21.7	24.7
11–20 (n = 26)	20.0	13.0	16.9
More than 20 (n = 31)	18.8	21.7	20.1
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 4)	2.60, *p* = .626		

Table 6. Instagram Influencer Following Across Influencer Conditions (N = 154)

Influencers Followed	Micro (%)	Macro (%)	Total (%)
None (n = 17)	13.0	9.1	11.0
1–5 (n = 42)	31.2	23.4	27.3
6–10 (n = 38)	20.8	28.6	24.7
11–20 (n = 26)	15.6	18.2	16.9
More than 20 (n = 31)	19.5	20.8	20.1
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 4)	2.52, *p* = .641		

Table 7. Daily Social Media Usage Across Storytelling Conditions (N = 154)

Time Spent Daily on SM	Absent Story (%)	Emotional Story (%)	Total (%)
Less than 15 min (n = 3)	2.4	1.4	1.9
Half hour – 1 hour (n = 23)	17.6	11.6	14.9
1–2 hours (n = 64)	41.2	42.0	41.6
3–4 hours (n = 48)	30.6	31.9	31.2
5–6 hours (n = 11)	5.9	8.7	7.1
7–8 hours (n = 5)	2.4	4.3	3.2
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 5)		2.01, *p* = .848	

Table 8. Daily Social Media Usage Across Influencer Conditions (N = 154)

Time Spent Daily	Micro (%)	Macro (%)	Total (%)
Less than 15 min (n = 3)	0.0	3.9	1.9
Half hour – 1 hour (n = 23)	19.5	10.4	14.9
1–2 hours (n = 64)	40.3	42.9	41.6
3–4 hours (n = 48)	32.5	29.9	31.2
5–6 hours (n = 11)	5.2	9.1	7.1

7–8 hours (n = 5)	2.6	3.9	3.2
Total (n = 154)	100	100	100
Chi-Square (df = 5)	6.29, *p* = .279		

Appendix D: Variable Descriptives

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	*N*
PSI_ThinkingSituation	2.97	1.42	1	5	166
PSI_ThinkingAboutZara	2.79	1.38	1	5	166
PSI_GuessingZara	2.89	1.35	1	5	166
PSI_InfectedByMood	2.93	1.48	1	5	166
PSI_FeelingsContagious	3.04	1.41	1	5	166
PSI_BehaviorInfluence	2.95	1.44	1	5	166
PSI_WantedToSpeak	3.19	1.36	1	5	166
PSI_LikedToGetTouch	3.01	1.39	1	5	166
PSI_ExpressingThoughts	2.98	1.44	1	5	166
IESM_GoodImpression	2.95	1.36	1	5	166
IESM_IdentityDefined	2.9	1.41	1	5	166
IESM_ConveyIdentity	2.96	1.52	1	5	166
IESM_ImprovePerception	3.02	1.46	1	5	166
IESM_ImageToOthers	3.05	1.41	1	5	166
IESM_EnergyWithZara	2.89	1.34	1	5	166
IESM_WorryZara	3.16	1.53	1	5	166
IESM_MissZara	2.86	1.33	1	5	166
IESM_IfNoZara	3.01	1.44	1	5	166
IESM_PositiveFeelings	3.1	1.47	1	5	166
IESM_LookAtPhotos	2.8	1.48	1	5	166
IESM_ReadPosts	3.34	1.38	1	5	166
IESM_WatchVideos	3.06	1.5	1	5	166
IESM_CommentPosts	3.01	1.39	1	5	166
IESM_CommentLive	3.03	1.43	1	5	166
IESM_StoryAboutLife	3.02	1.41	1	5	166
IESM_VisualPosts	3.17	1.41	1	5	166
IESM_TextPosts	3.1	1.4	1	5	166
IESM_TagZara	3.01	1.25	1	5	166
IESM_HopeShare	3.09	1.42	1	5	166
IESM_HopeLike	3.03	1.44	1	5	166
Manip_PictureEvents	2.98	1.37	1	5	153
Manip_ActivityAround	3.07	1.41	1	5	152
Manip_ScenePicture	3.03	1.39	1	5	152
Manip_Involvement	2.99	1.42	1	5	152
Manip_PostOutMind	2.78	1.37	1	5	152
Manip_Curious	2.82	1.49	1	5	152
Manip_EmotionalImpact	2.89	1.38	1	5	152
Manip_AlternativeEndings	2.91	1.44	1	5	152
Manip_WanderingMind	2.99	1.44	1	5	152
Manip_RelevanceEveryday	3.1	1.43	1	5	151
Manip_LifeChanged	2.88	1.35	1	5	152
Manip_Wandering Mind_R	2.89	1.32	1	5	152
Manip_PostOutMind_R	2.05	1.17	1	5	152
Manip_ActivityAround_R	3.17	1.11	1	5	152

Appendix E: Linearity, Homoscedasticity, Multicollinearity

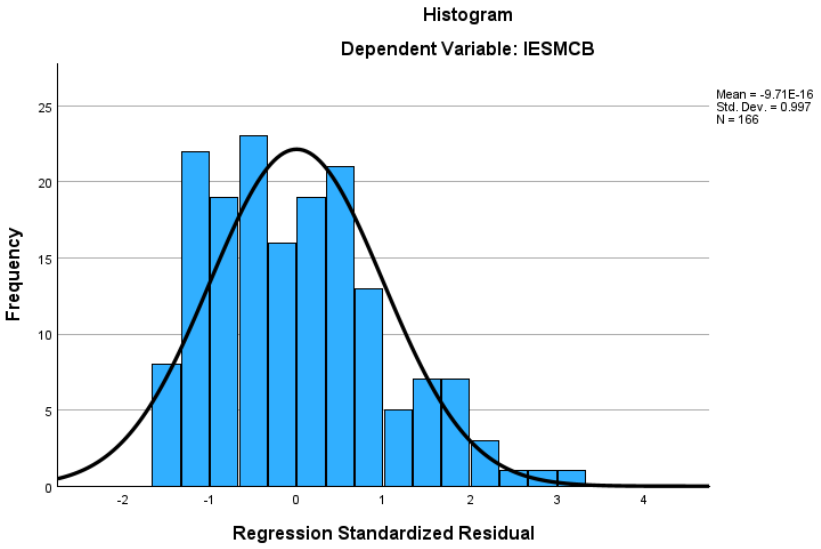


Figure A1: Histogram

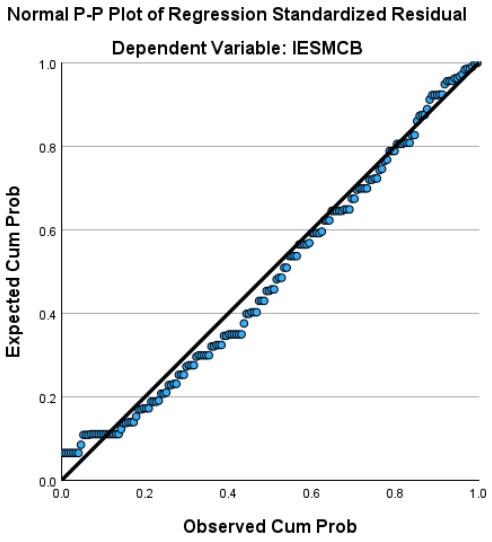


Figure A2: Normal P-P Plot

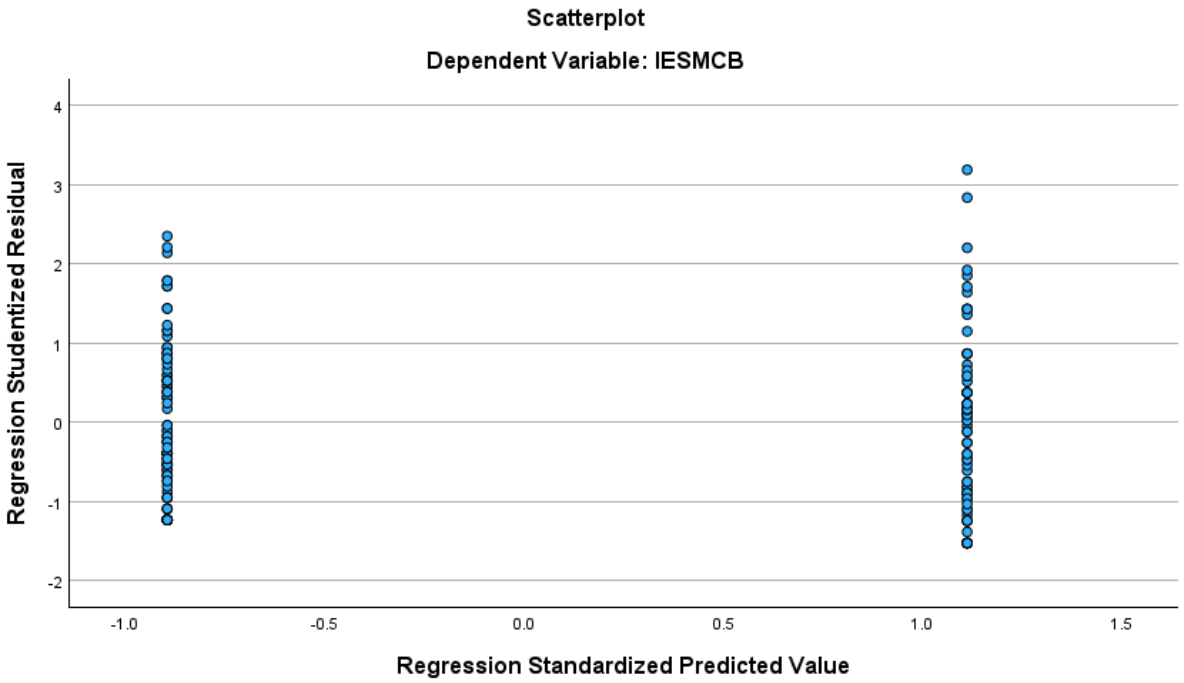


Figure A3: Scatterplot

Appendix F: PROCESS Model 6

********** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 **********

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D. www.afhayes.com

Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

****

Model : 6

Y : IESMCB

X : StoryTyp

M1 : Transpor

M2 : PSICB

Sample

Size: 153

****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

Transpor

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.189	.036	.363	5.563	1.000	151.000	.020

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.339	.066	35.369	.000	2.209	2.470
StoryTyp	.231	.098	2.359	.020	.037	.424

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
StoryTyp	.377

****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

PSICB

Model Summary

R R-sq MSE F df1 df2 p

.610 .372 .438 44.464 2.000 150.000 .000

Model

coeff se t p LLCI ULCI

constant .238 .221 1.077 .283 -.199 .676

StoryTyp .246 .109 2.253 .026 .030 .462

Transpor .766 .089 8.568 .000 .589 .942

Standardized coefficients

coeff

StoryTyp .297

Transpor .564

****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

IESMCB

Model Summary

R R-sq MSE F df1 df2 p

.691 .478 .248 45.508 3.000 149.000 .000

Model

coeff se t p LLCI ULCI

constant .267 .167 1.598 .112 -.063 .598

StoryTyp -.064 .084 -.770 .442 -.230 .101

Transpor .311 .082 3.783 .000 .148 .473

PSICB .412 .062 6.701 .000 .291 .534

Standardized coefficients

coeff

StoryTyp -.094

Transpor .278

PSICB .501

********** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y **********

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c'_ps
-.064	.084	-.770	.442	-.230	.101	-.094

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	.246	.082	.093	.408
Ind1	.072	.036	.011	.152
Ind2	.102	.055	.012	.226
Ind3	.073	.034	.012	.143

Partially standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	.360	.115	.137	.589
Ind1	.105	.055	.017	.228
Ind2	.149	.077	.018	.318
Ind3	.107	.049	.018	.209

Indirect effect key:

Ind1 StoryTyp -> Transpor -> IESMCB

Ind2 StoryTyp -> PSICB -> IESMCB

Ind3 StoryTyp -> Transpor -> PSICB -> IESMCB

********** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS **********

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000

NOTE: Standardized coefficients for dichotomous or multicategorical X are in

partially standardized form.

------ END MATRIX -----

Appendix G: PROCESS Model 7

```
***************** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 *****************

        Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.       www.afhayes.com

    Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

**************************************************************************

Model  : 7

    Y  : IESMCB

    X  : StoryTyp

    M  : PSICB

    W  : InflTyp

Sample

Size:  166

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

 PSICB

Model Summary

          R       R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p

     .2861      .0818      .6359     4.8129     3.0000   162.0000      .0031

Model

              coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI

constant     2.0828      .1117    18.6525      .0000     1.8623     2.3033

StoryTyp      .5577      .1766     3.1590      .0019      .2091      .9064

InflTyp      -.0801      .1673     -.4787      .6328     -.4104      .2502

Int_1        -.2549      .2502    -1.0189      .3098     -.7489      .2391

Product terms key:

 Int_1    :        StoryTyp x        InflTyp

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

       R2-chng          F        df1        df2          p

X*W      .0059     1.0382     1.0000   162.0000      .3098
```

****

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

IESMCB

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6578	.4327	.2706	62.1634	2.0000	163.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	.7061	.1171	6.0281	.0000	.4748	.9373
StoryTyp	-.0307	.0839	-.3660	.7149	-.1963	.1349
PSICB	.5519	.0507	10.8835	.0000	.4518	.6521

********** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y **********

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.0307	.0839	-.3660	.7149	-.1963	.1349

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

StoryTyp -> PSICB -> IESMCB

InflTyp	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
.0000	.3078	.1138	.1019	.5439
1.0000	.1672	.0938	-.0115	.3566

Index of moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effects):

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
InflTyp	-.1407	.1437	-.4356	.1323

Pairwise contrasts between conditional indirect effects (Effect1 minus Effect2)

Effect1	Effect2	Contrast	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
.1672	.3078	-.1407	.1437	-.4356	.1323

********** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS **********

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5000

------ END MATRIX -----

Appendix H: SEM Analysis

Table 1: Model Fit Indices for SEM

Model	χ^2(df)	RMSEA	CFI	$\Delta\chi^2$ (1df)	*p* (diff)
Unconstrained Model	206.33 (20)	.238	.571	-	-
Constrained Model	207.38 (21)	.233	.571	1.05	.30

Table 2: Direct and Indirect Effects – Micro-Influencer Group

Path	β (Std.)	*SE*	*p*	95% CI	Hypothesis	Supported
StoryTyp → PSICB	.315	.124	.002**	[.072, .558]	H2a	Yes
PSICB → SelfPresentation	.573	.102	< .001	[.373, .773]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → ContentCreation	.536	.082	< .001	[.375, .697]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → ContentConsumption	.512	.126	< .001	[.264, .760]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → Engagement	.479	.093	< .001	[.295, .663]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → EmotionalAttachment	.590	.090	< .001	[.413, .767]	H2b	Yes
StoryTyp → SelfPresentation	–.138	.176	.144	[–.483, .069]	H1	No
StoryTyp → ContentCreation	.117	.141	.204	[–.120, .417]	H1	No
StoryTyp → ContentConsumption	–.040	.217	.684	[–.465, .385]	H1	No
StoryTyp → Engagement	.135	.161	.159	[–.171, .441]	H1	No
StoryTyp → EmotionalAttachment	–.087	.155	.350	[–.391, .217]	H1	No

Table 3: Direct and Indirect Effects – Macro-Influencer Group

Path	β (Std.)	*SE*	*p*	95% CI	Hypothesis	Supported
StoryTyp → PSICB	.198	.124	.071	[–.046, .442]	H2a	No

PSICB → SelfPresentation	.576	.120	< .001	[.339, .813]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → ContentCreation	.405	.091	< .001	[.226, .584]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → ContentConsumption	.505	.135	< .001	[.239, .771]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → Engagement	.450	.094	< .001	[.265, .635]	H2b	Yes
PSICB → EmotionalAttachment	.408	.123	< .001	[.166, .650]	H2b	Yes
StoryTyp → SelfPresentation	–.159	.187	.096	[–.527, .020]	H1	No
StoryTyp → ContentCreation	–.091	.141	.392	[–.368, .186]	H1	No
StoryTyp → ContentConsumption	.160	.211	.097	[–.231, .551]	H1	No
StoryTyp → Engagement	–.005	.146	.960	[–.291, .281]	H1	No
StoryTyp → EmotionalAttachment	.051	.192	.630	[–.326, .428]	H1	No

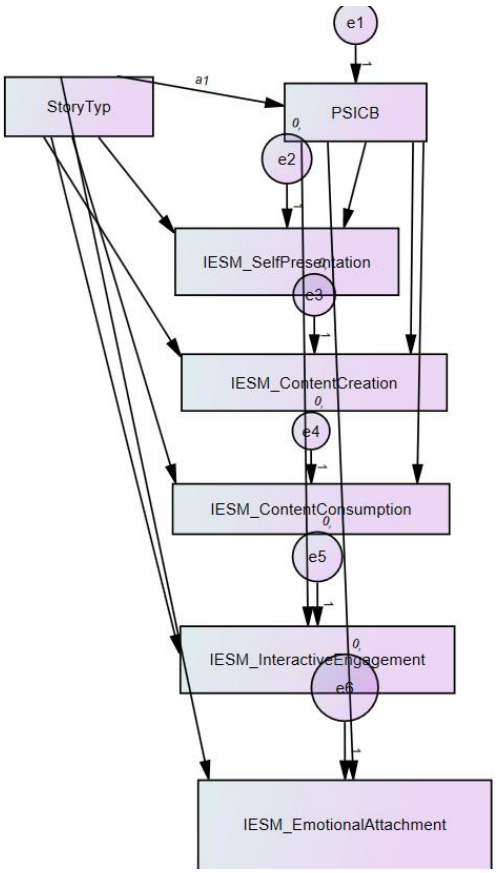


Figure B: SEM Model