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DOI
10.1080/02650487.2024.2407737

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
International Journal of Advertising

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVERTISING
2025, VOL. 44, NO. 4, 651–673
https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2024.2407737

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Beyond likes: the persuasive potential of romantic parasocial relationships with influencers

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ABSTRACT

While existing studies emphasize the crucial role of amicable parasocial relationships in influencing the audience, research on the persuasive potential of romantic parasocial relationships with influencers remains limited. These relationships, characterized by a blend of physical and emotional love, are believed to be particularly intense. Therefore, we aim to investigate the persuasive impact of romantic potential with influencers, which may lead to the development of romantic parasocial relationships. Specifically, we analyze the influence of romantic potential (no romantic potential vs. romantic potential) and its interaction with follower status (follower vs. non-follower) on romantic parasocial relationships, evaluative persuasion knowledge, and subsequently purchase intention. Conducted among German social media users ($N = 220$), our experiment revealed no significant main effects of romantic potential on evaluative persuasion knowledge and purchase intentions. However, we found a significant indirect effect of romantic potential on the dependent variables mediated by emotional love but not physical love. Additionally, a significant interaction effect revealed that while the formation of the physical dimension in romantic parasocial relationships occurs relatively quickly, emotional affection requires a longer period to develop. This study significantly contributes to our understanding of persuasive dynamics in influencer marketing and opens avenues for further research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 6 December 2023
Accepted 19 September 2024

KEYWORDS
Romantic parasocial relationship; social media influencer; advertising; persuasion knowledge

If you are active on social media, you probably have heard about the wildly successful Elevator Boys who have ignited a viral phenomenon that has left an indelible mark on the digital landscape. Emerging in 2021, this dynamic group of five friends skyrocketed to fame on TikTok and Instagram, capturing the hearts of millions with their short yet captivating clips that recreated various scenes within elevators. While lip-syncing to popular music, they infuse these audio fragments with a fresh and distinctive perspective, often drawing from well-known series, films, or songs.

Yet, what truly sets the elevator boys apart is the undeniable connection they forge with their audience. With millions of subscribers and views, they have cultivated a global fanbase that hangs onto their every video release. It is within this community

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that a fascinating phenomenon unfolds – the emergence of admirers who develop emotional connections that extend beyond friendship and admiration. Among their fans, there exists a subset who find themselves enamored by the elevator boys, projecting romantic feelings onto these digital personas. Comments beneath their content include expressions like 'Why are they so hot' (Instagram 2023b) and 'I'm jealous of her standing near Bene' (Instagram 2023a), referring to a girl next to one of the elevator boys in a video. It comes as no surprise that the elevator boys are sought after to endorse brands such as Armani Beauty, Gucci, and Westwing to their devoted fans. Recently, they even launched their own vegan cereal brand co-created with the German start-up *Wholey* (Wholey 2023).

Although the idea of having a crush on an influencer may seem abstract to some, the prevalence of romantic or sexual desires towards social media celebrities becomes evident on platforms such as Quora or Reddit and has been the topic of numerous magazine articles (e.g. an article by TeenVogue specifying 'Why Your Internet Crush Can Be Stronger Than Your In-Person Feelings'; Retta 2019). Many threads delve into topics like handling developing feelings for a (social media) celebrity (Quora.com 2021; Reddit.com 2022a) or coping if one's partner develops a crush on an influencer and consistently likes all their pictures (Reddit.com 2022b). As influencers are often considered attractive, share intimate details about their life, and post sexualized content on social media for reasons such as increasing engagement rates, promoting body positivity, or conforming to perceived social norms (Bussy-Socrate and Sokolova 2023; Gupta, Burton, and Costa Barros 2023; Prichard, Taylor, and Tiggemann 2023; Willoughby et al. 2023), it should be apparent that followers' interests can easily transcend the platonic stage of friendships to romantic attraction.

As specified by Gupta, Burton, and Costa Barros (2023), heterosexual consumers tend to be attracted to physically appealing influencers of the opposite gender, driven by the desire for escapism or the aspiration for parasocial romantic connections. Given that (social media) celebrities are often perceived as attractive individuals by virtue of their success, personality, and physical appeal, they hold the potential to be regarded as romantic interests by their followers (Gupta, Burton, and Costa Barros 2023; Kahle and Homer 1985). In this context, 'romantic potential' represents the influencer possessing qualities that could evoke romantic interest and lead to the establishment of an especially intense connection, namely romantic parasocial relationships. Specifically, it in our manuscript it pertains to the attractive influencer being of the gender to which the individual feels both sexually and romantically attracted. According to Tukachinsky (2010), it is reasonable to assume that heterosexual viewers will form stronger romantic parasocial relationships with characters of the opposite sex. However, amicable parasocial relationships are more likely to be experienced with characters of the same gender.

While several studies have investigated the effect of these amicable parasocial relationships, it is surprising that the persuasive impact of romantic parasocial experiences have not been studied, considering that it is generally assumed that more intense forms of parasocial experiences lead to greater persuasive effects (Breves and Liebers 2022; Gong and Huang 2023). Additionally, the formation of romantic parasocial attachments is believed to be quite common, with most of both men and women experiencing romantic parasocial relationship with a media character, such

as a fictional book character, music artists, actors, or social media influencers at least once in their life (Tukachinsky Forster 2023). These relationships are believed to occurring both in adolescence and adult life (e.g. Erickson and Dal Cin 2018; Hu et al. 2022; Liebers 2022). During adolescence, individuals often develop romantic attachments to prominent media figures as a means to practice romantic relationships and establish schemas and normative beliefs about romance (Erickson and Dal Cin 2018). In adulthood, people form romantic parasocial relationships for various reasons, including social surrogacy (Liebers 2022) or to complement their social life (Hu et al. 2022). While some papers have delved into the added value of romantic parasocial relationships in the context of entertainment research (e.g. Liebers and Straub 2020; Wu, Cai, and Mensah 2023), there is a lack of studies in marketing and advertising. If it is confirmed that influencers are more persuasive when perceived as (potential) romantic partners compared to amicable ones, this finding would significantly contribute to the theory of parasocial experiences and could offer intriguing insights for advertisers.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to experimentally study the persuasive influence of romantic potential and romantic parasocial relationships within the realm of influencer marketing. We examine how romantic potential affects evaluative persuasion knowledge *via* both the physical and emotional dimensions of romantic parasocial relationships, and, ultimately, how this affects purchase intention. This opens up a fresh avenue in advertising research and influencer marketing, shedding light on how it can be used effectively.

Social media influencers

Influencers, acclaimed as influential opinion leaders on social media platforms, possess an extensive network of followers with whom they have forged connections, varying in their intensity (Breves and Liebers 2024; Enke and Borchers 2019; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). While influencers have been known for their focus on commercially oriented topics such as beauty, fashion, and travel (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021), the emergence of other digital opinion leaders such as finfluencers (influencer who give financial advice; Hudders and Van Reijmersdal, 2023), momfluencers (influencers who share their experiences of motherhood; Van den Abeele, Vanwesenbeeck, and Hudders 2023), bopo-influencers (body-positivity influencers who share content related to body diversity and inclusivity; Breves, Paryschew, and Stein 2023), and greenfluencers (influencers who promote a more sustainable lifestyle; Schmuck 2021) show that the influencer landscape is continuously evolving, diversifying, and mirroring societal movements.

In scientific literature, the presence of high levels of amicable parasocial relationships (PSRs) is mentioned to explain the appeal and persuasiveness of influencers, because they are perceived as peers and friends (e.g. Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Chung and Cho 2017; Reinikainen et al. 2020). However, there is limited research exploring the dynamics when an influencer is perceived as more than just a friend. Specifically, the implications of social media users experiencing sexual or romantic attraction towards a social media star, leading to the development of romantic parasocial relationships, have not been extensively studied (Tukachinsky 2010). In the subsequent paragraphs, we will provide a brief overview of both amicable and

romantic parasocial experiences, followed by an analysis of potential distinctions in their respective persuasive influences.

Parasocial interactions and relationships: definition and clarification of the concepts

Parasocial experiences describe one-sided, illusionary forms of interactions and relationships between media users and media characters and were initially introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). In the context of social media, *parasocial interactions* describe the illusionary interaction between a social media user and an influencer while the social media user consumes the content of the influencer (e.g. watching a TikTok of the social media influencer). Noticing that media users not only feel connected during specific interactions with media personalities but also over the longer term, the concept of parasocial interactions was expanded to *parasocial relationships* (Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen 2016). In contrast to parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships are not limited to specific situations but resemble an overarching bonding between media characters and media users and, hence, can be seen as cross-situational relationships that continue after media consumption (e.g. thinking of the influencer before going to bed; see also Breves and Liebers 2022).

Depending on the quantity and quality of parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships can be in one of the early stages, referred to as *initiation* (stage 1; which involves forming the first impression), and *experimentation* (stage 2; involving learning more about the media character and forming a more expansive mental model about them). If individuals have had numerous positive interactions with the media persona, they can progress to the later stages, including *intensification* (stage 3; which involves intensifying and maintaining the relationship with the media figure) and *integration/bonding* (stage 4; involving developing commitment and interconnectedness) (Breves and Liebers 2024; Tukachinsky and Stever 2019).

Up to now, most studies that investigated parasocial interactions and relationships have understood them as having an amicable nature comprising feelings such as commitment and support that feature in real-life interactions and relationships of two friends (cf. Liebers and Schramm 2019). However, in real-life, humans do not only engage in interactions and relationships with friends but also with romantic partners.

In contrast to amicable parasocial experiences, romantic parasocial interactions and relationships are manifested by emotional, physical, and sexual attraction (Tukachinsky 2010) as well as romantically fantasizing about a media character (Erickson and Cin 2018). Thus, romantic parasocial relationships are often seen as a particularly intense form of parasocial experience involving elevated emotional and physical affection (e.g. Erickson and Cin 2018; Liebers 2022). According to Tukachinsky (2010), romantic parasocial relationships are comprised from two dimension, which she labeled emotional love (i.e. a strong emotional response to the character, such as admiration) and physical love (i.e. physical attraction), while amicable parasocial relationships mainly consist of the two dimensions communication (i.e. disclosure and advice seeking) and support as well as companionship (i.e. trust, sharing, and mutual help). Given the distinction between the two types of parasocial relationships, the existing theory concerning the impacts of parasocial experiences should be expanded to include

potential differences in their persuasive effectiveness and the associated psychological mechanisms.

Differences between romantic and amicable parasocial relationships regarding persuasive impact

Earlier research has mainly used the follower status to manipulate the intensity of the parasocial relationships and investigate their persuasive impact. Studies have unanimously reported that followers who have already established a parasocial relationship with the influencer were more strongly persuaded by their persuasive appeal than non-followers (e.g. Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021; Breves and Liebers 2022). As mentioned, the current body of research primarily focuses on amicable parasocial relationships, thereby creating a gap in our understanding of the consequences that arise when individuals develop emotions beyond friendship toward social media influencers. While there are no studies on the impact of romantic parasocial relationships formed between followers and social media influencers, two recent studies have analyzed the effect of romantic parasocial relations with game characters (Gong and Huang 2023) and live streamers (Gao, Yuan, and Lei 2023).

The study by Gong and Huang (2023) focused on romantic parasocial experiences[1] and utilized a survey design, analyzing the correlation between amicable and romantic parasocial relationships and participants' intentions to make in-game purchases in Otome games, which are mobile games particularly popular in parts of Asia, known for their romantic storylines tailored to a female audience. While no significant correlation emerged between amicable parasocial relationships and behavioral intentions, Gong and Huang (2023) reported a positive linkage between romantic parasocial relationships and behavioral intentions. Using an experimental setting, Gao, Yuan, and Lei (2023) either showed pictures of an attractive or unattractive live streamer to manipulate the intensity of the romantic parasocial relationship experienced by the female study participants and asked them to imagine the streamer advertising a beauty product to them. The results indeed support the assumption that the more attractive endorser elicited more intense levels of romantic parasocial relationships, consequently enhancing purchase intention. However, it is worth noting that since the streamers were fictional, the study participants never had any prior contact with the endorsers. This lack of interaction suggests that they did not have sufficient opportunities to form a substantial parasocial relationship, indicating that the reported effects might have been due to the heightened congruence between an attractive endorser and a beauty product (Till and Busler 2000).

Given the limited information on the persuasive potential of romantic parasocial relationships, we aim to draw insights from real-life romantic relationships. In these relationships, self-other integration plays a crucial role in fulfilling the desire for closeness and enhancing interdependence (e.g. Chen, Boucher, and Tapias 2006; Tesser et al. 1998). Self-other integration is perceived as both pleasurable and constructive within intimate relationships. Specifically, individuals are motivated to perceive themselves as similar to their romantic partner, as this perceived similarity positively impacts relationship satisfaction and fosters the development of new romantic bonds (e.g. Byrne 1971). For instance, it has been shown that the perceived approval of a romantic

partner regarding behaviors like cigarette smoking has a stronger influence compared to the approval of friends (Etcheverry and Agnew 2008).

The impact of (romantic) parasocial relationships on persuasion knowledge

Based on these findings, it seems likely that influencers who establish a romantic connection with their followers could potentially exert more persuasive influence than those perceived merely as friends or acquaintances. The amplified persuasive impact, particularly within the realm of intense parasocial relationships such as romantic ones, can be illuminated by the *persuasion knowledge model* (Friestad and Wright 1994).

Despite the legal mandate for social media users to be informed about content involving advertisements (increasing *conceptual persuasion knowledge*; Eisend et al. 2020), followers are inclined to assess these persuasive attempts positively regardless, thus enhancing the *evaluative persuasion knowledge* (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021). While conceptual persuasion knowledge entails recognizing and comprehending the persuasive intent behind advertisements (van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Rozendaal 2017, 2020), evaluative persuasion knowledge encompasses attitudinal responses to advertising, comprising distinct components such as skepticism towards, liking or disliking, and the perceived appropriateness of the ad (Boerman et al. 2018). Even though earlier research indicates that parasocial relationships did not significantly influence participants' conceptual persuasion knowledge, they were found to enhance evaluative persuasion knowledge (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021).

The inclination of followers to evaluate persuasive attempts more favorably can be attributed to heightened perceived source credibility. The multitude of positive interactions that followers have had with influencers over the span of several weeks, months, or even years has contributed to the formation of a stable character scheme within their cognitive network, wherein the influencer is regarded as a trustworthy communicator (Breves et al. 2019). Consequently, followers are more inclined to attribute positive motives when encountering a sponsored post by the influencer, such as believing that the influencer promotes the product because they genuinely use and are satisfied with it (Breves and Liebers 2022).

The persuasion knowledge model has solely been used to explain the persuasive impact of amicable parasocial relationships (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021) but seems to also be applicable to romantic parasocial relationships. Given the belief that romantic parasocial relationships are especially intense forms of connection, it can be inferred that the positive character scheme of followers who are romantically infatuated with the influencers is even more deeply ingrained and accessible within their cognitive network. This means that the persuasive appeal of an influencer who is perceived as a potential romantic partner instead of 'just' a friend should be evaluated even more benevolently.

All in all, we formulated four hypotheses, with the initial three hypotheses suggesting variations between groups due to the presence of romantic potential regarding the intensity of the romantic parasocial relationship, the evaluative persuasion knowledge, and persuasive effects (i.e. purchase intentions) and the fourth hypothesis delving into the underlying persuasive mechanism (see Figure 1):

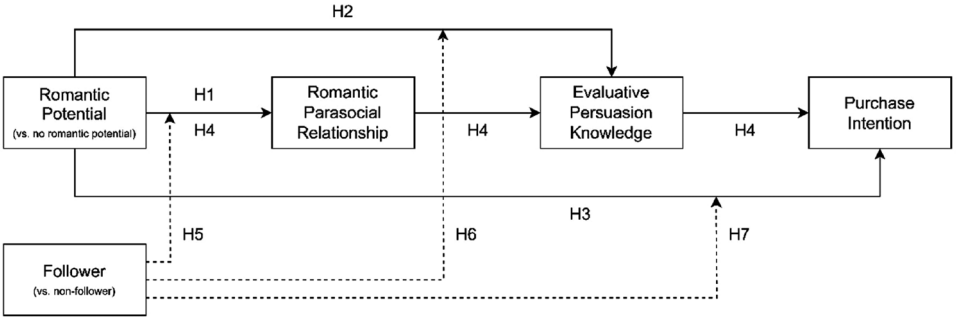

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

H1: Individuals who are presented with a persuasive appeal by an influencer with romantic potential (vs. no romantic potential) will show more intense romantic parasocial relationships.

H2: Individuals who are presented with a persuasive appeal by an influencer with romantic potential (vs. no romantic potential) will show a more positive evaluative persuasion knowledge.

H3: Individuals who are presented with a persuasive appeal by an influencer with romantic potential (vs. no romantic potential) will show stronger purchase intentions.

H4: The persuasive effect of influencers with romantic potential (vs. no romantic potential) is serial mediated by romantic parasocial relationships and subsequently evaluative persuasion knowledge.

The moderating role of follower status

However, the fact that parasocial relationships differ in their effects based on the respective relationship stage prompts an inquiry into whether romantic parasocial relationships consistently surpass non-romantic ones or if this holds true primarily as the relationship progresses to later stages (Breves and Liebers 2024; Tukachinsky and Stever 2019). This inquiry finds resonance in the work of Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) concerning the evolution of parasocial engagement. Their work underscores that the sway of parasocial relationships can diverge among individuals in the early stages versus those who have established a more enduring connection. The domain of influencer advertising further accentuates this phenomenon. A series of studies led by Breves and colleagues has empirically demonstrated that followers tend to exhibit heightened susceptibility to persuasion through sponsored influencer posts when compared with social media users who have yet to subscribe to the influencer's content, i.e. non-followers (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021; Breves and Liebers 2022). As demonstrated, followers who have subscribed to the channel of the social media influencer for several months or years had reached later relationship stages and consequently reported stronger parasocial relationships. Individuals who were non-followers or had only subscribed to the influencer for a few weeks were still in the early stages of the relationship and reported lower levels

of parasocial relationships. This, in turn, affected the persuasive effects of a promotional post of the influencer (Breves and Liebers 2024).

The impact of follower status has been demonstrated in various studies; however, its use as a moderating variable has been scarcely investigated and could provide valuable insights. For instance, variables such as the presence of an advertising disclosure have been shown to have divergent effects on followers and non-followers (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021). These findings are particularly relevant, as most studies have analyzed the impact of influencer advertising on non-followers, even though investigating the impact on actual followers seems more pertinent. After all, it is followers who have subscribed to the influencer's channel and receive their daily updates, as well as their persuasive messages. Therefore, this manuscript aims to investigate the moderating impact of follower status.

Based on findings from studies on interpersonal relationships, romantic relationships are believed to be persuasive in both their early and later stages, albeit for different reasons. In the initial stages, impression management is prevalent, with individuals aiming to make a positive early impression and appear compatible with their romantic partner (Etcheverry and Agnew 2008). Thus, even before an established relationship exists, individuals tend to align themselves with their (desired) romantic partner, adopting attitudes and behaviors accordingly. As the romantic relationship evolves, the importance of impression management goals lessens, while intimacy and closeness intensify. These factors are considered highly influential, as romantic partners have a significant impact on individuals' self-concepts, leading individuals to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of those they are romantically attached to (Kumashiro et al. 2006; Slotter and Gardner 2009). While impression management goals may drive the adaptation of attitudes and behaviors in the early stages of a romantic relationship, the increase in intimacy and closeness associated with a long-term romantic relationship can exert even greater influence (Berscheid and Reis 1998).

Therefore, given that long-term romantic interpersonal relationships often surpass amicable relationships in significance for individuals, we hypothesize that the heightened impact of romantic potential will increase with the progression of the relationship stage (Etcheverry and Agnew 2008; Furman and Wehner 1994). Initially, we assume that the difference between the impact of the presence or absence of romantic potential might be relatively small. However, as relationships progress, romantic potential is expected to become more influential (Berscheid and Reis 1998; Etcheverry and Agnew 2008). Specifically, we expect that the impact of romantic potential will be stronger for followers who have already reached later relationship stages compared to non-followers who are still in the early stages.

H5: The impact of romantic potential on the intensity of romantic parasocial relationships is stronger for followers than for non-followers.

H6: The impact of romantic potential on evaluative persuasion knowledge is stronger for followers than for non-followers.

H7: The impact of romantic potential on purchase intention is stronger for followers than for non-followers.

Method

Participants and design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment with a 2 (Romantic potential: Romantic potential vs. no romantic potential) x 2 (Follower status: Follower vs. non-follower) between-subjects experimental design among German social media users.[2] Together with four student research assistants (1 male, 3 females, aged 20-25) who were representative of our target sample, we selected 10 German influencers (five females, five males) who were popular and attractive lifestyle influencers with a substantial following.[3] Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through online channels, specifically utilizing social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok). The four student research assistants used their private network and additionally contacted social media users who had interacted with a post by one of the influencers.

According to a power analysis conducted using G*Power, we determined that a total of 199 participants would be needed to detect a small to medium effect size (f = .2) with a power of .80 (Faul et al. 2009). A total of 220 individuals successfully completed participation in the study. Gender distribution within the participant pool showed a majority of females (79.1%), with males accounting for 20.9% of the respondents. The average age of the final cohort was 22.50 years (SD = 3.53), ranging from 16 to 38 years. Regarding Instagram usage, participants reported using the platform at least once (n = 3) or multiple times each week (n = 5), with the majority indicating daily use (n = 21), multiple times per day (n = 132), or nearly every hour (n = 59). Regarding educational background, most participants held a high school degree (n = 108), had completed professional training (n = 32), or held a university degree (n = 58), while a smaller number had a lower (n = 20) or no educational degree (n = 2). Most participants identified as heterosexual (n = 198), while some indicated they were gay (n = 9) or bisexual (n = 13).

Procedure

At the start of the study, participants gave informed consent after receiving comprehensive explanation of the study's procedure. Subsequently, participants were asked about their use of Instagram. Only individuals acknowledging their Instagram usage progressed further in the study, while others were expressed gratitude and debriefed. Participants then provided demographic information and indicated the gender to which they felt a romantic attraction. Following this, the first experimental manipulation was applied to create two groups with differing levels of romantic potential. Participants were randomly assigned to the romantic potential condition or the no romantic potential condition. In the romantic potential condition, participants were presented with five influencers of the gender to which they had indicated romantic attraction, while in the no romantic attraction condition they were presented with five influencers of the gender to which they had indicated no romantic attraction. The intent here was to present participants with a selection of influencers likely to evoke either no romantic or romantic sentiments, contingent upon their assigned experimental condition. For example, if the participant was male and had indicated sexual attraction to females and had randomly been allocated to the experimental

group with romantic potential, he was confronted with five female influencers. If he had been assigned to the experimental group with no romantic potential, he would have been confronted with five male influencers.

While other variables are certainly also important when inferring romantic potential, such as the perceived attractiveness of the influencer, we used gender preferences to assign participants to experimental groups because earlier research has shown that both physical and romantic love in parasocial relationships was higher for media persona who were of the opposite gender of heterosexual participants (Tukachinsky 2010). By only varying the allocation of influencers to participants based on their gender, we could keep all other factors constant and thus increase the internal validity of the study.

At this stage, the second experimental manipulation in the study was applied to vary follower status. Alongside the five presented influencers, participants were tasked with selecting one influencer according to the instruction given at the top of the page. The specifics of the instruction varied based on the participant's randomly assigned follower status condition (follower vs. non-follower). For example, participants in the non-follower condition were instructed to select a social media influencer they did not follow on Instagram. Conversely, participants in the follower condition were instructed to choose a social media influencer they appreciated and followed on Instagram. If participants could not adhere to the instructions as specified (e.g. because they were not following any or were following all of the influencers), their participation was terminated, and they were thanked and debriefed.

Our procedure aligned with the methodological approach taken by Breves and colleagues (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021; Breves and Liebers 2022) and facilitated the experimental manipulation of pre-existing parasocial relationships by presenting multiple social media influencers and guiding participants' selections with randomly assigned instructions. This approach confers advantages such as heightened generalizability, robust external validity (by utilizing existing influencers and parasocial relationships stemming from participants' everyday lives) and mitigating risks to internal validity posed by quasi-experimental designs involving challenging-to-compare groups (see also the already mentioned studies by Breves and colleagues for more advantages and limitations of this methodological approach).

Following this, participants' romantic parasocial relationships with their chosen influencers were evaluated. Subsequently, participants were exposed to a sponsored Instagram post featuring the designated influencer, with detailed post information as outlined in the Stimulus Materials section. Consequent pages inquired about participants' evaluative persuasion knowledge, followed by queries on persuasive effects, encompassing their intentions to purchase the endorsed product. Finally, participants received a thorough debriefing.[4]

Stimulus Materials

In line with the methodology adopted by Breves and colleagues (e.g. Breves and Liebers 2022), we selected sponsored Instagram posts from multiple influencers, each highlighting the identical product. It was crucial that these posts enabled comparability and authenticity. As the prerequisite posts did not exist, our approach entailed the fabrication of these posts using photomontages. In each instance, we integrated a vegan chocolate

bar from the fictitious brand *Vegonuts* into an existing image of the respective influencer. This manipulation imparted the illusion that the social media influencer was personally endorsing the product. To bolster the illusion and to provide viewers with comprehensive information, we supplemented each Instagram post with accompanying text, which endorsed the benefits of the Vegonuts bar. All components of these posts, barring the social media influencer's visual representation and their identity, were carefully standardized. This encompassed elements such as the number of likes the post had garnered.

Measurements

All ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Romantic parasocial relationships

Romantic parasocial relationship was measured with eleven items based on the sub-dimensions physical love (4 items; Cronbach's α =.78; $M = 5.02$; $SD = 1.32$) and emotional love (7 items; α = .87, $M = 2.22$; $SD = 1.25$) of the multiple parasocial relationships scale by Tukachinsky (2010). Examples include 'The social media influencer is very sexy looking'. for physical love and 'Sometimes I think that the social media influencer and I are just meant for each other'. for emotional love. The relatively high mean for physical love suggests an, on average, strong physical attraction towards the influencer, while the low mean for emotional love indicates an, on average, weaker emotional connection.

Evaluative persuasion knowledge

To assess the participants' evaluative persuasion knowledge, we used five items by Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens (2012) with higher values indicating more benevolent evaluation of the persuasion knowledge. Examples include 'I think the post is honest' and 'I think the post is not objective'. [reverse item] (Cronbach's alpha =.75; $M = 3.88$; $SD = 1.19$).

Purchase intention

Participant inclinations concerning the purchase of the Vegonuts bar were assessed using a five-item scale adapted from Spears and Singh (2004). For instance, 'I am very interested in buying the bar by Vegonuts' or 'If a friend asked me for a recommendation for a bar, I would probably recommend the bar by Vegonuts'. (Cronbach's alpha =.92; $M = 2.76$; $SD = 1.52$). The relatively low mean suggests that, on average, participants showed a moderate to low interest in purchasing or recommending the bar.

Results

Randomization check

As highlighted by Breves, Liebers, et al. (2021), a limitation inherent in the selected approach for assigning participants to either the follower or non-follower condition

is the potential concern of systematic dropouts. To mitigate this concern, multiple randomization checks were executed to ascertain whether discernible differences existed in various participant characteristics between the follower and non-follower conditions.

The outcomes of these statistical tests indicated no disparities in critical attributes. Specifically, no significant differences were found in terms of gender distribution ($\chi^2(1, N = 220) = 1.20$, $p = .273$), education ($\chi^2(7, N = 220) = 8.22$, $p = .314$), and age ($F(1, 218) = 0.05$, $p = .833$) between participants allocated to the follower and non-follower conditions.

Data analysis

To investigate the hypotheses regarding the influence of romantic potential, we conducted a two-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA; see Table 1). This statistical approach allowed us to explore the impact of two independent variables: Romantic potential (romantic potential vs. no romantic potential) and follower status (follower vs. non-follower). The outcome variables were two dimensions of romantic parasocial relationship (i.e. physical love and romantic love), and evaluative persuasion knowledge, as well as purchase intention. Both the participants' gender as well as their sexual orientation were included as covariates. All descriptive values are reported in Table 2.

Direct effects of romantic potential

The first hypothesis postulated that when social media users were exposed to influencers they could potentially be romantically attracted to, as opposed to situations involving no romantic potential, the former would report heightened levels of romantic parasocial relationships. We expected that this would encompasses both the physical and emotional love dimensions of romantic parasocial relationships. As expected, in comparison to when there is no romantic potential ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.30$), the presence of romantic potential yielded significantly more pronounced levels of physical love ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.14$; $F(1, 214) = 41.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .164$). Likewise, this effect extended to emotional love, where individuals exposed to an influencer with romantic potential ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.35$) exhibited higher scores in this domain in contrast to when there is no romantic potential ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.14$; $F(1, 214) = 19.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .083$). Consequently, the data support H1.

The second hypothesis postulated a parallel distinction in the impact of romantic potential on people' evaluative persuasion knowledge. Contrary to our expectations, being exposed to a influencer with romantic potential ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.19$) did not translate into a more favorable assessment of the persuasive attempt compared to when there was no romantic potential ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.18$; $F(1, 214) = 0.09$, $p = .763$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$). Consequently, the data does not support H2.

Similarly, the main effect of romantic potential on purchase intention and behavioral intention was non-significant ($F(1, 214) = 1.58$, $p = .210$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$). Specifically, participants exposed to influencers with romantic potential ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.58$) did not exhibit a greater inclination to purchase the vegan chocolate bar compared to when exposed to influencers without romantic potential ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.47$), lending no support to H3.

Table 1. Main and interaction effects.

	MS	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Physical love					
Romantic potential (RP)	59.99	1	41.89	< .001	.164
Follower status (FS)	14.00	1	9.78	.002	.044
RP × FS	2.85	1	1.99	.160	.009
Sex	0.04	1	0.03	.866	< .001
Sexual orientation	0.57	1	0.40	.529	.002
Error	1.43	214			
Emotional love					
Romantic potential (RP)	26.60	1	19.36	< .001	.083
Follower status (FS)	36.00	1	26.19	< .001	.109
RP × FS	6.36	1	4.63	.033	.021
Sex	1.02	1	0.74	.391	.003
Sexual orientation	3.09	1	2.25	.135	.010
Error	1.37	214			
Evaluative persuasion knowledge					
Romantic potential (RP)	0.12	1	0.09	.763	< .001
Follower status (FS)	27.33	1	21.19	< .001	.090
RP × FS	0.74	1	0.57	.449	.003
Sex	0.72	1	0.56	.455	.003
Sexual orientation	0.01	1	0.01	.930	< .001
Error	1.29	214			
Purchase intention					
Romantic potential (RP)	3.63	1	1.58	.210	.007
Follower status (FS)	10.97	1	4.77	.030	.022
RP × FS	1.25	1	0.54	.462	.003
Sex	0.28	1	0.12	.729	.001
Sexual orientation	0.95	1	0.42	.520	.002
Error	2.30	214			

Note. One two-factorial MANCOVA was performed to test for group differences and interactions. Participants' sex and their sexual orientation were included as covariates. $N = 220$.

Table 2. Overview descriptive values.

Variables	Romantic Potential	Follower		Non-Follower		Total	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Physical love	Not present	4.92	1.23	4.10	1.24	4.57	1.30
	Present	5.76	0.90	5.51	1.22	5.58	1.14
	Total	5.15	1.20	4.92	1.41	5.02	1.32
Emotional love	Not present	2.24	1.15	1.73	1.06	2.02	1.14
	Present	3.31	1.63	2.14	1.07	2.46	1.35
	Total	2.54	1.38	1.97	1.08	2.22	1.25
Evaluative persuasion knowledge	Not present	4.26	1.18	3.60	1.08	3.98	1.18
	Present	4.40	1.02	3.51	1.16	3.76	1.19
	Total	4.30	1.14	3.55	1.12	3.88	1.19
Purchase intention	Not present	2.88	1.63	2.53	1.20	2.73	1.47
	Present	3.22	1.88	2.64	1.44	2.80	1.58
	Total	2.97	1.70	2.60	1.34	2.76	1.52

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, $N = 220$; the scales included values from 1 to 7.

All in all, these outcomes highlight that romantic potential in the context of influencer marketing did not yield statistically significant differences in terms of participants' evaluative persuasion knowledge or their purchase intentions. While discussing main

effects, it seems relevant to mention that while not initially posited within our hypotheses, a notable impact of follower status on evaluative persuasion knowledge and purchase intentions emerged (see Table 1), aligning with prior research (e.g. Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021).

Indirect effects of romantic potential

With our fourth hypothesis, we strived to analyze whether romantic parasocial relationships and evaluative persuasion knowledge emerged as meaningful mediators for the enhanced persuasive effects associated with the presence of romantic potential—thus being statistically accountable for this effect. A serial parallel mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes's PROCESS macro for SPSS (2018; Model 80) and 5,000 bootstrapping iterations. Romantic potential was included as the independent variable (0 = no romantic potential, 1 = romantic potential), while participants' levels of physical and emotional love were examined as parallel mediators, and evaluative persuasion knowledge was included as a serial mediator. Participants' sex, their sexual orientation, as well as the follower status were included as covariates. Figure 2 illustrates the observed connections between the variables, as well as the standardized regression coefficients.

While the unstandardized indirect effect of the parallel mediation *via* emotional love reached significance ($b = 0.08$; 95% CI [0.02, 0.16]), the indirect effect *via* physical love as a mediator ($b = 0.06$; 95% CI [–0.02, 0.16]) as well as the direct effect of romantic potential ($b = 0.03$; 95% CI [–0.36, 0.42]) did not turn out statistically significant. As such, the dimension of emotional but not physical love could be identified as a meaningful mediator for the impact of romantic potential on purchase intentions. The overall mediation model could explain 38% of the variance in the dependent variable purchase intentions.

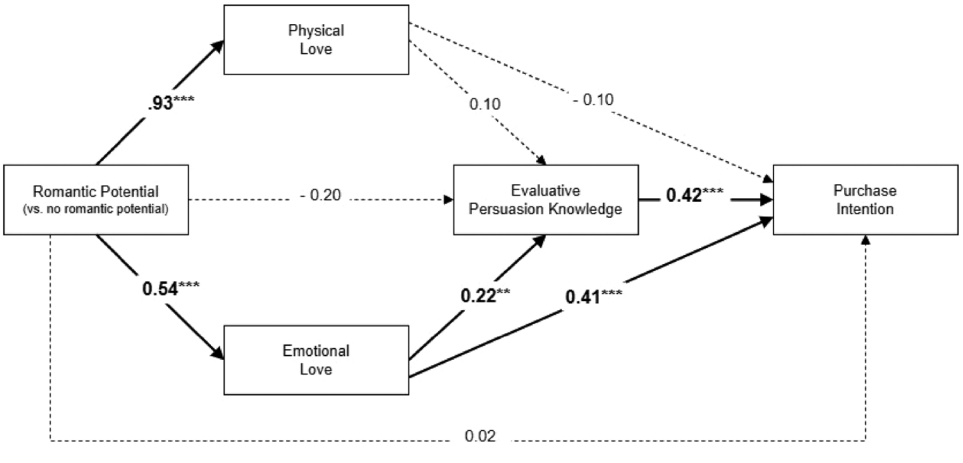

Figure 2. Persuasiveness of romantic potential mediation model.
Note. This path model shows the effect of romantic potential (romantic potential vs. no romantic potential), via the physical and emotional dimensions of romantic parasocial relationship and evaluative persuasion knowledge on purchase intention. The model shows partially *standardized* regression coefficients, controlled for follower status, participants' sex, and their sexual orientation. Paths in bold indicate significant positive effects, dotted paths indicate nonsignificant effects. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

The Moderating role of follower status

In our interaction hypotheses, we assumed that the follower status (follower vs. non-follower) would moderate the influence of romantic potential on the dependent variables physical as well as emotional love (H5), evaluative persuasion knowledge (H6), and purchase intentions (H7). Specifically, we anticipated that the impact of romantic potential would be more pronounced for followers compared to non-followers.

While we did not uncover any statistically significant interactions regarding the intensity of physical love ($F(1, 214) = 1.99$, $p = .160$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$), evaluative persuasion knowledge ($F(1, 214) = 0.57$, $p = .449$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$), or purchase intention ($F(1, 214) = 0.54$, $p = .462$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$), we found a significant interaction for emotional love ($F(1, 214) = 4.63$, $p = .033$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons revealed that the influence of romantic potential on emotional love is significant for followers ($M_{diff} = 1.15$, $SE = 0.27$; $p < .001$), while it does not affect the intensity of emotional love for non-followers ($M_{diff} = 0.40$, $SE = 0.22$; $p = .066$). Consequently, H5 can be partially accepted, while H6 and H7 need to be rejected.

Discussion

The present study was undertaken with the principal objective of delving into the persuasive impact of romantic potential within the domain of influencer marketing. Our investigation was centered on unraveling the impact of romantic potential on evaluative persuasion knowledge, taking into account both the physical and emotional dimensions intrinsic to romantic parasocial relationships. Furthermore, our aim extended to comprehending how these dynamics subsequently shape purchase intention. Based on an experiment among German social media users, several conclusions can be drawn.

The effect of romantic potential on the intensity of romantic parasocial relationships

First, it becomes evident that individuals have the capacity to form not only friendly parasocial relationships with influencers, as most prior research has emphasized, but also romantic connections with influencers of their preferred gender. The results showed that people, when exposed to a (potential) romantic interest, exhibit heightened levels of romantic parasocial relationships.

Notably, the development of physical love appears to occur rapidly, evident when comparing followers and non-followers. Both groups report values significantly above the midpoint when presented with an influencer of the gender they are romantically interested in. In contrast, emotional love evidently requires time to cultivate, as evidenced by the significant interaction and the pairwise comparisons. The results suggests that the effect of romantic potential is conditional to follower status, where only followers reported heightened emotional love, while the presence of romantic potential did not influence the intensity of emotional love reported by non-followers.

This discovery broadens the horizons for researchers who focus on parasocial experiences as well as influencer communication, particularly in light of the varying persuasive potential of physical and emotional love, as evident by the results of the

mediation analysis. However, it also raises concerns about the validity of the measurement instrument we employed as the physical dimension of romantic parasocial relationships may predominantly gauge situational physical attraction rather than capturing the broader relationship dynamics.

The effect of romantic potential on evaluative persuasion knowledge and purchase intention

Second, we found no support for the main effects of romantic potential on evaluative persuasion knowledge nor purchase intention, despite the noteworthy positive indirect effects emanating from romantic potential that were detected within the mediation model. The missing total effect could potentially stem from counteracting mechanisms, as underscored by the negative direct impact of the presence of romantic potential (vs. no potential) on evaluative persuasion knowledge.

Previous research has highlighted the pivotal role of perceived similarity between influencers and their audience in augmenting persuasion (Schouten et al., 2020). This factor takes on heightened importance when considering that perceived similarity is more likely with influencers who align with the same gender identity as the social media user, which may not necessarily align with the user's romantic and sexual orientation. Hudders and De Jans (2022), for instance, found that female participants were more susceptible to persuasion from female influencers compared to male influencers, attributing this to perceived similarity and levels of parasocial interaction. Within this line of reasoning, it is important to note that the majority of participants in our study identified as female and heterosexual.

In addition to the nonsignificant main effect, the impact of romantic potential did not differ between followers and non-followers regarding their evaluative persuasion knowledge and purchase intentions. Therefore, our assumption that romantic parasocial relationships are more persuasive in later stages could not be supported. However, it's important to note that overall, romantic parasocial relationships were more persuasive if participants were already followers of the influencer. This was also true for participants assigned to the condition with no romantic potential, as indicated by the significant main effect of follower status.

The persuasiveness of romantic potential

Third, we found that the persuasive mechanism intrinsic to romantic potential can, to some extent, be elucidated through the lens of the persuasion knowledge model. Notably, this model serves as a guiding framework for understanding the indirect impact of romantic potential *via* both dimensions of romantic parasocial relationships.

Specifically, our findings highlight that individuals tend to adopt a less critical stance towards influencers when experiencing heightened levels of emotional affinity towards them, while the physical dimension did not have an effect on evaluative persuasion knowledge nor on purchase intentions. In simpler terms, finding the influencer physically attractive did not lead to a more positive evaluation of the persuasive attempt. However, emotional affection reduced users' critical thinking, directly and indirectly increasing their purchase intentions.

Importantly, it should be noted that the persuasive potential of romantic parasocial relationships does not rest solely within the confines of the persuasion knowledge model. A closer inspection of our results suggests that emotional love towards influencers has effects beyond the indirect pathway of evaluative persuasion knowledge. In this context, heightened emotional love does not just indirectly lead to increased purchase intention but also directly contributes to these outcomes. This suggests that the effect *via* emotional love could also (partly) explained by self-other integration or another mechanism at play.

Limitations and future research

In summation, this study significantly contributes to our understanding of the persuasive dynamics inherent within romantic potential in influencer marketing. Through a comprehensive examination of romantic parasocial relationships' dimensions and their ensuing effects on evaluative persuasion knowledge and purchase intentions, our study serves as a foundational platform for further exploration within this intriguing topic. However, our study also has several limitations.

Firstly, our utilization of a sponsored post showcasing vegan nut bars introduced a non-romantic product into our investigation. Drawing from the congruency principle and schema theory (Lynch and Schuler 1994), it could be argued that influencers perceived as love interests by their followers might serve as more fitting endorsers for romantically relevant products, such as perfumes. Considerable room exists for further exploration into the persuasive impact of romantic parasocial relationships.

Secondly, an inherent challenge stemmed from the uneven distribution of group sizes due to our research design. Despite having a sufficient number of participants to detect relevant effects based on our power analysis, the uneven group sizes may have limited our ability to detect effects. The size of the experimental group that included followers who were romantically attracted to the influencer ($n = 27$) was considerably smaller than the group of friendly followers ($n = 70$). Notably, it seems to be more commonplace for individuals to form an amicable parasocial relationship with an influencer, as opposed to a romantic one. This consideration should be taken into account for future studies in a similar vein, suggesting the necessity of establishing romantic relationships rather than relying on pre-existing ones, which might pose challenges when integrating them into research designs.

Instead of solely focusing on one-time exposure studies, a more captivating and relevant approach may involve offering participants a selection of unfamiliar influencers. Participants could then be directed to select an influencer to whom they feel either amicably or romantically attracted. Subsequently, participants could be exposed to content from their chosen influencer for several weeks, allowing them to develop a parasocial relationship and introducing a longitudinal study design. The study could then compare the persuasive effects of these relationships, considering whether relationships of a romantic or amicable nature are more influential.

Employing this approach would tackle another shortcoming of the current study, as participants would be able to choose an influencer with romantic potential which is not solely based on the preferred gender. While gender is an important aspect

regarding the romantic potential (Gupta, Burton, and Costa Barros 2023; Tukachinsky 2010) and was successfully able to increase the intensity of the romantic parasocial relationship in this study, it is by far not the only factor that has an influence. Consequently, simply using gender as a proxy of the romantic potential in this study for reasons of internal validity might have oversimplified the complex topic of romantic and sexual attraction. By enabling participants to choose the influencer they perceive to be most sexually and romantically attractive themselves, they can also include other factors such as physical appearance, personality, or competence into their decision making (Whyte et al. 2021). This might give rise to more intense romantic parasocial relationships, which in turn could be more persuasive. More specifically, participants' respective relationship stage could also be taken into consideration, instead of simply allocating them into binary categories, such as follower and non-followers. Based on this, we could give clear indications at what point romantic parasocial relationships become (more) persuasive.

Another research idea in this context would be to explore different types of influencers altogether by comparing human influencers to virtual influencers generated by AI or CGI (Byun and Ahn 2023). These virtual influencers have recently gained popularity and often conform to the unrealistic beauty standards prevalent on social media. Consequently, many of them have followers who are obviously enamored with them, despite the influencers not actually existing. For example, the virtual influencer Milla Sofia (@millasofiafin) receives compliments and is often asked out for lunch by her male followers (independent.co.uk 2023). This comparison could shed light on whether individuals are more inclined to form (romantic) parasocial relationships with virtual influencers or if relationships with human influencers are more intense.

Other aspects that might influence the intensity of the parasocial relationship should also be considered. One example is the relationship status of the influencer. While it has already been shown that singles are likely to engage in stronger romantic parasocial relationships than individuals who are in a committed relationship (Liebers 2022), the impact of the relationship status of the media character is largely unknown. In the current study, we included influencers who appeared to be single or did not disclose to be in a relationship publicly (e.g. Pamela Reif) as well as those who were officially in a relationship (e.g. Stefanie Giesinger) during the data collection period. It would be interesting to analyze whether the romantic parasocial relationship with an influencer is stronger if they appear to be single based on their social media content.

Thirdly, by utilizing the scale employed in the study by Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens (2012) to assess evaluative persuasion knowledge, our focus primarily centered on the dimension of skepticism, with less consideration given to other components such as liking or disliking and the appropriateness of the advertisement. It is possible that the skepticism towards the ad did not vary significantly between the groups, while participants in the experimental condition with romantic potential may have attributed higher levels of liking and appropriateness at the same time. Future studies should incorporate more sophisticated measurement scales capable of distinguishing between the various components of evaluative persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al. 2018).

Finally, while romantic parasocial relationships represent a particularly intense facet of influencer relationships, it is essential to acknowledge the presence of other non-amicable parasocial relationship variations. In this study, we examined how

romantic potential could foster romantic parasocial relationships, while participants in the non-romantic condition likely experienced feelings of friendship. However, parasocial relationships may not inherently possess a positive valence, as seen in loyal negative parasocial relationships (characterized by an inability to sever ties with a disappointing parasocial relationship partner) and pervasive negative parasocial relationships (formed with ubiquitous media figures that one cannot avoid; Tukachinsky Forster and Click 2023). The persuasive impacts of such media figures remain largely untapped and warrant in-depth investigation. It is conceivable that products associated with these personas might be evaluated more unfavorably when the intensity of the relationship is heightened (Knoll et al. 2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study sheds light on the persuasive dynamics of romantic relations in influencer marketing. While not yielding a direct impact on evaluative persuasion knowledge and persuasive effectiveness, romantic potential indirectly contributes to elevated purchase intention through less critical engagement with influencers. Circling back to the elevator boys introduced at the beginning of this article, this might explain their success as influencers for various brand and products, such as their vegan cereal brand co-created with the German start-up *Wholey* (Wholey 2023). Future research should explore product-specific effects and further investigate the interplay of parasocial relationship types in influencing consumer behavior.

Notes

1. Please note that while the authors (Gong and Huang 2023) use the term romantic parasocial interactions in their article, their understanding as well as their measurement items refer to the overarching relationship with the character (PSR) and not the situational interaction (PSI).
2. The study was designed and conducted in Germany. Please note that it is not mandatory (and rather unusual) to consult an ethical committee for conducting studies at German Universities unless potential physical or psychological harm of participants is expected. Hence, there is no ethics approval for this study – however, we conducted our research in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.
3. The SMIs with their number of followers (as of March 2023): @dregold (269k followers), @gerdalewis (1.0 million followers), @janis_danner (1.5 million followers), @magic_fox (4.0 million followers), @melissadamilia (449k followers), @mrsbella (2.5 million followers), @pamela_rf (9.1 million followers), @samislimani (1.3 million followers), @stefaniegiesinger (5.0 million followers), @tobiasrtr (771k followers).
4. Within the context of open science, we disclose that we measured more variables than the abovementioned (e.g. parasocial interaction, behavioral intentions regarding the adaption of a more vegan lifestyle). As they are not a focus of the current manuscript, we will not go into details about them.

Acknowledgements

The authors confirm that the manuscript has been submitted solely to this journal and is not published in press, or submitted elsewhere.

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

The data associated with this manuscript has been gathered at the former affiliation of the authors Priska Breves and Nicole Liebers (University of Wuerzburg, Germany, Institute Human-Computer-Media).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was not supported by grants or funding. There are no financial interests or benefits dependent on this manuscript.

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