



BACHELOR THESIS

# Responding to the irresponsible

A study on the responses of followers experiencing parasocial relationships with influencers involved in controversial incidents

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Social media has radically altered our daily lives and the digital landscape. Due to the enormous amounts of user-generated content that is shared and consumed, social media influencers have emerged, who are apparent on many social media platforms nowadays. As a result, followers may develop a parasocial relationship; an illusionary, one-sided relationship with a media performer. Therefore, when influencers engage in controversial behaviour or posting, this may evoke great amounts of responses. Furthermore, important ethical considerations with regards to online controversy may arise.

**Objective:** This exploratory study aims to provide insight in how followers perceive and respond to controversial incidents involving influencers they follow, as well as how this relates to the parasocial relationships they may or may not experience with these influencers.

**Method:** Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insight in followers' perceptions of the relationships they perceive with influencers, ethical considerations with regards to the practices of influencers as well as their perceptions of and responses to controversial incidents. For the latter, the critical incident technique was used; participants were asked to come up with an incident that was important or salient to them.

**Results:** Generally, the parasocial relationships that the participants experience can be characterized by an emotional connection, follower dedication, and perceived familiarity, which affects how they respond to critical incidents to a great extent. This influence is twofold: a) dedication and loyalty towards the influencer results in participants being more involved in incidents involving their favourite influencers, and b) the feeling of familiarity increases empathy towards the influencer and fosters the ability to understand their thought processes, which explains why participants tend to be more forgiving and understanding as compared to incidents involving influencers they don't perceive a parasocial relationship with.

**Conclusion:** This study provides interesting insights in follower-influencer relationships as well as ethical considerations in the context of social media influencers. The results provide an elaborate overview of the dynamics between influencers involved in controversial incidents and their audience, as well as how this feeds into followers' responses.

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## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, a group of social media influencers (SMIs) from various western countries went on a press trip to Saudi-Arabia to promote a festival and boost the image of the country as being a friendly tourist destination, thereby allegedly neglecting the breaches of human rights, which the country, in western societies, has been associated with for the past years (Gorman, 2019). This incident elicited great amounts of backlash on social media as well as on the traditional news channels. Similarly, in 2018, a SMI uploaded a video on his YouTube channel featuring footage of a deceased person in the Aokigahara forest in Japan, more commonly known as the 'suicide forest' (Rohde, 2019), for which he received a lot of criticism. Ever since the emergence of social media, and simultaneously the rise of SMIs, similar controversial incidents have occurred, involving for instance inappropriate content posted by SMIs or SMIs engaging in unethical behaviour; they, to some extent, have become part of the context in which SMIs operate. However, although online controversy involving SMIs has become more apparent over the years, the majority of incidents that take place does not elicit as much media attention and negative backlash as, for instance, the well-known scandals mentioned above. This raises interesting questions concerning the differences in how controversial incidents are perceived and responded to; this study provides a first exploration of followers' responses with regards to controversial incidents, as well as how this relates to the relationship they perceive with the SMI involved.

Over the past years, technological advances have constituted and shaped the digital landscape of nowadays society. In today's digital ecosystem, mobile and web-based technologies play a major role; they constitute the foundations for social media platforms, which generally provide a space for users to create, share and communicate about user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). This has resulted in the development of virtual social worlds and online communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), thereby adding a whole new dimension to the communication landscape (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). The popularity of social media has resulted in the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs), who, according to Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg (2011) are characterized by their ability to persuade and shape their audience through the content they create; this social influence is generally capitalized on in marketing practices, involving for instance brand and product endorsement (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). SMI practices usually involve relatively high levels of engagement with their audiences (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), thereby possibly inducing followers to perceive a personal bond with the SMI, which is generally referred to as a parasocial relationship (Ballantine & Martin, 2005).

Social media platforms provide opportunities for all individuals with access to the Internet to express their opinions freely, which explains why they are frequently used to facilitate public discussions (Morente-Molinera, Kou, Peng, Torres-Albero & Herrera-Viedma, 2018) and increasingly as a platform for internet activism, as these platforms serve as a tool for collective identity and community development (Gerbaudo & Trer , 2015). As a result, content published on social media platforms generally is subject to the opinion-forming processes of users, and therefore may be criticized publicly when evaluated negatively (Horne, Adali & Sikdar, 2017). Due to their overt position, the risk of receiving public backlash or becoming involved in a scandal as a result of publishing inappropriate content or engaging in unethical behaviour is substantial for SMIs, which may severely harm their reputation, although this is not necessarily the case (Hautala, 2019); responses towards SMIs in such

situations may vary greatly. In order to understand the variation among responses, it is of importance to study the dynamics between SMI and followers during such a situation, as well as the perceptions of followers and how these feed into their responses. In this study, the aim is to explore these responses, the differences between them and to unravel the underlying perceptions in light of parasocial relationships, in order to be able to understand them. Therefore, the research question that will be addressed is as follows:

*“How do the responses followers have towards a SMIs’ controversial posts and actions relate to the parasocial relationships they might be experiencing?”*

In order to address this question adequately, two subquestions were formulated. Firstly, how parasocial relationship theory plays out into practice in the context of SMIs will be addressed by the following question: *“How do followers experience (parasocial) relationships with SMIs?”*. Secondly, the situational judgement of SMI-followers will be looked into by asking: *‘When do followers consider a SMIs’ posts or actions as morally controversial/unacceptable and how are these situations perceived?’*.

The importance of addressing this topic is twofold. Firstly, due to their rapid emergence as well as the ways in which they have extensively integrated themselves on social media platforms, SMIs have become increasingly visible in the online environment (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). As digital media plays an enormous role in the daily lives of many, people are increasingly confronted with content created by SMIs, which results in it being highly relevant for research focusing on online contexts. Secondly, as the content SMIs produce and share tends to have quite an influence on their audiences (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011), it is of great importance to consider the consequences of controversial posts or behaviour. Whereas much emphasis tends to be on the ways in which SMI’s ability to persuade their audience can be capitalized on for marketing purposes or to stimulate desirable behaviour, not as much focus is laid on considering the negative consequences that may arise due to followers being affected by a SMI’s unethical behaviour online. Therefore, getting insight in the perceptions and responses of followers with regards to controversial incidents seems a relevant aspect within the context of SMIs.

The following chapter of this paper contains elaboration on the most important concepts including social media, SMIs, parasocial relationships and ethical considerations to gain a solid theoretical foundation for the present study. Then, in the chapter on the methods used, the data collection and analysis procedure is described, as well as the sample of participants. The result chapter will contain the findings from the conducted interviews, and in the discussion these findings will be summarized, accompanied by elaboration on the limitations and implications of this study. The report ends with a conclusion.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Social media**

Technological developments over the past years have radically altered the way we live and have become embedded in societies in many ways. Relatively new technologies such as the internet and smartphones have become accessible to an increasing number of people during the last ten years. To illustrate, in 2018, 95% of households in the Netherlands had internet access, 87% of the households used smartphones and 86% of the Dutch population above 12 years old went online daily (CBS, 2020). Such developments have resulted in a digital environment that has had, and continues to have, a great influence on our daily lives. According to Bennet, Maton and Kervin (2008), the intensive use of information and communication technologies has specifically influenced the ways in which we work, spend our leisure time and interact with each other. These actions increasingly involve the use of social media networks, which provide platforms for users to create, share, consume, and search for a wide array of (user-generated) content (Bolton et al., 2013). Furthermore, they serve as a tool for users to publicly voice their attitudes and opinions, have direct interactions with other users and form communities (Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). Especially these characteristics of social media have evoked a shift with regards to the way in which the general public makes use of modes of media. Instead of passively receiving, social media users are now able to start dialogue and engage actively in the co-creation of content or business-related activities (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). This has opened new doors for companies and brands to make use of the social media environment, by engaging followers in online branding and promotion activities (Bolton et al., 2013; Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay & Richard, 2017; Yadav, Kamboj & Rahman, 2016; Dissanayake, Siriwardana & Ismail, 2019) or deploying electronic word-of-mouth marketing (eWOM) by means of celebrity and brand ambassador endorsement (Gong & Li, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, according to Labrecque et al. (as cited in Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), due to the various possibilities for easily creating and sharing content, online platforms provide many opportunities for individuals to engage in self-branding. This refers to the process in which an individual develops a distinctive public image which is "singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences" (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; p. 191). It is the self-conscious construction of a publicly displayed persona that is to be marketed (Marwick, 2010), enabling common users of social media platforms to position themselves as internet personalities.

The enormous variety of individuals that easily create and share online content, results in a digital environment in which many different topics are addressed and discussed. Social media platforms seem to be ideal for fostering discussions, since a single post or statement by one user can get picked up by millions of other users fast, thereby inducing widespread debates among online communities (Lange, Bojars, Groza, Breslin & Handschuh, 2008; Highfield, 2012). Increasing online activism has given rise to discussions that address controversial topics (Smith, Zhu, Lerman & Kozareva, 2013), which may be based on offline events or caused by inappropriate behaviour of individuals online. In today's highly connected digital environment, such cases may easily give rise to the development of internet scandals.

### **2.2. Social Media Influencer (SMI)**

Since the emergence of social media platforms, opportunities for individuals to engage in self-branding have increased drastically. The positioning of created online identities

as well as the potential social media provides for developing a narrative and thereby gaining an audience has given rise to the practices of micro-celebrity (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). This term generally refers to regular users who, through ongoing engagement and interaction between them and their online audience, build a wide following across the internet and therefore attain celebrity status (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). According to Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol (as cited by Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; p.1434), the foundation for micro-celebrities to thrive is the “recognition, admiration, association and aspiration of their followers”. Therefore, the process of developing oneself as a micro-celebrity can be perceived as a bottom-up process in which interplay between audience and internet personality is of great importance (Usher, 2018), constituting a relationship between both parties that generally is perceived as more authentic as compared to mainstream celebrities (Senft as cited by Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). The emergence of micro-celebrities has resulted in the rise of a new type of internet personality which stems from the practices of self-branding, referred to as the SMI (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Abidin & Ots, 2016). SMIs can be characterized as online opinion leaders, who engage with their audience and build their brand by documenting and sharing their personal lives on social media platforms (Burke, 2017; Abidin & Ots, 2016). Important for the relationship between SMI and followers is a sense of persona intimacy, the cultivation of an emotional bond with the online persona of the SMI (Abidin & Thompson, 2012), which is fostered by a relatively high degree of interaction and dialogue (Abidin & Ots, 2016). The SMIs perceived credibility, relatability and authenticity foster the support of large amounts of followers and fans, who generally experience strong feelings of emotional connection (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Tran & Strutton, as cited by Gajewski, 2019; Torres, Augusto & Matos, 2019).

### **2.3. SMI Marketing**

Ever since the 1980s, companies have complemented their regular marketing activities with celebrity endorsement, which involves celebrities featuring brands in order to generate attention and establish positive customer attitudes (Erdogan, 1999). With the emergence of social media and SMIs, new opportunities for companies and brands to reach potential customers and deploy eWOM activities have come up, including strategies that involve the capitalization of SMI activities. This strategy of SMI-marketing is characterized by the identification of SMIs that are opinion leaders for a specified target group, and making use of their credible position through product or brand endorsement (Woods, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abidin & Ots, 2016). In comparison to traditional celebrity endorsement, SMI endorsement tends to elicit higher perceptions of relatability and trust (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020; Gröve, 2017). Furthermore, SMI marketing is associated with high levels of brand liking (De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Therefore, SMI marketing is a valuable strategy for companies and brands to deploy when positioning themselves online.

### **2.4. Parasocial relationships**

To understand the dynamics between SMIs and their audiences as well as how these followers respond in certain situations, it is important to take a closer look at the interactions between the two parties and how this constitutes a relationship. As discussed, the relatively high levels of interaction and dialogue between SMI and followers results in a sense of authenticity and connection, thereby defying the traditional audience-performer dichotomy (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), which involves less direct interaction and perceived

accessibility (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2019). The nature of this connection can be explained by the theory of parasocial relationships, which involves the experience of parasocial interaction. The concept of parasocial interaction traditionally refers to a viewers' illusory perception of an immediate two-way interaction with a TV-performer, while in reality the viewer is merely a passive receiver (Horton & Wohl, as cited by Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). The experience of such an illusory, reciprocal interaction is mainly triggered by the ways in which a performer addresses the audience, for instance by acknowledging the presence of the audience and adapting to their needs and preferences, mimicking informal face-to-face interactions and use of body language (Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen, 2016). This in turn may trigger viewers' feelings of mutual awareness, attention and adjustment, thereby constituting the parasocial experience (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial relationships concern the effects of such experiences on the long-term, involving "a cross-situational relationship that a viewer or user holds with a media person, which includes specific cognitive and affective components" (Schramm, 2015; p.2). The notion of these affective components is illustrated by the idea of parasocial relationships as involving a sense of friendship toward media performers, instead of merely focusing on asymmetric interaction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Of great importance, therefore, is the understanding that parasocial relationships transcend the idea of the temporary illusion during parasocial interaction, but rather describe the constitution of a personal association with the media character that extends beyond the period of exposure (Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen, 2016). This may explain how parasocial relationships generally result in some sort of bond between two individuals, similarly to how real-life relationships would; the increased levels of intimacy and understanding people perceive while developing a parasocial relationship increases the importance of the relationship to them as individuals (Rubin and McHugh, as cited by Knowles, 2007), resulting in increased feelings of faithfulness towards the media figure, strong personal connection (Eyal & Dailey, 2012), trust (Gajewski, 2019; Nouri, 2018) and belonging (Derrick, Gabriel & Hugenberg, 2009). Therefore, media figures who are able to connect with their audience on this level tend to be more effective in persuading and steering their audience than those who are not (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

## **2.5. Parasocial relationships, social media and SMIs**

Although traditional research on parasocial relationships was mainly focused on traditional media and related media personas such as TV-performers, parasocial relationship theory is also highly relevant in the context of SMIs and the digital environment in which they operate. The ways in which SMIs engage with their audience differs greatly from traditional media personalities; social media platforms allow two-way interactions, SMIs generally have a specific type of followers, which simplifies the process of addressing them appropriately, and the content they share tends to be very personal. This context seems to be especially fruitful for developing parasocial relationships, since it provides various opportunities to foster personal connections. Firstly, SMIs generally document their lives on social media, thereby disclosing a lot of personal information (Burke, 2017). Such systematic disclosure may lead users to think that they are part of the SMIs personal life, resulting in a strong sense of relationship and trust; users perceive the SMI as someone they know personally (Gajewski, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018). Secondly, the development of a parasocial relationship is strongly related to identification processes and homophily; people tend to bond with others similar to them (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Turner, 1993). Since SMIs generally are common people having gained fame via social media platforms (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), they tend to be

perceived as relatable and authentic (Abidin & Ots, 2016), giving followers a sense of recognition which fosters the development of parasocial relationships (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thirdly, while SMIs will only selectively read and respond to their followers' communications due to their large following, the functions on social media that enable users to write comments, like their favourite content and send private messages still promote the illusion of direct two-way communication (Gong & Li, 2017). Concluding, the concept of parasocial relationships is highly relevant for SMI-marketing and persuasion. To illustrate, followers that experience a parasocial relationship with regards to a SMI, show increased purchase intention when faced with sponsored posts (Hjortaa & Øver s, 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Hwang & Zhang) and tend to display more trust towards the endorsed brand as well (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho, 2020).

In the context of this study, the focus is not necessarily on how parasocial relationships may affect the outcomes of SMI-marketing but rather on if and how parasocial relationships influence followers' perceptions of controversial posts and their responses to them. According to Osterman & Hecmanczuk (2020), people experiencing a parasocial relationship with a public figure reported the offenses that figure involved in as less severe, attributed them less responsibility and intention, and reported higher levels of forgiveness compared to those not experiencing a parasocial relationship. Therefore, the responses people have in the context of controversial posts seems to be related to the experience of parasocial relationships; it can, for instance, be expected that those followers who perceive a parasocial relationship might experience stronger emotions due to their investment with regards to the SMI, as well as respond in more extreme ways as compared to those followers who do not experience this type of relationship. Furthermore, the experience of parasocial relationships seems to be personal, thereby varying in its nature for different individuals. To illustrate, parasocial relationships, for instance, may be perceived as a form of friendship (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), as established previously. However, a study of Sokolova and Kefi (2018) showed that for younger generations, parasocial relationships may be characterized by addictive content consumption and extreme fandom as well, as opposed to older generations. Therefore, it seems that the experience of parasocial relationships is dependent on personal characteristics and goals, which may result in different dynamics in terms of SMI-audience relationships and therefore may also affect the ways in which followers respond to controversy.

## **2.6. Ethical considerations in the context of SMIs**

The rise of social media and the transformation of the digital landscape has resulted in calls for changes in the ideas about and practice of public relations (Macnamara, 2010). Especially the practices that exert influence on audiences are important to review in terms of the ethical considerations involved (Archer, Pettigrew & Harrigan, 2014), which involves the practices of SMIs. According to Wolf, Archer and Xu (2018), the abilities of SMIs to set the public agenda, successfully engage in advertising activities and influence public opinion in general has made them important stakeholders for organisations and given them a prominent place in the landscape of public relations. However, their powerful positions are fragile; Khamis, Ang & Welling (as cited by Wolf, Archer & Xu, 2018) argue that the social capital of SMIs is merely based on external gratification, involving the recognition, support

and value judgements of others, therefore increasing the need to act in an ethically responsible manner. However, what exactly this means has been discussed extensively, generally departing from discussions about dialogue and its' ethical dimensions. Social media platforms have provided many ways in which dialogue can be constituted, which tends to be seen as a positive asset. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), this is due to the fact that dialogue generally is perceived as more ethically correct compared to other ways of communicating, since dialogue cherishes honesty, trust and a sense of otherness, as well as enables everyone to voice their opinions. However, engaging in dialogue does not guarantee ethical behaviour (Kent & Taylor, 2002); the complexities of transparent and complete dialogue with all stakeholders generally involves trade-offs between interests, which to some extent involves the exertion of control, and no incentives for actual organisational change are guaranteed (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that the engagement of SMIs in terms of dialogue with their followers does not guarantee ethical behaviour, however may help facilitate such behaviour. According to Toledano and Wolland (2011), true ethical behaviour in the social media context requires transparency, the acknowledgement and acting on social responsibility as well as active utilization of social media platforms to consult stakeholders about their concerns and interests. More specific attributes of ethical behaviour include for instance attribution, truthfulness, minimizing harm and accountability, as argued by Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim and Soon (2009) who studied ethical behaviour among bloggers. Similar requirements for online ethics were found by Macnamara (2010) and Smith, Kendall, Knighton and Wright (2018), who argued for the importance of honesty, transparency and disclosure. According to Wellman, Stoldt, Tully & Ekdale (2020), who studied the ethical guidelines used in SMI-marketing, authenticity is deemed most important as code of conduct; in practice, this involves maintaining consistency of one's online identity and truthfulness towards one's audience.

In case codes of ethics are ignored or breached, followers may become distrustful towards the SMI involved. Generally, such ethical issues play a role in SMI advertising, and sponsored posts specifically (Archer, Pettigrew & Harrigan, 2014; Loude, 2017). Important is that advertisements should be properly disclosed, since lack of disclosure withholds followers with important information for them to make an informed purchase decision (Loude, 2017). Another severe problem is false advertising; providing false or misleading information to the customer, which has occurred within the realm of SMI marketing over the past few years (Pacifico, Johnson & O'Meara, 2019). However, unethical practices may also occur outside of advertisement, and may differ in nature substantially based on the audience of the SMI and their characteristics. In some cases, unethical practices are also not noticed by the public, especially when they take place behind the scenes and these moments are deliberately kept private. In such a case, SMIs may try to adopt a strategy which highlights their good deeds and ethical standards to maintain a legitimate position; however, if followers sense discrepancies between this morally conscious persona that is positioned online and the SMI's actual behaviour, this moral hypocrisy can lead to severe media backlash (Leban, Thomsen, von Wallpach & Voyer, 2020). The current research aims to gather insight into how such situations are perceived and responded to by the public, which is expected to be determined partly by the relationship that is perceived between follower and SMI, as well as by the follower's personal ethical standards and fundamental ideas on responsible behaviour. While the first seems to be the result of ongoing exposure to and interaction with the content of a SMI, the latter merely originates from one's personality, education and upbringing. The dynamics between these influences is expected to be of great importance for the development of

responses followers have with regards to controversial incidents.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The aim of this study is to gather insight in how and why followers respond to controversial incidents involving SMIs, as well as how this relates to the parasocial relationships they might be experiencing with the SMIs in question. In order to understand why certain responses are elicited in certain situations, it is of great importance to, in the first place, gather insight in the value judgements and perceptions followers hold with regards to their relationships with SMIs, controversial incidents they might be confronted with, as well as general ethical considerations in the context of social media and SMIs. In other words, to understand how followers make sense of controversial situations, as well as how this feeds into their responses, it is important to unravel the underlying feelings, attributions and rationalizations, for which a qualitative research design seems to be the most appropriate since it provides room for detail, nuance and elaboration (Boeije, 2014). For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were chosen as instrument to gather rich insights on the personal experience of the participant and to account for individual differences in perception (Alsaawi, 2014). Since the current study is explorative in its nature, the use of interviews is ought to provide a detailed understanding of what concepts, considerations and emotions are at stake in the context of controversial incidents, as well as online controversy involving SMIs in a more general sense.

#### **3.2. Sampling and participants**

In order to gather participants for the interviews, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used, which involves the selection of participants on the basis of convenient availability of the subjects and the recruitment of subjects by recommendation of already selected participants respectively (Panacek & Thompson, 2007). Since social media platforms are mostly used by young adults between 18-29 years old (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), the target group of this study allowed the researcher to make use of her own personal network to recruit suitable participants. Important was that the participants made use of social media platforms and actively followed at least one SMI, which in this study will be referred to as the viewing of the SMIs content on a regular basis, as well as the engagement with the SMI for instance by liking their content or leaving comments.

The group of recruited participants that was interviewed includes 15 individuals, all between the age of 18-22 years old. Of all participants, 11 are female and 4 are male, and the majority of the individuals in the sample have a Dutch nationality. However, the sample also includes individuals with a German and Bulgarian nationality. Concerning their occupation, 14 participants are students, of which the study tracks include Communication Science, Nursery, Life Science Technology, Social Work, International Business, Marketing and Communication, Media and Design, Theatre Science, Psychology and International Hospitality Management. One participant has a full-time job in a production office, as well as works as a SMI part-time. The participants all are active social media users, and follow multiple SMIs.

#### **3.3. Procedure**

The current study focuses on perceptions and value judgements followers have about controversial actions and posts of SMIs. Therefore, it is important to address such a situation during the interviews, preferably a real-life situation with which the participants can truly identify. Therefore, the critical incident technique was used, which involves the participants' assessment of his/her behaviour, feelings and experiences during a self-recalled incident, providing rich data on how participants evaluated certain situations (Woolsey, 1986). According to Hughes, Williamson and Lloyd (2007), critical incident technique is a suitable technique to gather rich and contextualized data that reflect the participants' experiences, specifically the human activities involved and their significance to the individual. The use of this technique requires an elaboration on the plans and specifications (Hughes, Williamson & Lloyd, 2007), which can be found in appendix A. In order for the participants to feel prepared as well as to ensure that they would be able to propose a critical incident during the interview, a short briefing was sent out to them a week in advance. In this briefing, they were asked to think about an incident regarding the controversial actions or posts of an SMI of their choice. It was emphasized that controversy is a subjective matter, and may include anything that they had perceived as controversial, whether it concerned a relatively minor incident or a well-known scandal. It was not specified what further topics or questions would be addressed during the interview; the briefing had the sole purpose of preparing the participants to speak about a controversial incident. Furthermore, the informed consent form ensuring anonymity, ability to withdraw oneself from the study at any time and consent for the audio to be recorded was sent along with this briefing. The briefing text can be found in appendix B, and the informed consent form can be found in appendix C.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the possibilities for the interviews to take place in a face-to-face setting were severely limited. Therefore, it was decided for the interviews to take place via Skype or another video-call service, if preferred by the participant. This provided a more natural context for the conversation as compared to interviews via a regular telephone call. At the start of the interviews, the participants were once again made aware of their rights and consent, and the informed consent forms, which were signed digitally beforehand, were checked. The first three interviews were relatively explorative in nature; therefore, a previously developed set of questions was used as a guideline for the different topics that were supposed to be addressed. However, as a clearer picture of the relevant aspects and patterns arose during the process of data collection, the focus shifted towards getting a more detailed and thorough understanding of the data. Therefore, the remaining interviews proceeded in a semi-structured manner, which enabled anticipation from both the interviewer and the interviewee, clarification and in-depth answers as well as a naturally flowing conversation, which generally result in more detailed data on perceptions, feelings and attitudes (Boeije, 2014). During the interviews, both the critical incident the participant had come up with and questions addressing the general relationship between the SMI and participant were addressed, as well as ethical considerations and some demographic information. A table summarizing the content of the interviews is presented below. The interviews all were audio-recorded, and had a duration of approximately 45 minutes each.

Table 2

*Elaboration on content of the interviews*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Concepts addressed</b>	<b>Example questions</b>
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Demographics and general information	Age; gender; occupation; nationality Social media use: includes the time spent on social media; what content they are interested in; what activities they engage in Following SMIs: includes type of SMIs; reason to follow	What social media platforms do you use? How often do you use social media? What SMIs do you follow and why?
SMI-follower (parasocial) relationship	Characteristics: includes positive assets of a SMI and negative assets of a SMI Relationship: how is the relationship between SMI-follower perceived and why Influence: in what ways SMIs influence them and their daily lives	How would you describe the relationship between you and this SMI? What makes this SMI special for you compared to other SMIs? Does the relationship with the SMI affect your life in any way, and if so, how?
Ethical considerations	Ethical standards: are there specific standards SMIs should keep in mind Responsibility: who carries responsibility and why Boundaries: personal view on what is acceptable and what is not	What do you think is important for a SMI to be ethically responsible? Do you have any boundaries regarding what is acceptable for a SMI to do and what is not? If so, where do you draw the line?
Critical incident	Situational description: how the incident is perceived by the follower Feelings and perceptions: what emotions are elicited because of the incident Effects: What are the consequences of the incident Responses: how did the follower respond to the incident and why	Can you tell me what incident you have come up with? Why is especially this incident so important/salient for you? How did you feel in this situation? How did you respond? Has this incident changed your relationship with and/or perceptions of the SMI?

### 3.4. Data processing and analysis

After data collection, data processing was undertaken in order to prepare the data for analysis. The audio recordings of the interviews were translated and transcribed, as well as simultaneously anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Therefore, names and other information that could potentially be used to identify participants such as addresses or

usernames were removed. In order to safeguard the privacy of the SMIs that were mentioned during the interviews as well, their names and usernames were removed. Subsequently, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, which was used for the coding process. The coding process started with open coding based on the knowledge of the theoretical framework, with the aim to distinguish between and label the content of the different pieces of text within the transcriptions. This provided the foundations for the coding scheme, which was further developed throughout the coding process. Axial coding was performed to revise previously conducted coding and develop sub-codes, which was based on the information gathered from the data during the first coding round. Here, special attention was paid to the construction of categories regarding the critical incidents, to get a clear view of all the concepts involved. The results following from the axial coding phase fostered the fine-tuning of the coding scheme. Subsequently, the coding scheme and the reliability of the coding was tested by means of intercoder-reliability; a second coder coded 10% of the interview transcripts in order to calculate a Cohens' Kappa by means of SPSS. The first coding round with a second coder showed insufficient agreement, after which the codebook was revised. After providing more specific definitions and descriptions of the codes as well as the removal of codes that appeared to be redundant, a second round of coding was conducted. Subsequently, the Cohens' Kappa's for all separate categories were calculated, except for the category referring to the participants' demographics. The categories social media use, SMI, SMI relationships, ethical behaviour and standards, critical incidents and interventions had a Cohens' Kappa of respectively 0.81; 0.84; 0.78; 0.84; 0.73 and 0.64, which ensures sufficient reliability of the codebook. The final version of the codebook can be found in appendix D, and an example table used for calculating the Cohen's Kappa's can be found in Appendix E. By means of selective coding, the main categories and their relationships were identified, thereby providing insight into the answers to the research question and the sub questions. The findings are presented in the following chapter of this report.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Social media use and behaviour

In order to understand the context in which controversial incidents involving SMIs as well as the subsequent responses of followers occur, it is important to elaborate on the followers' social media use and what it means to them. All participants are active social media users, spending approximately 1,5-5 hours on social media per day. Generally, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat are used most frequently; however, Facebook and TikTok were also mentioned. The use of these social media platforms appeared to revolve around two major activities; engaging with friends and family, as well as the consumption of online content. Participant 14 stated that:

*"On Instagram, I mainly check what other people are doing, what friends are doing. And in addition to that, I started following influencers".* Similarly, participant 9 stated: *"Yes, mostly looking at others' content. Looking for inspiration for the stuff that I make, designs, such as logos. Or just following friends".*

When asked about their favourite type of content, most participants expressed a preference for content involving humour and lifestyle topics, especially when in vlog-style. Additionally, one participant also expressed a preference for activism-related content, on which will be elaborated later. Even though most participants actively consume large amounts of content, as illustrated by participant 2 who stated that *"I can scroll on Instagram for so long, checking out all the stories...I can do that for an infinite amount of time"*, all participants described themselves as silent users who limit their online activities to interacting with friends, scrolling through content and sporadically liking. As an example, participant 12 explained:

*"Well, that depends on the platform I guess. So, like I said, I only use Snapchat to text with friends. But on Instagram I am kind of a silent watcher, I don't comment anything. I just look at the pictures and stories".* On a same note, participant 14 stated: *"Well, it is mainly scrolling through it, liking, and then going on. I never comment".*

Due to the high amounts of content that the participants consume and the amount of time spent on social media platforms daily, these online activities seem to be of at least some significance to them. When asked about what social media means to them personally, most participants stated that they perceive it as a form of inspiration. As participant 13 explained: *"Instagram I think, I just use it for content, to see how things are, to get inspired..."*. Therefore, social media can, in some way, be a means for people to enrich their personal life. Participant 12 illustrates that by saying:

*"I think it is some kind of inspiration or motivation sometimes, to...do stuff I want to do, like yoga. Or a reminder to come down, and relax a bit. I don't know, follow my hobbies and stuff like that. Because a lot of people I follow have similar things they do".* She later added that *"It is new input for what I can do, and also people...Like multiple people are*

*doing the same thing but in different ways”.*

In addition to inspiration, participants also described social media as a means for both entertainment and educational purposes. When asked about how he experiences his online content consumption, participant 11 stated: *“I think that it is educational, and at the same time entertaining as well”*. With regards to following SMIs, participant 3 expressed: *“I always like to follow people who can educate me in a certain way”*. Various ways in which the participants try to capitalize on educational aspects of social media content were described, ranging from watching tutorials to adapting new perspectives on specific topics based on the content they consume. The latter can be illustrated by participant 12 explaining:

*“I think it is really nice to also have these more thoughtful topics, then it does not feel as useless. And it also gives new ways of thinking. And makes me think of other stuff or from different viewpoints sometimes, and I like that”*.

Such considerations are highly integrated in a more overarching perspective on social media as a means for online activism. Activism-related online efforts generally include raising awareness as well as starting and maintaining discussions; often as an extension of offline activism, but also to address issues that are taking place specifically in an online context. Generally, the participants perceived the efforts of online activism as a positive development within the context of social media. As participant 14 stated: *“Maybe it is a really good thing that it happens. Because it can foster discussions and maybe lead to new solutions, or gets people to think. Creating awareness for certain things”*. Participant 11 highlights the possibilities and benefits of capitalizing on social media platforms for online activism, however, also places a critical note by saying:

*“I think that is good. On the one hand... It gives a certain reach, and some sort...Democratic thing, that marginalized groups may get just as much attention as the mainstream, you know. So, in that respective it is more democratic. But I do think that people sometimes see it as some sort of replacement, and I don't think that works. Because although there might be a lot of online awareness, that of course is not politics. So, there is a difference”*.

Generally, the perceived fruitfulness of online activism depends on the participant's perspective on what it means as well as how it is implemented; however, especially creating awareness for societal issues was perceived as a valuable aspect of online activism.

#### **4.2. Following SMIs**

In order to understand the relationships that may develop between follower and SMI, it is important to gather insight in the general ideas and opinions the participants have with regards to following SMIs. To begin with, all participants actively follow multiple SMIs. For the majority of the participants, active following referred to them consuming all the content the specific SMI creates, liking their pictures and/or videos and following them on multiple channels, so on both Instagram and YouTube, for instance. To illustrate, participant 6 said: *“Indeed, watching the videos, often liking them and being subscribed to the channel”*. However, other participants added that for them it is not necessarily about liking and commenting from her side, but more about staying up to date with the life of the SMI. As an

example: “So, for me, active following is more like following everything someone does on a daily basis” (participant 4). A similar perspective was expressed by participant 7, who explained: “You can follow #insertname, and then you see all the things that she has been tagged in, you know. So, you stay up to date with the latest things”. Generally, active following was associated with displaying at least some dedication and involvement as a follower.

During the interviews, many different types of SMIs were mentioned, varying from those focussing on niche topics and/or markets, to those recording and sharing their entire lives online. Regardless of the many variations among types of SMIs and the content that they produce, there was consensus among participants that transparency is the most important positive asset an SMI can have. Generally, the participants expressed to prefer transparent SMIs over those who are not, and perceived them as more likeable, credible, and relatable. Many participants highlighted the importance of being real online; to illustrate, participant 12 stated that:

*“I like it if people are talking about more serious stuff also, and maybe about their thoughts, or what they are struggling with. And not always pretending as if everything is perfect all the time, but also showing the difficult sides. I like that, because I think it makes it more real”.*

In addition to being transparent about the reality of daily life, the importance of being transparent in other contexts was also mentioned a few times; especially communicating openly about advertisements and promotions, as well as the quality of the product that is promoted. This can be highlighted by participant 13 who stated: “I think that it is now so important for influencers, to say like ‘oh, this is a promotion or this is... not something I can guarantee a 100% because of all those negative results’, and yeah”. Generally, transparency was valued highly in all respects. This is strongly associated with relatability, which was the second most mentioned positive characteristic. As participant 5 said: “I think the more people share about their life... what is real, you know? Like raw material, the more you can relate to them”. All participants agreed on the fact that relatability is of extreme importance for becoming actively involved with an SMI. Both in terms of the SMIs personality and the content that they make, the participants expressed the need to identify themselves, thereby favouring SMIs who appear similar to them. Participant 1 stated:

*“I think that is the biggest reason why I watch her, what we have in common, and why I find her content interesting to follow. And well, I just think the way she comes across is similar to me, you know”. Similarly, participant 2 noted that “Especially with YouTubers I follow that I can relate to, I can compare them to myself. Like: oh, I could have also done something like that, or thought about it like that”.*

The process in which followers compare themselves with the SMIs that they are involved with, is in line with the strong preference for transparency; the more unfiltered a SMI presents themselves, the more the illusion of a perfect, glamorous life ceases to exist, which increases relatability. As stated by participant 2: “I really prefer watching YouTubers that are a bit more casual, because my life style is more similar to theirs. I notice that”. In addition to transparency and relatability, authenticity appeared to be an important positive asset as well. During the interviews, being authentic was mainly associated with integrating ones’

personality within their content, as well as with being oneself and staying true to oneself. For instance, participant 3 stated:

*"I just really like how she lives her life and normally does not give a fuck about what other people think". Participant 5 highlighted that "well, you are looking at someone for hours, so you should like the person; it should speak to you".*

Interestingly, when speaking about authenticity, many participants immediately made a connection with promotions and advertisements. It was strongly emphasized that promotions and advertisements should be and feel sincere; for instance, a good match between the promoted product and the SMI's personality is of great importance. This can be highlighted by participant 3 who explained:

*"Not just...work with any kind of company but actually being interested in them, being positive about them and actually showing their followers a brand that they believe in".*

During the interviews, some perceived negative characteristics of SMIs were discussed as well, of which the most frequently mentioned ones are not being authentic and relatable. To illustrate, participant 12 explained:

*"I have this certain picture of someone in my head, about how this person is, behaves and thinks about some things. And if that is really contradicting to something they are saying, that would be... not cool". Participant 3 stated: "They create content that I can't relate to in any kind of form of way because it is just nothing I would ever do in my life, or can afford, it is not a possibility for me. So, I just don't... I'm just not as interested in their stuff because it does not have any added value for me personally".*

These statements once again highlight the importance of relatability and authenticity for the likeability of a SMI as well as becoming involved in their online world. Furthermore, the importance of authenticity in relation to promotion and advertisement was emphasized:

*"If YouTubers for example promote stuff that does not interest them at all or that does not have anything to do with them every day...for example, if beauty influencers are going to promote a washing machine every day, then I am also like... nice money making, haha. We all want money, but at least come up with something useful. If that is the case every day, I am also like, bye" (participant 10).*

It seems most important that SMIs are visibly genuine in every facet of their activities, whether it involves the regular content they post or the advertisements they do.

Overall, the participants seem to have quite clear ideas on what they look for in SMIs, as well as what they would not like to see. This provides us with a solid basis for understanding what is needed for relationships to develop, of which the most important aspects are a) the possibility for followers to identify themselves with the SMI and b) transparent and honest communication from the SMI's side.

#### **4.3. Perception of follower-SMI relationships and influence**

In the previous section, the reasons for following SMIs as well as positive and negative characteristics of SMIs were discussed. As such characteristics are of great importance for determining the likeability of a SMI as well as considering the need to follow them, they form the basis for potential relationships that may develop. In order to understand how certain characteristics relate to follower-SMI relationships, participants were asked to describe how they perceive their relationships with SMIs, if there are any. Generally, the participants referred to their favourite SMIs as role models; someone they look up to and take as an example. To illustrate, participant 3 stated:

*“I really think she is somewhat of a role model to me, I really look up to her”.*

Participant 11 added that this perception of SMIs as a role models is associated with the need for relatability that is discussed in the previous sections: *“I think that the power of influencers maybe also lies within representation of people. Ehm, that people recognize themselves. In some sort of role model”.*

A clear connection between relatability and follower’s perceptions of SMIs being role models can be identified, as the general preference for relatable SMIs is in line with follower’s desire to be like the SMI, which explains why they are taken as an example and are being described as a source of inspiration.

In addition to perceiving their favourite SMIs as a role model, a few participants expressed that they felt like they had a more personal relationship with the SMI as well. In most cases, the participants explained this in terms of friendship; the SMI, to them, felt like an actual friend, or someone they could be friends with if they would have known them in real life. For instance, participant 6 stated that

*“You know, if she would live here or I would live there, I also think she could be a good friend of mine. And that is fun to me, and I really like to watch them then, that I feel like...oh, she is a really nice girl and I could be friends with her”.*

This perception of the SMI being a (potential) friend seems to be related to follower’s need for transparency; the more is known about a SMI, the more the participant is able to connect with them. As participant 6 explained: *“If you follow someone for such a long time, you experience everything and you get this idea that like, you are friends with them, even though they don’t know you at all”.* Generally, the participants who expressed that they perceive the relationship with their favourite SMI as a friendship, also expressed that they are aware of the fact that this actually is not the case. This will be elaborated on in the upcoming section concerning parasocial relationships, as there can be made a distinction between those who are aware of the parasocial relationships they are experiencing and therefore are able to describe this illusion, and those who are not aware of the parasocial relationships they experience and therefore are not able to detect and describe them. Especially the latter group requires some additional elaboration that will be provided in the following section.

Overall, most participants did perceive a relationship between them and their favourite SMIs. The SMIs mostly were perceived as role model, friend, or both. Additionally, a few participants referred to them as a mentor or teacher in some respects. However, some participants indicated to experience no sense of a relationship at all. These participants explained that although they may like an SMIs’ personality and enjoy consuming that persons’ content, they do not experience any form of connection with them. For instance, participant

11 stated:

*"I just like to follow them and I like that content. But other than that...Her as a person, well, I of course don't know her at all. So, there is barely such a bond".* Participant 4 emphasized the importance of mutuality in order to develop a relationship by saying: *"I think you can only get a bond or relationship with someone when you mutually...You don't have to know each other completely, but you do have to know about each other's existence".*

This concept of mutuality is of great importance when considering the position of follower and SMI in relation to each other, since a) lack of mutuality can interfere with the process of developing any relationship, and b) in case a follower does perceive a relationship, it is usually one-sided. The latter can be illustrated by participant 8, who is an SMI himself and elaborated on this asymmetrical relationship followers may have with SMIs: *"You know, of course you are thankful that you have many followers and that you can make a job out of it, ehm...But the most love still comes from the follower towards the influencer".*

In addition to their perception of the relationship between follower and SMI, the participants were asked about how following a SMI affects them and their daily lives. Interestingly, all participants reported that following SMIs influences them and their daily lives, including those who expressed not to perceive a relationship. However, those who expressed to perceive their favourite SMIs as role models, generally perceived themselves to be more prone to the influence of the relevant SMIs. Overall, many participants reported themselves as susceptible to imitating SMIs, for instance in terms of behaviour and appearance. To illustrate, participant 6 stated:

*"She is always so positive, and when I am moody I sometimes think like, okay, try to have some more of her vibes, you know".* Participant 15 places a critical note by saying: *"It looks very real, what they are doing. And then you start mimicking that automatically. And that can end very well or it can end very badly, that depends on who you follow".*

This phenomenon of consciously and unconsciously imitating SMIs is specifically relevant for those looking up to a SMI. For instance, participant 6 who expressed to have a relatively strong connection with a certain SMI stated:

*"Recently she had ordered a jeans, and I really liked that one. And she said it was from Zara, so then I immediately ordered it. Then I realized like, oh, I previously did not do this kind of stuff, and with her I do have that".*

From this example, it becomes evident that SMIs can have quite an influence on purchase intention as well. During the interviews, many participants referred to situations in which they bought or had intended to buy a product or service based on the content of an SMI. For instance, participant 8 explained: *"Their makeup is so nice, and the products look so good in the videos...Then I also want to try that. I think half of my daily makeup products is because I got influenced, haha".* In addition to imitating SMIs and increased purchase intention, participants also expressed to be influenced by SMIs in terms of opinions and attitudes. Especially when serious topics are addressed, followers may become encouraged to start reflecting, thereby forming new opinions or reinforcing already existing ones. To

illustrate, participant 11 explained: *“Well, it does contribute to how you think about certain things. So, I think its worth lies in the fact that you get to see a different perspective. And that you learn from that”*. Especially in the context of online activism that is discussed in the first section, this is of great importance.

The relationships that are perceived between the follower and SMI foster the SMI's ability to persuade their audience, whether this is in terms of purchase intention, opinions and attitudes or followers unconsciously imitating the SMI. Especially the latter two may be of importance for follower's responses to controversial incidents, hence they should be carefully considered.

#### **4.4. Parasocial relationships**

The previous sections have provided insight in how followers perceive the relationships they have with SMIs, if they perceived any. Especially the one-sidedness of follower-SMI relationships was emphasized, although the follower may not always be aware of this asymmetry. The development and experience of a parasocial relationship usually only becomes apparent when reflecting on your own perceptions and feelings retrospectively, which explains why they are often overlooked and followers tend not to be aware of them. As a result, a distinction regarding the experience of parasocial relationships among followers can be made; those who are aware of the fact that they perceive a parasocial relationship, those who are not aware of the fact that they perceive a parasocial relationship and those who do not perceive a parasocial relationship at all. The latter group, however, is barely represented in this study; during the interviews, all participants either showed clear signs of parasocial relationships and expressed to be aware of it being an illusion, or they expressed not to perceive a relationship, however, did show signs of parasocial relationships. To illustrate the latter, when asked about her perception of her follower-SMI relationships, participant 15 expressed to be unsure: *“Well, emotional bond...I don't know, maybe if something happens to her. But not necessarily, I think”*. However, as the interview continued, she did show clear signs of being dedicated. For instance, she mentioned that *“I just like her, the way she is, and that's why I follow her. And when I see that she posted a video, I am like 'oh! I am going to watch that tonight', because I just like her a lot. I can really look forward to watching that”*. Furthermore, she also illustrates the difference in influence with regards to her favourite SMI and others she follows by saying: *“If I look at those products, and they look nice and it seems worth the try, I am immediately sold. At least, with her. And with other influencers that takes longer”*. There seems to be a certain level of trust involved that she does not experience with other SMIs she follows, which she confirmed herself during the interview as well. This example illustrates how it can be difficult for followers to express what exactly they are perceiving, hence the discrepancies that may exist between the perceived relationship and the followers' behaviour in relation to the SMI. For the sake of providing clarity with regards to this matter, it was decided to distinguish between follower's perception of their relationships with SMIs and the (often overlapping) concept of parasocial relationships that is discussed in this section.

The development of a parasocial relationship seems to be, in the first place, initiated by a followers' interest in the SMIs content or personality, after which it is mainly subject to time and systematic follower involvement. To illustrate, participant 3 explained:

*“The ones I follow for a long time and I am really kind of invested in, they are most of the time the ones I 'click' with in the beginning, so...I need some kind of initial interest to*

*keep on following them*". Similarly, participant 12 stated: *"I think it develops over time. So, when I first followed them, I just did because the topics were interesting. But the longer I follow them, see what they are doing, and what they struggle with, and stuff like that... The more I care about them"*.

In this example, the participant already tips upon one of the most important concepts with regards to parasocial relationships: familiarity. As explained previously in this section, transparency is of great importance to followers, which is straight in line with how parasocial relationships develop and are perceived. Generally, participants placed strong emphasis on the feeling of knowing the SMI on a personal level. To illustrate, participant 10 stated:

*"You just know everything, and you really start seeing her as a best friend then. I think I know more about her than I know about some friends of mine, haha! That you think like, wow... This really is... It feels like a friendship, while of course that is totally not the case"*.

Moreover, the last sentence highlights clearly how some participants are aware of the parasocial relationships they perceive. The importance of the concept of familiarity within a parasocial relationship is also acknowledged from the perspective of the SMI:

*"You also create a bit of a bond by sharing like... Some sort of life advice with people who ask for that, you know. Because I have had people ask me like how I came out, and when. And if you then talk to them and share your story, you just automatically get a bond with that person. That kind of stuff. At least, I think you create a bond then"* (participant 8).

Overall, the sharing of personal information and stories with followers seems to be at the heart of parasocial relationships, for which social media platforms are particularly suitable due to their possibilities for creative storytelling and interaction. To illustrate the latter, participant 11 explained: *"I have, for example, send her a message about something once, and we also had a pretty nice conversation afterwards. So, it did not stop with one thing, but it went on"*. The participant later referred back to this statement when discussing parasocial relationships, by adding *"maybe it is not 'just' an illusion"*. This illustrates how parasocial relationships may become increasingly similar to real-life relationships due to the highly interactive context in which they now develop, as compared to the context of television performers in which they traditionally occurred. However, a critical note that should be considered here refers to the reach and audience of the SMI; the larger the audience of the SMI, the lower the chances of interpersonal contact between follower and SMI occurring. From that perspective, parasocial relationships in the context of SMIs remain fairly similar to those in the context of television performers.

Generally, the participants expressed to perceive higher levels of dedication towards SMIs they perceive a parasocial relationship with. This dedication includes mostly personal involvement with the SMI; for instance, immediately consuming their content when posted, following them on multiple platforms or even attending real life events where the SMI is present. To illustrate, participant 2 stated: *"I always watch her videos. When she uploads, I push everything aside, I immediately get behind my computer and go watch the video"*. Participant 6 mentioned: *"I also went to his theatre show, so I really like him"*. In addition to being dedicated, the participants expressed to be more trusting towards the SMIs with whom

they perceive a parasocial relationship. As a result, they perceived themselves to be more susceptible for influences coming from these SMIs as well. For instance, participant 3 explained:

*“To be honest, thinking about the ones I really follow, like their posts and am really interested in, I think all of them I definitely trust. And like think, okay, if they say this is good and it is something you should maybe try, I am definitely up for trying it”.* This is supported by participant 2 who mentioned: *“Some people I have been following for so long and actively now that it almost feels as if I know them, and if they for instance promote something or say something I’m way more likely to accept that as compared to when it happens in some random video I am watching”.*

However, the influence with regards to parasocial relationships extends beyond purchase intention or attitudes and opinions; it also may evoke emotional responses. Many participants experienced a sense of emotional connection when in a parasocial relationship, meaning that events in the SMIs life may evoke emotional responses for the follower as well. To illustrate, participant 12 explained:

*“Once I really follow and I am interested in them...When something in their life happens, it is also interesting for me. For example, when one of them gets married or something, I am also happy for them. Which is kind of weird a bit, because I don’t know them. But still”.*

Such an emotional response is not merely a consequence of experiencing a parasocial relationship, however, also seems to reinforce the relationship; the more of an emotional response is elicited, the more it feels like a shared moment. To illustrate, participant 6 stated:

*“His father passed away and he has also cried in a video about that. And then you really empathize with him, and you get the feeling you know him, and I don’t really have that with people I don’t follow”.*

Therefore, familiarity and emotional connection seem to be inherently intertwined with respect to the development as well as reinforcement of parasocial relationships.

The development of parasocial relationships seems to deepen as well as reinforce the connection between the follower and SMI, regardless of whether the follower is consciously experiencing this or not. As a result, more emotional responses come at play as compared to when no parasocial relationship is experienced, which can be reinforced even more by follower’s dedication towards the SMI that is inherent to such a relationship. These notions seem to be of great importance for the responses of followers with regards to controversial incidents; however, first, focus needs to be put on the ideas followers have with regards to ethical standards in the context of SMIs, as these are crucial for situational assessment and value judgement.

#### **4.5. Ethical behaviours and considerations**

In order to understand why certain controversial situations elicit certain responses, it is not only of importance to understand the relationships between follower and SMI, but also to gather insight in the beliefs followers hold with regards to SMIs and ethical behaviour. As discussed in the previous sections, the participants generally perceive SMIs as role models,

and therefore are relatively impressionable with regards to their influence. As a result, the participants strongly emphasized the importance of taking responsibility as a SMI in general, considering their large, and sometimes vulnerable, target groups as well as the strong influence they may exert on them. To illustrate, participant 1 stated:

*“Many people follow you, and of course you can be yourself, but there are also things you should...I mean, people are looking up to you, you have an example function for some, so then I think you should also think well about what is okay and what crosses the line”.*

However, such ideas about what is okay and what crosses the line varied among participants. Based on the interviews, a distinction between the participants can be made; those who perceive social media and specifically the platforms of a SMI as a space in which issues can and should be addressed, and those who perceive the addressing of issues and sharing of opinions as a SMI as inappropriate. This first group argues mainly that SMIs should take responsibility by making use of their large audience and influence to make positive changes. This, for instance, may include addressing cultural-societal issues and other matters that are of importance to the SMIs themselves, which strongly relates with the online activism that was discussed earlier. To illustrate, participant 6 explained:

*“Recently with these forest fires in Australia, I also saw many influencers who addressed that in their stories and I think that is really good. If you have such a big platform, I feel like you are somewhat obligated to do that kind of stuff because you have so much followers and reach. You can reach so many people with that message”.* Participant 13 supports SMIs addressing certain issues as well, however, does place a critical note by saying: *“I think it is important to raise awareness, but if you don’t have the knowledge, or the expertise and the background and education you should not really come forward and say like ‘this is the correct thing’. It is fine to put your opinion out there, but also remind people you are not an expert”.*

This critical note specifically relates to the argument of the second group, who emphasize that SMIs are not in the position to address issues or voice their opinions. They generally argue that SMIs do not have the required expertise to discuss certain topics, as well as that followers’ opinions about certain important topics should not be influenced by SMIs. Especially the latter argument was emphasized during the interviews; to illustrate, participant 4 stated that:

*“I would not go into a lot of details about specific stuff. For example, if you think a certain political leader is horrible, I don’t think you should share that sort of opinions. I think that if you stay more neutral...I think you should be careful with your own opinion”.* She later added: *“You also of course have target groups with very vulnerable people, who do see you as an example and then might copy your opinions without good reason, and therefore may get into trouble”.*

Aside from these general considerations about how SMIs should be using their platforms, it was strongly emphasized by all participants that SMIs should, in all cases, be honest towards their audience, and that they should be aware of how their content can affect their audience negatively. According to the participants, the latter mainly refers to followers

imitating SMIs, which may have negative consequences in case of unethical behaviour. Therefore, it was highlighted frequently that SMIs should remain conscious about their example function and should pay attention to their behaviour and how they display this online. To illustrate, participant 14 stated: *“They should realize that thousands or millions of people are watching them. So, that they can’t just do anything”*. Participant 7 gave a concrete example of behaviour that he thinks should not be promoted online:

*“I do think that you cannot post everything. That you all of the sudden post a picture of you on Instagram with really big pupils, with a caption like, ‘just took a pill’ or something like that. I don’t think that is a good example. That would not be acceptable”*.

Here, the participant refers to a clear personal boundary; most participants expressed to have a set of personal boundaries that they tend to refer to in controversial situations. Overall, there was consensus about certain matters being unacceptable regardless of the context. These include for instance neglecting or risking your audiences’ physical and mental health, excluding certain groups of people and minorities, acting disrespectfully towards others and ultimately, not obeying the law. Such boundaries strongly refer to one’s norms and values; therefore, the participants highlighted the importance of a SMI having similar fundamental ideas about ethical issues as them. To illustrate, participant 6 stated:

*“I don’t really follow people who have a complete different viewpoint than me. And most of the people I know are quite similar in such situations, and think about it the same. And I do find that important”*. On the same note, participant 3 explained: *“I don’t know, maybe they say they are against abortion or something like that. I think that would be reason for me to say like, okay, you don’t have the same interest in me and like, do something I don’t agree with. Or if they say they are against same sex marriage or are racist, stuff like that. So, definitely stuff that is ethically questionable. Then I would also start questioning them and then either write something, or definitely unsubscribe to them”*.

Although most participants perceived SMIs as being responsible for behaving ethically, some participants also argued that followers carry some responsibility as well. In order to avoid being confronted with content that does not match your standards or norms and values, it was ought to be of importance to consider the content that a SMI makes as well as how they present themselves online, before deciding to follow them. To illustrate, participant 2 explained:

*“Imagine you are totally against eating meat and you follow someone who is, this is a really weird example, but you follow someone who is the complete opposite and posts pictures of that and all, and you don’t like it, just unfollow then”*, and she later added: *“You cannot just blame the influencers solely because followers also have to select what they want to see and what not in my opinion”*.

Additionally, with regards to young and vulnerable target groups, participants mentioned the responsibility that parents have to be aware of and select what their children are watching. For instance, participant 10 stated: *“What I also just said, with young children, I feel like parents should be attentive of what their children watch. Everything is all so easily accessible”*. Another aspect of follower responsibility was also highlighted, which mainly

emphasizes the importance of followers whistle blowing SMIs in case they are displaying unethical behaviour or are producing inappropriate content. As participant 6 explained:

*"I think it is important to address it if they do something wrong, so they also realize again like, oh, I am an example for people. I feel like they sometimes forget that a little bit. And if they get put into their place they can do better in the future".*

However, some participants did not perceive this to be their responsibility. Generally, the focus of follower responsibility is ought to be on prevention and selecting appropriate content for oneself, rather than responding to and whistle blowing SMIs after an incident has occurred.

#### **4.6. Perception of reality**

In addition to all the ethical considerations discussed in the sections above, many participants addressed an overarching problem in the way SMIs present themselves and their lives online, as well as how this is perceived by followers. Through the sharing of carefully constructed, perfectly beautiful images and videos solely, this false idea of reality is created, which is insensitive to all imperfections of people as individuals and life in general. As a result, participants expressed to perceive such unrealistic content as less enjoyable, which is in line with their preference for transparent SMIs which was discussed earlier. During the interviews, participants mentioned various situations in which they felt SMIs painted an unrealistic picture of what their lives look like, as well as situations in which the reality turned out to be completely different as compared to how it was presented online. As an example, participant 2 explained:

*"I think that is really bizarre. Because, I don't know...As a follower, when they all are on such a trip together it looks so nice, you might almost get jealous if you see all those pictures. And if you then hear the stories of how it really was for those girls, you really think, how can this be so crooked? How can it come across as so nice while in fact it was not even nice?"*

In the first place, such discrepancies between what is presented online and how it is in real life can leave followers feeling disappointed and betrayed. To illustrate, participant 13 stated:

*"If something they say contradicts the person or persona they have been trying to show you so far...that also kind of gives a feeling of betrayal, like, 'okay, I am such a nice person', but at the same time, on another platform, they show you that they are actually quite racist, for example. Ehm...Yeah, that definitely does affect you".* Later she added: *"Well, I think it just was the first red flag of how a lot of things, a lot of pages are just not transparent all the way through".*

Another important consequence of SMIs presenting an ideal version of themselves and their lives online, is the possible development of insecurity issues among their followers. The carefully constructed, edited and selected images of SMIs followers are confronted with everyday can, especially when the follower is not aware of the behind-the-scenes processes, result in severe insecurity issues. This is due to, for instance, unrealistic beauty standards or

expectations about how one's life should look like. For instance, participant 15 illustrates this by saying: *"If you are scrolling on Instagram, that is a good example, that you only see skinny and fit girls, while when you walk around the city you see that is totally not the case. And I think a lot of girls can become insecure because of that, or that they get the wrong ideas"*. Most participants expressed a clear desire for this to change, which explains why relatable and transparent SMIs were valued as highly as compared to those who are not.

#### **4.7. Controversial incidents**

The results have, until now, provided insight in a) follower's ideas about following SMIs and how this feeds into the relationships they might perceive, b) how such relationships develop and what they mean to the follower and c) what ideas followers have about online ethical standards and how SMIs should behave in order to act responsibly. This has resulted in a solid basis for understanding the context in which controversial incidents occur, and specifically, how this is experienced by the follower. Therefore, it seems appropriate to now connect these findings and considerations with online controversy involving SMIs.

In the highly adaptive environment of social media, controversial situations generally tend to spread quickly and elicit a lot of attention and responses. Therefore, all participants were able to think of a critical incident; more specifically, most participants proposed to discuss multiple. The controversial incidents that were discussed during the interviews can be distinguished into three categories. The first one concerns promotion and advertisement issues; this includes, for instance, the promotion of inappropriate products and/or services as well as collaborations with controversial companies. The second category concerns SMIs posting inappropriate content, which may include a variety of situations that involves content that is not appropriate for the target group to consume or not appropriate for online publishing in general. The last category involves any type of unethical behaviour of a SMI, which mostly includes events that happened in real life but became known to the public, however, also includes online unethical behaviour. Especially incidents involving unethical behaviour and promotion and advertisement issues were mentioned frequently by participants, many of these incidents being well-known scandals within the Netherlands or even worldwide. To illustrate, the two most frequently mentioned incidents both involved SMIs engaging in sexual misconduct, which elicited a lot of media attention and backlash on social media as well as on traditional media platforms. According to the participants, the extreme amounts of media attention that often surrounds such scandals is the main reason they come to mind. To illustrate, participant 14 stated:

*"Well, when you asked me that question the first one to come to mind was [...], because he is literally known for all of this stuff. That is also why he changed his name to [...], to save his reputation, which of course will never work. But because he has been in the news for this type of stuff so often, it was the first thing I thought about"*.

Additionally, some participants chose to discuss a certain incident because it involved one of their favourite SMIs, which made it of great concern to them. For instance, participant 3 stated:

*"I think she is just one of my favourite YouTubers, when she got like into this whole scandal I was kind of surprised. I was already kind of surprised when she made a response video to him, because she does not really interact with other YouTubers, she is pretty much*

*on her own so...It was kind of surprising to me”.*

In such cases, the discrepancies between one’s online persona and actual behaviour as discussed in the previous sections are of importance. As participant 6 explained: *“I felt like her true colours came up a bit, you know”*. This is in line with the findings of section 4.2, in which it became clear that authenticity is one of the most highly valued characteristics, that heavily affects follower’s opinions in case a SMI appears not to be as sincere as was expected.

#### **4.8. Responses**

Followers may react to controversial incidents differently depending on their ideas about ethical standards, the context of the incident, the SMI involved, and the relationship that is perceived with that SMI. The latter will be elaborated on in the section about parasocial relationships and controversial incidents. During the interviews, many possible responses to controversial incidents were identified, varying mostly in terms of follower commitment. This may range from not undertaking anything and ignoring the incident, to actively researching the case and voicing ones’ opinion about it. Generally, ones’ first response with regards to a critical incident concerns an unconscious reaction, which includes both an assessment of the situation, as well as a value judgement with regards to the event and the parties involved. This, in turn, may evoke certain emotions or feelings about the SMI involved. To illustrate, participant 6 explained her first response to a controversial incident by first giving her value judgement about the situation:

*“Well, I also thought that was really weird, like, it is none of your business”, after which she added: “then I kind of got...Well, not angry at him, but I thought, what kind of dude are you? Yeah, actually a little bit angry”.*

Clearly, the event as well as how she perceived it resulted in her experiencing negative emotions towards the SMI involved.

Most participants indicated that they tend to experience an immediate emotional response after a controversial incident. Subsequently, a decision on how to handle the situation is made, which is dependent on the value judgement of the situation and SMI involved as well. Overall, most participants in this study reported that they usually tend to ignore the situation, especially when it concerns incidents they perceive as not being as severe, as well as if they are not as engaged with the SMI involved. To illustrate, participant 2 stated: *“I would not send her a message or leave hate comments when she makes a mistake you know, I would not do that kind of stuff. I am not that actively concerned with it, no”*. In general, very few participants reported that they would take action as a response to a controversial incident, and if they would, this would be in terms of unfollowing the SMI in question instead of voicing their opinion, for instance by means of placing a comment. Furthermore, such a response is usually only elicited in cases of relatively severe incidents. To illustrate, participant 4 stated: *“If it would really cross the line, I might report it. But I don’t think that responsibility is mine”*. Participant 13 stated: *“You can’t really do a lot, I think the worst thing you could do to an influencer is just unfollow them”*. The idea that taking action as a response to a controversial event is not fruitful was shared by other participants as well. In most cases they felt like if they would voice their opinion on the matter, it would not be considered anyway due to the enormous amounts of messages SMIs get every day.

Although most participants expressed that they usually tend to not actively respond to controversial incidents, in most cases they still seemed to be relatively involved. For instance, multiple participants mentioned that they usually speak about such controversial events with friends: *"I talk about it with others, like, what the fuck is this person doing, but I don't really respond to that person directly"* (participant 14). Additionally, some participants mentioned that they tend to actively research the case, for instance by reading more comments than they usually would or looking up content reporting about the incident.

One interesting topic that was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews, concerns the concept of cancel culture. According to dictionary.com (2020), cancel culture refers to the collective boycotting and public shaming of public figures or companies as a result of them displaying offensive behaviour and/or voicing offensive opinions. However, in reality, it seems to function more like a spontaneous coping mechanism as a response to controversy as well as the emotional discomfort that may come with it, rather than a conscious and structured effort to achieve a certain goal. Therefore, cancel culture is a relatively lucid concept and may take on many forms, depending on the context. Nevertheless, cancel culture has, in line with social media increasingly becoming a part of our daily lives, become an important part of online pop culture over the years. As a result, cancel culture was mentioned multiple times during the interviews as something participants had engaged in, as what they saw as a form of protest against certain controversial issues. For example, participant 6 stated:

*"So, then I unfollowed him on everything, I did not need to see anything from him anymore".* Additionally, participant 15 described: *"He misused his position of power, which is also why a lot of his contracts with radio stations and TV were immediately dismissed. And I thought that was really good"*.

These quotes clearly illustrate that a wide array of actions, or maybe just thinking in a certain way, may feel as an act of protest and can vary among individuals. Additionally, multiple participants placed critical notes regarding the fruitfulness of cancel culture as well. For instance, it was doubted whether cancelling someone would actually improve the situation or the online atmosphere in general, as well as whether it is fair to cancel someone based on one mistake. To illustrate, participant 11 explained:

*"A stupid remark can happen sometimes. When I say something dumb myself, I sometimes also realize like, wow, if I were an influencer I would have been cancelled now, even though I did not mean it like this. Things can also be perceived very differently"*.

Cancel culture, from that perspective, is portrayed as a 'last resort', a definite and destructive response strategy in which there barely is any room for nuance, context and deliberation. From such a perspective, followers may perceive a pressure to act in certain ways as well. As participant 10 stated: *"It was also some sort of group pressure, like, everyone said how bad of a person he was...so I also can't follow him anymore"*. However, as cancel culture is a lucid and subjective phenomenon, it does not necessarily have to manifest in such a way. Another interesting perspective on cancel culture was given by the participant who is a SMI himself. He proposed that this specific idea of cancelling individuals enforces a certain culture of drama, in which public figures constantly try to elicit negative attention as a strategy to gain more followers. In his words:

*“People are just looking for the drama. Just this year, I have already experienced four drama situations. And I am totally done with it. There constantly are arguments, there constantly is competition...And I am like, let’s just make a party out of it all together and help each other”* (participant 8).

This illustrates how cancel culture is perceived differently as well as may manifest differently in various contexts. However, it can be concluded that cancel culture is important to consider, as it may have a great influence on the online atmosphere as well as the extent to which incidents develop and escalate.

Lastly, a few words should be dedicated to possible interventions that were proposed by participants as a response to controversial incidents. To improve the online atmosphere and to protect specific vulnerable target groups, it was proposed to introduce age restrictions for potentially inappropriate content. Furthermore, the importance of disclaimers was emphasized, as well as the importance of a proper apology or statement in case of a controversial incident. To illustrate, participant 11 stated:

*“I also think the apology is important. Because sometimes people also give these kind of fake apologies, and I am not really fond of that”*. He added that in his opinion, they often are not apologizing at all: *“I think language is really important in that respect. If I for example say, ‘I did not intend to get people all worked up or make them feel bad’... Then I am actually making this their problem, saying that it is about their responses. And that of course is not true. So, in that respect I am pretty strict with that”*.

In conclusion, the interventions that were proposed included both strategies to prevent online controversy (e.g. age restrictions and disclaimers) as well as response strategies that are supposed to be adopted by SMIs (e.g. apologies). Whether such interventions are suitable for reducing online controversy or improving the online atmosphere is difficult to assess, due to the varying nature, context and perceived severity of the many incidents that occur online every day.

As can be concluded, the responses followers have with regards to controversial incidents are subject to many different factors, and generally result from unconscious, emotionally loaded processes. However, why certain situations elicit certain responses as well as how this relates to parasocial relationships remains unclear; hence, it is discussed in the next section.

#### **4.9. Parasocial relationships and controversial incidents**

In the previous sections, the general and most common responses of the participants with regards to controversial incidents are discussed. However, during the interviews, it became apparent that there is a substantial difference between responses in cases where a follower perceives a parasocial relationship with a SMI, as compared to when this is not the case. Although not every participant experienced a controversial incident in which their favourite SMI was involved, most of them appeared confident that they would perceive a controversial situation differently, as well as would react differently if that would have been the case. Generally, followers seem to be more engaged with the incident and its’ further development when they perceive a parasocial relationship with the SMI involved. To illustrate, they are more likely to conduct research on the case and consider different

perspectives:

*“In this example with the one I have been following for a long time I straight away googled a lot of different stuff, I tried to research and look at the other influencer again, the one she was responding to. I looked at other videos kind of analysing the whole situation, so I tried to get a way bigger picture and see multiple sides, and also really tried to think like, think about what she was thinking”* (participant 3).

Especially the latter was emphasized by multiple participants; they appeared to be more willing to understand the SMIs' thought processes, merely because of the feeling of familiarity that was discussed earlier. The more the followers have the feeling they know the SMI, the easier it appears for them to detect what behaviour is out of line for them as well as how that could have happened. To illustrate, participant 2 explained:

*“I do think that is the case. Because I can understand their line of thought more. Because you have followed them for a long time you have an idea of how they are, and especially with YouTubers I follow that I can relate to, I can compare them to myself. Like; oh, I could have also done something like that, or thought about it like that. And I feel like you would then accept stuff from such influencers more easily”*. Participant 6 added: *“You maybe feel more pity for them, because you are like, oh, but he has experienced this, and has gone through that...”*.

Such feelings of understanding and empathy therefore result in the fact that followers tend to forgive them more easily as compared to other SMIs, and are more likely to defend them as well. To illustrate, participant 5 stated:

*“I do think because you follow someone, you understand them better as compared to when you would not. Ehm...about such a scandal, I do think you are a bit more empathic as compared to when it would be a random person, because I think you have prejudices way more easily then”*. Participant 6 added: *“With the people you have followed for so long...you do defend them. Which is weird actually because you don't know them, but you do have the feeling as if you know them, because you...If you follow someone for so many years, you do get that feeling a bit. And with him I would...not with this, I just think you can't do this, but something else that I would find weird if [...] would do it, but not if [...] would do it”*.

Furthermore, in case a follower perceives a parasocial relationship, there is also more at stake. As participant 3 explained:

*“If I now think about if I would not follow the girl anymore I have been following for so many years...Kind of makes me sad, because I kind of thought we were going strong, and I could kind of relate to her...And since then I have watched so many videos of hers I really enjoyed so maybe I would have missed that if I would have stopped following her”*.

Therefore, the initial emotional responses to a critical incident tend to be more intense as well. Feelings of disappointment and even betrayal may be experienced, while if it concerns an incident involving a SMI they are not involved with, the participants expressed to be not as interested. To illustrate, participant 12 stated: *“If someone I followed would do*

*something like that or talk about that, I would be very disappointed. And unfollow them. And if someone I don't know does that, I would just...not care".* Participant 13 explained how an incident with one of her favourite SMIs has affected her:

*"It kind of is disappointing and it does affect you kind of, and it opens your eyes. And it may result in you being very distrusting towards people, who are actually putting a lot of effort in their content and being open. So, yeah. It kind of affects your relationship with the internet a lot".*

This disappointment relates strongly to the false idea of reality that was discussed earlier, and specifically the discrepancies between ones' online persona and real identity. Therefore, it seems of extreme importance that SMIs carefully consider such issues; in the first place to protect their own reputation and online identity, but importantly, to be fair towards their committed followers as well.

To conclude, parasocial relationships heavily relate to the experiences and responses of followers in the context of controversial incidents. As such a relationship has quite the influence on how the SMI is perceived by the follower, as well as on how easily the follower is persuaded by the SMI, the entire nature of the incident changes in cases where a parasocial relationship is experienced. To some extent, the parasocial relationship can be perceived as a lens through which the incident is observed and experienced; therefore, it indirectly shapes the perceptions and responses of the follower. The follower's ideas on values and ethical behaviour online as well as their previous experiences, in that case, serve as a solid basis for critically assessing whatever is being observed through this lens of parasocial relationship.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to provide insight in how people experiencing parasocial relationships with SMIs respond to controversial incidents that involve these SMIs. Therefore, two subquestions were identified. The first subquestion refers to the relationships between followers and SMIs: *“How do followers perceive (parasocial) relationships with SMIs?”*. It can be concluded that generally, SMIs are perceived as a source for inspiration and information, thereby functioning as a role model for their followers. This relates to follower’s overall preference for transparent, relatable and authentic SMIs to a great extent, as it enables them to identify with the SMI. Additionally, SMIs are sometimes perceived as an acquaintance or friend. In both situations, parasocial relationships may develop, which are sometimes recognized by followers, but may also exist unconsciously. However, in both cases, followers perceive an emotional connection with the SMI, feel as if they know them and tend to be exceptionally dedicated towards them as compared to other SMIs. The second subquestion concerns controversy within the context of SMIs: *“When do followers consider a SMIs’ posts or actions as morally controversial/unacceptable and how are these situations perceived?”*. Although the answer to this question varies among followers, since it is highly dependent on ones’ previous experiences, way of life and other personal factors, some trends can be distinguished. Generally, followers tend to engage with SMIs whose content matches with the norms and values that they hold themselves; a discrepancy between the two usually is perceived as controversial and results in a negative experience. Usually, followers tend to refer to a set of personal boundaries, which is the foundation for the assessment of controversial incidents. Furthermore, an overarching problem concerning the creation of false reality can be identified, which refers to the discrepancies that may occur when the content that is produced is not in line with reality. Such a situation can develop into a controversial incident and may affect follower’s negatively in itself, however, also shapes the context in which most controversial incidents take place as SMIs generally engage in the building of an online persona which is not always fully representative of themselves, although followers may not always be aware of this. Overall, these considerations feed into the answer to the research question: *“How do the responses followers have towards a SMIs’ controversial posts and actions relate to the parasocial relationships they might be experiencing?”*. To conclude, parasocial relationships heavily influence the way in which controversial incidents are perceived, as well as how they are responded to. The general tendency of followers to ignore incidents merely manifests in cases where followers do not perceive parasocial relationships. However, when followers do perceive parasocial relationships, the need to respond grows, whether it is a silent or active response. Such responses can be characterized either by a) the desire to distance oneself from the SMI due to feelings of disappointment or even betrayal or b) forgiveness and defending due to the emotional connection that is experienced. Generally, the emotional attachment and dedication that is inherently connected to the development of a parasocial relationship heavily influences both the perception of the situation as well as the response, which seems to manifest in similar ways as to how it would in the offline world; getting into an argument with a friend as compared to a stranger may stick with you for longer as well as elicit more emotional response.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The results of this study have provided some interesting insights, which add to the existing body of literature. In the first place, this study builds on the theory of parasocial

relationships in a new context; previous studies have focussed on parasocial relationships with SMIs as well as parasocial relationships in relation to public scandals, however, have not combined the two. A very similar research concerning the latter was conducted by Ostermann & Hecmanczuk (2020), who studied how parasocial relationships affect people's responses to public scandals. According to them, people experiencing a parasocial relationship with a public figure involved tend to be not only way more forgiving, but also tend to attribute them less responsibility; in such cases, the incidents are also perceived as being less severe. Generally, these results can be supported by the results from this study, and therefore seem to be applicable to the context of SMIs as well. Those experiencing a parasocial relationship with a SMI involved in a controversial incident expressed to be more benevolent with regards to their responses and value judgements, as well as displayed the tendency to forgive more easily. In some cases, a desire to defend the SMI in question was expressed as well. However, the results from the current study are more circumspect in some respects; although follower's responses highly relate to the parasocial relationships they are experiencing, one's personal set of boundaries remains of great importance for situational assessment, as well as the response. Certain behaviour was perceived as inherently unacceptable, regardless of the relationship that was experienced with the SMI in question. Therefore, the tendency to downplay the severity of the incidents was to some extent apparent in this study as well; however, this was not a definitive and straightforward effect, but rather dependent on the context and personal preferences and boundaries of the follower.

As the current study distinguishes itself from previously conducted studies on online ethics by considering this in the context of SMIs, some interesting implications should be discussed in this respect as well. In the existing literature on online ethics, the main focus is on blogging; studies from Macnamara (2010) as well as Smith, Kendall, Knighton and Wright (2018) have identified honesty, transparency and disclosure as being the most important values for blogging ethically. Wellman, Stoldt, Tully and Ekdale (2020) specified their study on online ethical standards by focusing on SMI-marketing, and proposed authenticity as being the most important value. The results from all three studies are in line with the findings from the current study. Especially transparency, authenticity and honesty were identified as being desirable characteristics, as well as were mentioned to be of great importance for online ethical behaviour. This was emphasized in the context of SMI-marketing, in which authenticity was also identified as being crucial for credible advertising, as well as in the context of general content; as trust-based relationships between follower and SMI may develop, some responsibility in terms of being honest and open towards the SMI's audience is expected. This responsibility is highly related to the overarching problem of constructing and presenting a false reality. Although this problem is not specifically mentioned in these previously conducted studies, it is inherently connected to follower's desire for transparent, honest and relatable SMIs and therefore, its consideration in this context is a valuable addition to the existing body of literature. Furthermore, the current study adds to studies on online ethics by including a focus on online activism and SMIs addressing social-cultural issues. Generally, being socially concerned was deemed as an important aspect of online ethical behaviour, however, critical notes were placed as well; these mainly concerned the

possible consequence of followers not learning to think critically for themselves and adopting other people's opinions. Although no consensus on this topic was reached, its possible benefits as well as downsides are of great importance to the topic of online ethical behaviour, as online activism is increasingly apparent on social media platforms. To conclude, as online controversy is an inherent part of the online environment today and as SMIs have become vital actors within the digital landscape, the scope of this study provides interesting additions to the results of similar studies, both in terms of online ethical behaviour as well as SMIs, controversy and parasocial relationships.

## **5.2. Practical implications**

A few practical implications can be derived from this study. First of all, this study provides some guidelines as to what SMIs should consider in order to build a solid understanding and connection with their audience. Most important is transparency and honesty in all respects; this, in the first place, enables a connection and trust to develop, as well as it seems to be the most enduring strategy to choose in case of a critical incident, since it enables others to understand thought processes and certain choices that have been made. Here, an apology or explanation is of great importance, especially for dedicated followers who are specifically sensitive for discrepancies between online persona and actual behaviour.

Secondly, a need for more regulations initiated by the social media platform was expressed. Since, with exception for the law and contracts with companies or managements, SMIs are not restricted by many regulations concerning the content they post, various types of content are easily accessible, also for vulnerable and/or young audiences. In order to shield them from accessing inappropriate content, the introduction of age restriction regulations could be considered. However, implementing such a measure comes with downsides as well. In the first place, deciding on what type of content is inappropriate for certain audiences is a subjective task that comes with many considerations due to the interest of various stakeholders. Additionally, it to some extent may harm the artistic freedom and freedom of speech that some types of possibly controversial content now reside under. Secondly, it can be debated whether implementing age restrictions actually solves the problem of online controversy, as it does not stimulate SMIs to reconsider the content they post or to become aware of their responsibilities and how they should adapt to this. As an alternative, SMIs could make more extensive use of disclaimers, which is specifically important with regards to promotion and advertisement; this is straight in line with the need for transparency that has been greatly emphasized throughout the report. However, the use of disclaimers has similar pitfalls; although it may shelter followers from smooth advertising as well as inappropriate content, it does not solve the problem of SMIs displaying irresponsible behaviour. Furthermore, such a solution will only be fruitful if platform-wide regulations are implemented that obligate SMIs to use disclaimers in all cases of sponsorship or advertisement, to prevent confusion. Frankly, it seems to be most fruitful to invest in the education of SMIs in terms of online ethical behaviour as well as working with vulnerable target groups. Although it might not always be consciously, SMIs tend to have a relatively large influence on their audience, and this persuasion may have negative consequences. Therefore, media training for public figures should not only focus on how to speak and present oneself publicly, but also lay focus on the responsibilities one's social capital brings. However, such education is time consuming, which is why until then, age regulations and disclaimers may be implemented in specific cases or contexts, preceded by careful

consideration.

### **5.3. Limitations**

A few words should be dedicated to the limitations of this study. First of all, an important limitation concerns the process of data analysis, and more specifically, the preparation of the data. Since the majority of the participants is Dutch, these interviews were conducted in Dutch as well, to ensure that the participants were able to articulate themselves in their preferred manner. However, since the study is conducted in English, including the results section with the quotes, the transcribing process included simultaneous translation of the audio recordings. In retrospect, this was not an ideal decision as in such a translation process, some nuance and meaning of the original data may get lost due to differences between the languages and their semantics. Although the English transcripts resemble their original meaning as much as possible, it is important to note the possibility of meaning becoming lost in translation, as well as the data being a result of interpretation already, to some extent. This might have altered the results, since qualitative research generally consists of processes of interpretation, and this should be conducted with careful consideration and the least interference from the researcher as possible.

The second limitation concerns the data analysis and specifically the development of the codebook that was used. The interviews that were conducted took longer than initially expected; they generally took approximately 45-60 minutes, with a few exceptions. Therefore, a large amount of interesting and rich data was gathered. However, it appeared to be challenging to translate the richness of the data into a coherent and concise codebook. Since many different topics were addressed during the interviews, the data was relatively broad on the one hand; however, some participants shared a lot of details as well, which resulted in relatively specific pieces of data as well. In order to fully preserve the meaning of the data, the codebook could have been both broadened and specified in terms of codes and subcodes. In order for the codebook to remain concise and to prevent from losing the scope of the study, it was decided to refrain from further specifying and broadening the codebook; however, it is of importance to note as a possible limitation.

### **5.4. Future research**

From the findings of this study, a few interesting directions for further research can be formulated. First of all, with social media platforms increasingly becoming a space where online activism can be deployed as well as SMIs becoming increasingly popular and influential, it would be interesting to not only study the role of SMIs in the context of marketing, but in the context of activism as well. As can be concluded from the results of this study, there was no consensus as to what extent SMIs should involve themselves in online activism; however, as opinion leading individuals, they could be of substantial impact. Future research could gain insights in how SMIs can play a role, as well as how this would influence their current position in the social media landscape. Additionally, it could be interesting for further research to focus on cancel culture, either in the context of online activism or in itself. As became clear from the results, cancel culture is a complex phenomenon that is fairly lucid with regards to the ways in which it develops and manifests, however, can be very influential to the atmosphere on online platforms; it has an enormous impact on both the development of scandals as well as on the careers of the SMIs involved. In order to achieve a better understanding of the context in which incidents and scandals occur, studying cancel culture could be an interesting first step.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has provided insight in how relationships between follower and SMI are perceived, what followers perceive as ethical and unethical behaviour, as well as how followers perceiving parasocial relationships with SMIs respond to critical incidents involving these SMIs. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted by means of the critical incident technique, which has provided some interesting results. Generally, the participants strongly favour relatable and transparent SMIs over those who do not have these characteristics. This desire for them to relate to the SMIs is also reflected in the way they perceive their relationships with them: generally, the SMI was perceived as a role model, as well as a source of inspiration. Therefore, participants expressed that they tend to both consciously and unconsciously imitate the SMI, and that their opinions and attitudes tend to be influenced by them as well. All participants showed signs of parasocial relationships, although not always being aware of it themselves: feeling like they know the SMI personally, feeling emotionally connected to them or even unconsciously implying that the SMI feels to them as a friend or acquaintance, for instance by saying that certain things remind them of the SMI, like that would happen with a friend, or that they feel happy for them when certain life events occur.

Ethical considerations concerning SMIs and their practices are of great importance for follower's situational assessments and value judgements in controversial situations. These ethical considerations mainly concern SMIs taking responsibility for having such a large audience and influence, and therefore carefully considering what is posted online. Furthermore, it appeared to be of importance that a SMI has somewhat the same norms, values and ethical standards as the follower, to prevent personal boundaries from being violated. Generally, disrespectful behaviour towards others, risking followers' wellbeing and excluding a certain minority (e.g. racism) are all considered not done. A more general ethical consideration that appeared to be important is how a false reality is carefully presented online. Attention should be paid to not painting a perfect picture solely, since this may result in insecurity issues and disappointment as well as feelings of betrayal when discrepancies between a SMIs' online persona and actual personality come to light; this relates to the positive characteristics of transparency and honesty, which are of great importance.

A followers' relationship with the SMI involved relates heavily to the way in which they respond to a controversial incident. Generally, the more personally engaged followers are with the SMI they follow, the more emotional response is elicited and the more they tend to be engaged with researching and following the developments of the incident or scandal. However, interesting is that this engagement does not necessarily lead to them taking action, in terms of, for instance, unfollowing or commenting. Many participants also showed compassion towards the SMI, for example by defending their actions or forgiving them. Such a response is merely a result of the experience of a parasocial relationship. In case followers are not as engaged with the SMI involved in the incident, the main response generally is ignoring due to a lack of interest, or immediate drawing of conclusions without research, resulting in

for example an immediate unfollow.

The digital environment that we spend so much time in every day is entertaining and convenient, but also complex and sometimes dangerous. Therefore, in a time where there is so much content accessible, of all types, from anyone, and we are heavily influenced by all the persuasive messages that are posted every day, it is important to reflect on your own perceptions, responses, and how certain situations affect you. As we have all experienced over the past few years, social media can have great power, and with power comes responsibility. Therefore, it is of great importance to consider the role it plays in our society, how societal structures are represented and adapted online, as well as how we make use of these platforms. Only through being reflective of ourselves and others we can understand the complex nature of the online environment, and specifically social media, and use this to discuss and make decisions about online controversy and the role SMIs play, or should play, in that respective.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Table 1

*Plans and specifications (template derived from Hughes, Williamson & Lloyd, 2007)*

<b>What?</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Activity	Responding to controversial acts and posts of a SMI
Aim of the activity	Depends on the situation; might be to reconstruct a damaged relationship or to distance oneself from a SMI
Situation	Who: 15 young adults who follow SMIs Where: social media platforms What: responding to controversial actions and posts of a SMI
Critical incidents	Scandals or highly debated actions/posts that SMIs have engaged in
Critical interactions	Communication to followers/public (if there is any); communication among fellow followers/the community
Dimensions	Affective responses, especially considering parasocial relationships and ethics of SMI marketing/persuasion that might influence followers' responses and perceptions

## **Appendix B**

Dear participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my bachelor thesis study! It is about how people respond to influencers promoting controversial products/services and/or engaging in controversial activities, as well as how this relates to the relationship between follower and influencer. If you want to learn about the results, please send me an email and I will send you a copy of the final results.

### Practical information

You are asked to participate in an interview. It will take approximately 35-45 minutes. This interview will, with your consent, be audio recorded. The data will be handled confidentially and will be anonymized; please refer to the informed consent form that is attached to this briefing before the interview. If you agree with the terms, please sign the form and send it back to me, so I will be aware of your consent. Due to the corona virus outbreak, the interviews unfortunately cannot be executed face-to-face, which is why we will be making use of Skype.

### Interview

During the interview, we will be talking about influencers, controversial situations they may be involved in, how you feel about this and respond to it. In order for you to feel prepared and to give you some time to think about this, I would like to ask you if you could think of a specific controversial situation involving an influencer of your choice, that has stuck with you. Such a situation could include for example an influencer promoting something you thought was ethically questionable, a scandal, or something else an influencer was involved in that you perceived to be controversial. It is up to you. During the interview, we will elaborate a bit more on this specific situation.

If there are any questions beforehand, please send me an email on the address listed above. I am excited for our interview, see you then!

Kind regards,  
Pien Spanjaard

## Appendix C

### *Informed consent form*

This study aims to gain insight in the relationships between influencers and their followers, and how followers respond to controversial actions and posts of influencers. The results will be used to understand in how certain situations are perceived and anticipated on, which can be of importance for the policy making of social media platforms. If you want to be updated on the results of the study, you can contact me via email.

In order to gather data, interviews will be conducted. If you have given your consent, your interview will be audio recorded. To protect your privacy and consent, the following measures will be taken:

- The data from the interview will be handled confidentially and will be anonymized;
- The audio recordings will be handled confidentially and destroyed after the results have been gathered;
- Your right as a participant to withdraw from the study at any time will be respected (in case you want to withdraw yourself from the study, please contact me via email)

Thank you for your participation!

**Date:**

By signing this form, I confirm my participation in this study, agreement with the content of this form and give my consent for the interview to be audio recorded:

**Signature participant:**

**Signature researcher:**

## Appendix D

Table 3

*Finalized codebook*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Sub code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
1. Demographics	1.1 Age 1.2 Nationality 1.3 Gender 1.4 Occupation	-	Characteristics of the interviewee.	"I am 19 years old" "I am a psychology student"
2. Social media usage	2.1 Time 2.2 Platforms 2.3 Activities 2.4 Content	-	Participant describes how much time is spent on social media; what platforms are used; for what activities it is used; and the content of interest.	"I use Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok the most" "it's all lifestyle, a bit of fashion, lifestyle vlogs"
3. SMI	3.1 Reason to follow	3.1.1 Information 3.1.2 Inspiration 3.1.3 Entertainment 3.1.4 Other	Participant describes why he/she follows an influencer.	"mainly for inspiration. Regarding designs, fashion or travelling..."

	3.2 Positive characteristics	3.2.1 Relatability+ 3.2.2 Credibility+ 3.2.3 Honesty + 3.2.4 Humour 3.2.5 Expertise 3.2.6 Originality 3.2.7 Engagement with followers 3.2.8 Transparency+ 3.2.9 Authenticity+ 3.2.10 Other	Participant describes positive attributes of an SMI.	"I mostly like influencers I can relate to, who do the same things and are on the same level" "I find it really nice if they if they also show less nice things" "in her vlogs, she is really down to earth and nice"
	3.3 Negative characteristics	3.3.1 Relatability - 3.3.2 Transparency – 3.3.3 Credibility- 3.3.4 Authenticity- 3.3.5 Other	Participant describes negative attributes of an SMI.	"if someone barely shares something about their life, and I guess are not 'real', the the person comes across as less credible"
	3.4 Influence	3.4.1 Purchase intention 3.4.2 Motivation 3.4.3 Mimicking 3.4.4 Opinions 3.4.5 Other	Participant describes how following an influencer affects them/their daily life.	"I think half of my daily makeup products is because I got influenced"
4. SMI relationships	4.1 Perception of relationship	4.1.1 Friend 4.1.2 Role model 4.1.3 Teacher 4.1.4 Other	Participant describes their perception of the link between follower and SMI.	"I really think she is somewhat of a role model to me, I really look up to her"
	4.2 Parasocial relationship	4.2.1 Emotional connection 4.2.2. Interaction	Participant shows signs of having a parasocial	"Some people I have been following for so long and

		4.2.3 Familiarity 4.2.4 Follower dedication 4.2.5 Trust	relationship with an SMI.	actively now, it almost feels as if I know them”
5. Ethical considerations and standards	5.1 Responsibility	5.1.1 SMI Responsibility + 5.1.2. SMI Responsibility - 5.1.3 Follower responsibility	Participant talks about the responsibility an SMI did or did not take, or to the responsibilities followers may or may not have.	“She doesn’t show herself drunk, and that is also her responsibility” “from many people you can also expect what they post, as a follower you also have responsibility”
	5.2 Norms & values	5.2.1 Ethical behaviours 5.2.2 Discrepancies 5.2.3 Freedom 5.2.4 Boundaries	Participant speaks about ethical considerations with regards to SMIs.	“I do think as an influencer you should research a product before putting it on your platform”
	5.3 Reality perception	5.3.1 Differences 5.3.2 Insecurity issues	Participant speaks about reality as compared to online reality.	“how can it come across as so nice while in fact it wasn’t even nice?”
	5.4 Online activism	5.4.1 Awareness 5.4.2 Discussion 5.4.3 Other	Participant speaks about the role of social media and/or SMIs with regards to activism.	“She talks about things... a lot of things not everyone would talk about” “It is important to raise awareness”
6. Controversial incidents	6.1 Incident description	6.1.1 Promo & Ad issues 6.1.2 Inappropriate content 6.1.3 Unethical actions	Participant describes nature of the critical incident they have in mind.	“the advertisement was greenwashing of the company”

	6.2 Incident salience		Participant explains why this incident came to mind/is important to them.	"I think because it has been a lot in the news as well"
	6.3 Responses	6.3.1 Emotional response 6.3.2 Ignoring 6.3.3 Taking action 6.3.4 Forgiveness 6.3.5 Research 6.3.6 Awareness 6.3.7 Defending 6.3.8 Cancel culture 6.3.9 Other	Participant speaks about how he/she responded to a critical incident, or speaks about responses to controversial situations in general.	"I don't feel like it is my responsibility, so I indeed did nothing with it" "she also won me back again because it went so personal for her"
	6.4 Perceptions	6.4.1 Situational perception 6.4.2 Influencer perception	Participant speaks about how he/she experienced an incident and the SMI(s) involved.	"I think it was definitely not good what he did" "that was just horrible"
7. Interventions	7.1 Disclaimers 7.2 Apologies 7.3 Follower intervention 7.4 Age restrictions 7.5 Other		Participant speaks about things that can/should be improved or interventions they deploy themselves.	"I also think the apology is really important" "in the worst case you just make accounts that are 16 or 18 plus" "what some people do is marking their video as 18+"

## Appendix E

Table 4

*Example table for calculating Cohen's Kappa*

2. Social media usage	2.1 Time	2.2 Platforms	2.3 Activities	2.4 Content	999 Other	Total P
2.1 Time	1					1
2.2 Platforms		1				1
2.3 Activities			2		1	3
2.4 Content				2		2
999 Other						0
Total M	1	1	2	2	1	7

## Appendix F

Table 5

*Search logbook*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Database</b>	<b>Search terms</b>	<b>Hits</b>
25/03/2020	Google Scholar	Influencers AND persuasion ethics	17.800
26/03/2020	Google Scholar	Social media use AND societal implications	1.090.000
27/03/2020	Scopus	Social media use AND influencers	618
27/03/2020	Google Scholar	Social media AND user engagement	1.390.000
27/03/2020	Google Scholar	Social media AND traditional media AND communication	3.870.000
27/03/2020	Google Scholar	Online branding activities AND social media	147.000
27/03/2020	Scopus	Celebrity endorsement AND Social media	117
27/03/2020	Google Scholar	Social media AND self-branding	216.000
1/04/2020	Google Scholar	Social media as discussion platform	2.480.000
3/04/2020	Scopus	Social media AND Influencers	623

4/04/2020	Google Scholar	Microcelebrity AND influencers	1.320
4/04/2020	Scopus	Influencer marketing	473
5/04/2020	Scopus	Parasocial relationships	310
5/04/2020	Google Scholar	Parasocial relationships	16.100
5/04/2020	Google Scholar	Parasocial relationships AND trust	6.280
5/04/2020	Google Scholar	Parasocial relationships AND influencers	1.320
5/04/2020	Google Scholar	Homophily AND parasocial relationships	1.040
10/04/2020	Google Scholar	Persuasion ethics AND influencers	17.600
10/04/2020	Google Scholar	Unethical advertising AND influencers	4.020
11/04/2020	Google Scholar	Interviews qualitative method	1.470.000
13/04/2020	Google Scholar	Critical incident technique	1.690.000

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