



VENICE 18-20 January 2024

**A Psychographic View on the Influencing Chain of Fairness  
in Fashion Influencer – Follower Relations**

**Sonja Bidmon, PhD**

Associate Professor

Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt

Universitätsstraße 65-67

9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria

[sonja.bidmon@aau.at](mailto:sonja.bidmon@aau.at)

Tel. +43 (0) 463 2700 4048

**Ines Sulzer, BSc MSc**

Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt

Universitätsstraße 65-67

9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria

**Alexandra Probsdorfer, BSc MSc**

Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt

Universitätsstrasse 65-67

9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee, Austria

## **A Psychographic View on the Influencing Chain of Fairness in Fashion Influencer – Follower Relations**

### **Eine psychografische Sichtweise auf die Wirkungskette von Fairness in Fashion Influencer – Follower Beziehungen**

#### **Abstract (English):**

There has been an increasing interest in fashion social media influencers (SMI) from both the scientific and practical point of view. Individuals deciding to follow influencers on Instagram as well as developing interest in and purchasing the influencers' recommended products, seem to reflect the daily routines of today's young adults. A considerable amount of literature has been published on organizational justice/fairness so far. Recently, researchers have transferred concepts of perceived fairness to influencer-follower relationships. We go beyond and add the impact of two followers' psychographic variables (loneliness, low self-esteem) on Instagram in the influencing chain explaining followers' purchase intention. Thus, we investigate the influence of the four fairness dimensions (informational, interpersonal, procedural, distributive) on parasocial relationships and on purchase intention by adding loneliness and low self-esteem. The results derived from SEM emphasize the importance of informational and interpersonal fairness and loneliness as valuable antecedents of parasocial relations with SMI and purchase intention for recommended products. The findings have implications for theory and practice.

#### **Abstract (German):**

Es gibt ein zunehmendes Interesse an Fashion Influencern sowohl aus wissenschaftlicher als auch aus praktischer Sicht. Die Entscheidung von Menschen, Influencern auf Instagram zu folgen, sowie empfohlene Produkte zu kaufen, ist zur täglichen Routine der jungen Erwachsenen von heute geworden. Viel Literatur wurde seit langem zur organisationalen Gerechtigkeit/Fairness veröffentlicht. In jüngster Zeit haben Forscher\*innen erstmals Konzepte der wahrgenommenen Fairness in den Bereich der Influencer-Follower Beziehungen übertragen. Wir gehen noch einen Schritt weiter und fügen die Auswirkungen von zwei relevanten psychografischen Variablen der Follower (Einsamkeit, geringes Selbstwertgefühl) auf Instagram in die Einflusskette zur Erklärung der Kaufabsicht der Follower ein. So untersuchen wir den Einfluss der vier Fairness-Dimensionen (informationale, interpersonale, prozedurale, distributive) auf parasoziale Beziehungen und Kaufabsicht, indem wir Einsamkeit und geringes Selbstwertgefühl hinzufügen. Die mittels SEM abgeleiteten Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Bedeutung der informationalen und interpersonalen Fairness sowie der Einsamkeit als wesentliche Antezedenzen für die Bildung von parasozialen Beziehungen mit Influencern und die Kaufbereitschaft für empfohlene Produkten. Die Ergebnisse haben Implikationen für Theorie und Praxis.

**Keywords:** *fashion influencer, psychographic variables, SEM*

*18,872 characters, spaces included (without cover page with the title, the abstracts and keywords, the figure, and the references)*

## 1. Introduction and aim of the study

Instagram, the well-known mobile phone photo and video sharing and social network service (Sheldon and Bryant 2016), is one of the fastest-growing channels on social media, especially among the younger segments of the population. 71 % of young adolescents aged 18 to 29 years use Instagram (Pew Research Center 2021). In Austria, where our study took place, usage of Instagram has tripled over the last four years, with an increase from 1 million users in January 2017 to 3.2 million users in March 2021 (36.8 % of the Austrian population) and thus, it has been established as the leading social network after Facebook (Statista 2021a) with a slight overhang of females (52 % of the users in general). 66.6 % of Instagram's users are between 13 and 34 (Statista 2021b). Besides, a survey among practitioners in charge of communication in Austria revealed that beauty/fashion/lifestyle (87.9 %) is considered especially suitable for Influencer Marketing (Statista 2021 b). Although Instagram has been steadily on the rise during recent years with regard to its usage and pervasiveness, especially for the special group of millennials (Statista 2021a), studies dealing with fairness perceptions are scarce in this realm.

Many researchers worldwide have investigated SMIs' characteristics in the influencing chain, explaining the effectiveness of SMI's product or brand recommendations. Yuan and Lou (2020) were the first, to connect the huge research stream on organizational justice with literature in the field of SMI, and this has met with great interest in the scientific community. Their article has been viewed 23,019 times since its release three years ago (retrieved from Google Scholar 2023-09-15). Yuan and Lou (2020) investigated the role of fairness and source credibility in parasocial relationships between followers and social media influencers (SMI) on Instagram. They found out that the SMI's attractiveness, the followers' perceived similarity to the SMI, and the procedural and interpersonal fairness within the follower-SMI relationship strengthened their parasocial relationship, which led to increased product interest for recommended products by the SMI. Additionally, a direct strong impact on product interest was found for informational fairness and distributive fairness as perceived by the followers.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has ever been conducted to clarify the role of psychographic variables in the influencing chain of fairness perceptions on purchase intention for products recommended by SMI on Instagram in the special realm of fashion SMI. Therefore, this study aims to find out whether the two psychographic variables of followers' loneliness and low self-esteem contribute to explaining the effectiveness of SMI's product recommendations, i.e., product interest and purchase intention, by conceptualizing the parasocial relationship in-between. An influencing chain of the two psychographic factors and the four fairness dimensions on the parasocial relationship and further purchase behavior was developed and tested using structural equation modeling with AMOS 28.0.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical background

### 2.1 Theoretical conceptualization and dimensions of organizational justice (fairness)

There is a long tradition of fairness research in different scientific disciplines e.g., philosophy or psychology, and discussion about fairness goes back to Plato and Socrates or Aristotle (Colquitt et al., 2001)). More than fifty years of research in the field of organizational justice (OJ) dealing with fairness perceptions and the dimensionality of fairness ( Colquitt et al., 2013) have created an impressive scientific literature base on this topic. Only recently, however, attempts have been made to study OJ perceptions in SMI settings (Yuan & Lou, 2020). The scientific community mostly agrees with the four dimensionality of fairness perceptions: *procedural fairness*, *distributive fairness*, *interpersonal fairness*, and *informational fairness* (see, e.g., for an overview Colquitt et al., 2001 and Colquitt et al., 2013).

*Interactional justice* relates to how individuals are treated in interactions with each other and whether they are treated politely and respectfully (Bies & Moag, 1986) and was later split into *informational* and *interpersonal justice*, based on a construct validation study by Colquitt (2001). *Informational justice* refers to the amount of adequate and sufficient information delivered, whereas *interpersonal justice* refers to treating individuals with dignity and respect (Colquitt, 2001). The *procedural justice* dimension refers to the perceived fairness of the procedures and whether individuals affected by a decision had a meaningful voice in the process that led to a decision (Van Den Bos & Van Prooijen, 2001). *Distributive justice* is the outcome-related dimension of fairness and refers to the degree of fairness in the distribution of an outcome (Adams, 1963), Thibaut & Walker, 1975). We built on the theoretical contribution of Yuan and Lou (2020). In line with their study, we refer to their conceptualizations of fairness within a specific follower-fashion SMI relationship. *Distributive fairness* refers to the amount of benefit drawn from the content of the SMI, *procedural fairness* refers to the followers' possibility to share their voice with influencers, *interpersonal fairness* refers to the respectful treatment during the interactions, *informational fairness* refers to the amount of delivering information honestly and sincerely to the followers. As fairness perceptions are always in the eyes of the beholder and influenced by the characteristics of an individual, we extend the model of Yuan and Lou (2020) by adding two psychographic variables from the followers' perspective: loneliness and low self-esteem. In order to reduce complexity, we excluded the characteristics of the SMI as these are well-investigated elsewhere.

## **2.2. Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and characteristics of the followers: loneliness and low self-esteem**

In our research endeavor, we also build on Hwang and Zhang (2018), who investigate the effect of empathy, loneliness, and low social self-esteem on parasocial relationships based on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), and we combine it with the fairness research stream. UGT goes back to Katz et al. (1973), who mention three distinct sources where the media audience can derive gratifications: the media content, exposure to the media per se, and the social context of media exposure. Consequently, individuals strive for need satisfaction in three dimensions: social, informational, and entertainment needs (Phua et al., 2017, cited by Hwang & Zhang (2018)). Parasocial interaction theory describes the more or less one-sided relationship between a media user and the media being consumed (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Parasocial interactions, therefore, can also be seen as a need to be fulfilled by social media utilization. The question arises about which characteristics of a follower could especially strengthen the need for parasocial interactions. Hwang and Zhang (2018) have identified three: *loneliness*, *low self-esteem*, and empathy. Empathy, however, might be less relevant in the area of fashion influencers, at least in our view. One's own clothes and fashion, in general, are suitable for demonstrating social affiliation. Thus, *loneliness*, and *low self-esteem* might be especially suitable and important follower characteristics in the realm of fashion SMI in the proposed influencing chain.

*Loneliness* can be interpreted as a social compensation variable provoking a high need to belong (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Also, *low self-esteem* triggers the desire for belongingness, so both loneliness and low self-esteem might contribute to a higher desire for establishing parasocial relationships. *Loneliness* can be defined as follows: "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way". (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p- 31, cited by Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Thus, we combine the fairness dimensions and the followers' characteristics of *loneliness* and *low self-esteem* as the antecedents of parasocial relationships and consequently develop a psychographic influencing

chain of purchase intention in the area of fashion SMI-follower relations. Such an influencing chain has, to the best of our knowledge, not been developed so far.

### **2.3 Developing a possible influencing chain and hypotheses**

In the study by Yuan and Lou (2020), *procedural fairness* and *interpersonal fairness* had a direct and positive impact on the extent of a *parasocial relationship* (PS) between a follower and an SMI, which further had a positive impact on product interest in the products recommended by the SMI. We, however, go a step further and measure purchase intention, and we propose:

*H1a: Procedural fairness has a direct, positive influence on the parasocial relationship between a follower and a fashion SMI.*

*H1b: Interpersonal fairness has a direct, positive influence on the parasocial relationship between a follower and a fashion SMI.*

*H1c: The extent of a parasocial relationship between a fashion SMI and the specific follower has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention for a product recommended by a fashion SMI.*

*Distributive fairness* and *informational fairness* were found to be significant direct antecedents of product interest for products recommended by the SMI in a specific follower-SMI relationship. Accordingly, we propose the following for purchase intention as a measure of effectiveness for recommended products by a fashion SMI.

*H2a: Distributive fairness has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention for products recommended by a fashion SMI.*

*H2b: Informational fairness has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention for products recommended by a fashion SMI*

Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that *low self-esteem* positively affected *parasocial relationships*, whereas *loneliness* did not have a significant impact on *parasocial relationships* within their sample of young adults (18-40 years old). The authors argued that the younger age might have contributed to the ineffectiveness of *loneliness* in building *parasocial relationships* with a digital celebrity. They mentioned other studies like Bonetti et al. (2010) and Hood et al. (2018), which found an impact of adolescents' and adults' media usage in forming friendships to compensate for *loneliness*. Bearing in mind, that their study was conducted in 2017, which was before the outbreak of the pandemic, we think that the pandemic's outbreak in 2020 might have contributed to a higher desire for *parasocial relationships* to compensate for *loneliness*, especially in times of lockdowns due to a lack of possibilities to build up real friendships. This experience might have been memorized during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

*H3: Loneliness has a direct, positive influence on the parasocial relationship between a follower and a fashion SMI.*

*H4a: Low self-esteem has a direct, positive influence on parasocial relationships between a follower and a fashion SMI.*

In the special case of fashion SMI and bearing in mind that clothes are suitable to fulfill the need for belongingness, people scoring low in self-esteem might face a higher need to buy recommended products by a fashion SMI in order to fulfill this need. Thus, we also propose a direct effect of *low self-esteem* on purchase intention.

*H4b: Low self-esteem has a direct, positive influence on purchase intention towards a product recommended by a fashion SMI.*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Study design and sample description

The present study was conducted as an online survey using LimeSurvey in November and December 2021. A total of 309 respondents, mostly students from an Austrian university, took part in the survey, but  $n=3$  did not reveal an Instagram account, and  $n=92$  did not follow any fashion SMI, which was a prerequisite for participation, leaving a calculation sample of  $n=139$  for testing the hypotheses. Of the  $n=139$  respondents, 84.9 % were female, 13.7 % were male, 0.43 % were diverse. The age range was between 18 and 45 years (mean age=24.65 years). We did not focus on the follower base of a specific fashion SMI on Instagram, but asked young adults who have already followed one or more fashion influencers on Instagram to think about their existing follower-influencer relationship. Against the backdrop of an existing influencer-follower relationship, respondents had to think about their specific follower-influencer relationship and fill out the online survey in this vein. The analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.0 and AMOS version 28.0.

#### 3.2 Construct operationalisation

All constructs of interest were assessed using a five-point Likert scale (1 = do not agree at all, 5 = totally agree): *distributive fairness*, *procedural fairness*, *informational fairness*, *interpersonal fairness*, and *parasocial relationship* (Yuan & Lou, 2020), *loneliness* and *low self-esteem* (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), *purchase intention* (Holzwarth et al., 2006).

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Judgement of the measurement model

To analyze the proposed path diagram (H1 – H4), the two-step procedure according to (Kline, 2005) was used. In the first step, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was calculated, whereby the scales were adjusted, and the measurement model was optimized. The average variance recorded was at least .50 (*informational fairness*), and all other values were between .57 and .83 and thus above the required threshold of .50 (see Figure 1). Discriminant validity was checked according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was marginally breached for *distributive fairness* and *informational fairness*, but merging constructs would have led to a severe deterioration of the global fit measure. Therefore, we decided to proceed with the theoretically conceptualized constructs as planned. After calculating the measurement model, the second step of hypothesis testing followed.

#### 4.2 Judgement of the structural model

Overall, there was a satisfactory global fit for the structural model (see Figure 1). As expected, there is a direct positive influence of *interpersonal fairness* ( $\beta=0.27^{**}$ ) on the extent of the parasocial relationship. *Informational fairness* is a significant antecedent of purchase intention for recommended products by the fashion SMI ( $\beta=0.66^{**}$ ). *Low self-esteem* did not reveal any significant impact on the proposed influencing chain. As expected, *loneliness* has a direct positive influence on the parasocial relationship ( $\beta=0.29^*$ ). Unexpectedly, no significant impact of the parasocial relationship on purchase intention was found. To recap in brief, H1b, H2b, and H3 could be confirmed, whereas H1a, H1c, H4a, and H4b have to be rejected.

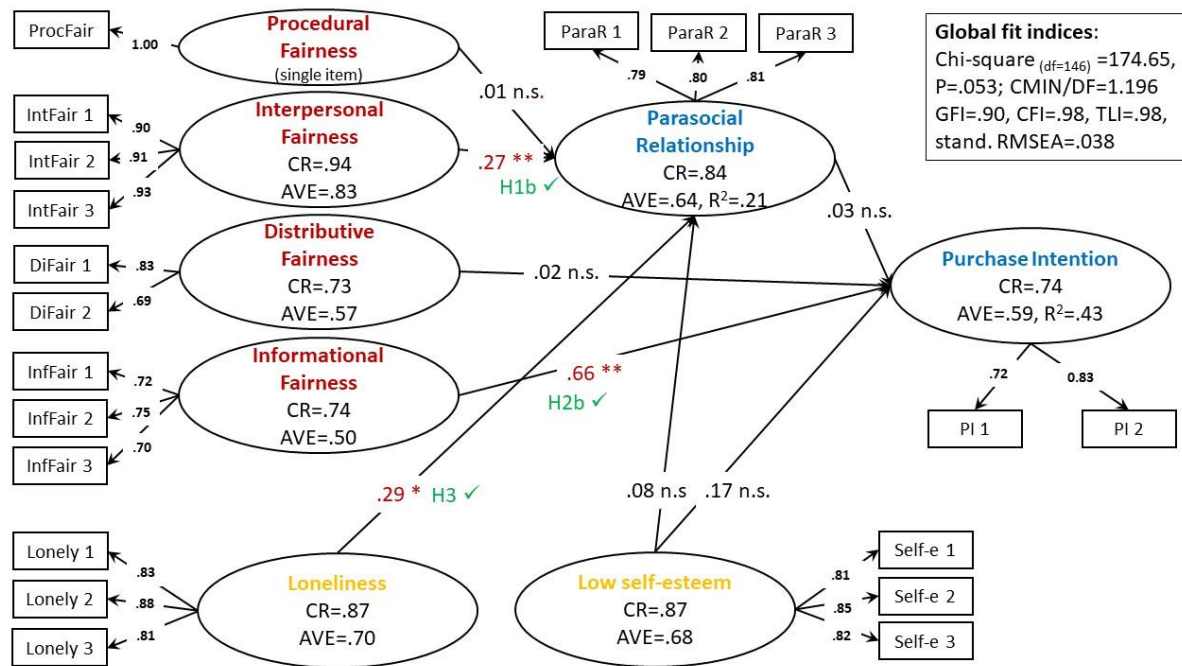


Figure 1: Structural model

## 5. Discussion

In the present study, the importance of fairness perceptions from the followers' perspective in fashion SMI-follower relations could be underlined. Being treated with respect and dignity, and the extent of reliable information delivered by the SMI were found to be crucial in developing either a strong parasocial relationship or revealing high purchase intention for the recommended products by the fashion SMI. This result corroborates the findings of Yuan and Lou (2020). However, the findings of the current study do not entirely support the previous research due to a lack of impact of *procedural fairness* and *distributive fairness* on parasocial relationships and purchase intention. The most interesting finding was that *loneliness* also contributed to developing a bond with the SMI. Surprisingly, contrary to our expectations, *low self-esteem* did not impact the proposed influencing chain, which might be caused by a social desirability bias. Another unanticipated finding was that the parasocial relationship and the purchase intention did not relate.

## 6. Limitations, future outlook, and practical implications

There are several possible explanations for the results. The fact that only three of the hypothesized paths were found to be significant might have been caused by the low sample size. Additionally, using a student sample does not allow for the generalization of the population as a whole. The sample size was very small due to the challenging prerequisite of having to be a follower of a fashion SMI, and unfortunately, the possibility of winning a voucher in a lottery did not help to increase the willingness to participate in the online survey. Besides, there was an overhang of female participants in the sample. This uneven distribution between genders, however, might reflect the real distribution of the follower base of fashion SMI as it is well-known, that fashion SMIs' followers are mostly female. In addition, the proposed model was limited to a psychographic chain of effects and used cross-sectional data. In the next step, socio-demographic variables could now be included in the analysis, and a gender perspective could be taken to investigate the influencing chain of fairness on parasocial relationships and purchase intention within existing influencer-follower SMI also beyond the fashion realm. Thus, investigating the influencing chain in other areas of SMI on Instagram could be fruitful, like gaming, fitness, nutrition, soccer, or traveling. Future studies using a larger sample size could

shed light on the influencing chain by including the influencers' characteristics and, alternatively, conceptualizing the psychographic variables of *loneliness* and *low self-esteem* as moderators instead of exogenous variables. In future studies, an in-depth view of fairness perceptions could be gained by applying another research setting, like experimental designs or qualitative approaches in the form of interviews or focus group discussions. As a practical implication of the results, several considerations can be made. SMI on Instagram should put more emphasis on their communication with followers in order to fulfill the need for interpersonal fairness and informational fairness. This means they should especially care about respectful treatment during their interactions and deliver information honestly and sincerely to their followers. Respectful treatment helps to establish a parasocial relationship with the follower base, and informational fairness is relevant for the effectiveness of product recommendations by the SMI. Although the present study has shown that both are not intertwined with each other by reflecting a nonsignificant path from parasocial relationship to purchase intention, future studies with a larger sample size would help us to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter. Taken together, this research has thrown up many questions that need further investigation.

## 7. References

- Adams, J. S. (1963). Towards an understanding of inequity. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(5), 422-436. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040968>
- Ballantine, P. W., & Martin, B. A. S. (2005). Forming parasocial relationships in online communities. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 32(1), 197-201.
- Bies, R., & Moag, R. (1986). Interactional justice: Communication criteria of fairness. In R. RJ Lewicki, B. Sheppard, & M. Bazerman (Eds.), *Research on negotiations in organizations* (pp. 43-55). Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Bonetti, L., Campbell, M. A., & Gilmore, L. (2010). The relationship of loneliness and social anxiety with children's and adolescents' online communication. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 13(3), 279-285. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2009.0215>
- Colquitt, J. A. (2001). On the dimensionality of organizational justice: A construct validation of a measure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 386-400. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.386>
- Colquitt, J. A., Scott, B. A., Rodell, J. B., Long, D. M., Zapata, C. P., Conlon, D. E., & Wesson, M. J. (2013). Justice at the millennium, a decade later: a meta-analytic test of social exchange and affect-based perspectives. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 98(2), 199-236. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031757>
- Colquitt, J. A., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O. L. H., Conlon, D. E., & Ng, K. Y. (2001). Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 425-445. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.425>
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Structural Equation Models with Unobservable Variables and Measurement Error: Algebra and Statistics. *Journal of Marketing*, 18(3), 382-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224378101800313>
- Holzwarth, M., Janiszewski, C., & Neumann, M. M. (2006). The influence of avatars on online consumer shopping behavior. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(4), 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.4.19>
- Hood, M., Creed, P. A., & Mills, B. J. (2018). Loneliness and online friendships in emerging adults. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 133, 96-102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.045>



- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *87*, 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029>
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and Gratifications Research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, *37*(4), 509-523. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747854>
- Kline, R. B. (2005). Principles and Practice of Structural Equation Modeling. 2005. *New York, NY: Guilford*.
- Perlman, D., & Peplau, L. A. (1981). *Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness*. In W. Duck & R. Gilmour (Eds.), *Personal Relationships in Disorder* (pp. 31–56). London: Academic Press.
- Pew Research Center (February 7, 2021). Social Media Fact Sheet: Who uses social media. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/?menuItem=45b45364-d5e4-4f53-bf01-b77106560d4c> (last accessed: 2021-04-14)
- Phua, J., Jin, S. V., & Kim, J. (Jay). (2017). Gratifications of using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat to follow brands: The moderating effect of social comparison, trust, tie strength, and network homophily on brand identification, brand engagement, brand commitment, and membership intention. *Telematics and Informatics*, *34*(1), 412–424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.06.004>
- Sheldon, P., & Bryant, K. (2016). Instagram: Motives for Its Use and Relationship to Narcissism and Contextual Age. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *58*, 89–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.059>
- Statista (2021a). Instagram-Nutzerzahlen für Österreich bis 2021. Altersverteilung [Instagram user numbers for Austria until 2021. Age distribution, in German] Retrieved from: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/512380/umfrage/instagram-nutzer-in-oesterreich/> (last accessed: 2021-04-14).
- Statista (2021b). Altersverteilung der österreichischen Instagram-Nutzer im April 2021 [Age distribution of Austrian Instagram users in April 2021, in German]. Retrieved from: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/512308/umfrage/instagram-nutzerzahlen-fuer-oesterreich-nach-alter/> (last accessed: 2021-04-14).
- Thibaut, J., & Walker, L. (1975). *Procedural Justice: A psychological analysis*. Erlbaum.
- Van den Bos, K., & van Prooijen, J.-W. (2001). Referent Cognitions Theory: The role of closeness of reference points in the psychology of voice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*(4), 616–626. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.4.616>
- Yuan, S., & Lou, C. (2020). How Social Media Influencers Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, *20*(2), 133–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>