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Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

Master's thesis

The Dynamics of Blame Attribution in Influencer Marketing: The Role of Relationship Strength and Perceived Trustworthiness in Shaping Customer Satisfaction

Babette Heines

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization International Marketing Strategy

SUPERVISOR :

Prof. dr. Allard VAN RIEL

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PREFACE

The journey of writing this thesis has been both challenging and rewarding. The decision to explore the dynamics of blame attribution in this context stemmed from my interest in how social media influencers shape consumer perceptions and expectations in today's interconnected digital world. Navigating through the complexities of this topic has provided me with deeper insights into the intricate relationships between social media influencers, service providers, and consumers.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who took the time to complete my questionnaire. Your participation was essential to the success of this study, and without your valuable input, this research would not have been possible. I am particularly grateful to those who went above and beyond by distributing the questionnaire within their personal networks. Your willingness to help was instrumental in gathering the necessary data and making this research feasible.

I also wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Professor Allard van Riel. Your guidance and expertise have been invaluable throughout this process. Your constructive feedback and meticulous proofreading have greatly improved the quality of this thesis. Thank you for pointing out areas for improvement and for steering me in the right direction whenever I needed it. Your support has been instrumental in helping me complete this milestone.

Finally, I am grateful for the opportunity to explore this fascinating topic and contribute to the understanding of influencer marketing and consumer behaviour.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Purpose

This study investigates the dynamics of blame attribution in the context of influencer marketing, focusing on the roles of the strength of the relationship between a social media influencer (SMI) and their followers and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI in shaping customer satisfaction following service failures that occur after customers follow an SMI's recommendation. In today's digital age, SMIs have become pivotal in marketing strategies, significantly impacting consumer behaviour. However, the interplay between SMIs, service providers, and consumers' blame attribution during service failures remains underexplored. The primary research question guiding this study is: How do the characteristics of SMIs affect the attribution of blame between SMIs and service providers, and how does this blame distribution impact overall customer satisfaction when a service failure occurs with a service that the SMI recommended? To address this question, the study examines the direct and indirect effects of relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness on blame attribution towards both SMIs and service providers and their subsequent impact on overall customer satisfaction.

Research Methodology

The study employs a quantitative approach to investigate these dynamics. The primary data was gathered through a survey distributed to a diverse sample of consumers who have experienced service failures after following SMI recommendations. The survey measured key variables, including relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, blame attribution, and overall satisfaction. Additionally, service failure severity and service quality were included as control variables to account for their potential impact on the results. The collected data was analysed using multiple regression analysis to assess the relationships between the variables. This methodology enabled a detailed examination of these variables' direct and moderating effects on overall customer satisfaction.

Findings

This study reveals several key findings that shed light on the complex dynamics of blame attribution in influencer marketing. Contrary to the initial hypothesis (H1a), which posited a direct influence of the relationship between the SMI and their followers on blame attribution towards the SMI, the results indicate a more intricate interplay. Specifically, while an isolated analysis suggested that stronger relationships might reduce blame towards the SMI, the complete model did not show a significant relationship. This complexity suggests that other factors are more critical in influencing blame attribution towards the SMI.

Conversely, hypothesis H1b, which posited a direct influence of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the service provider, was supported by the analysis. This indicates that stronger relationships between customers and SMIs can increase blame towards the service provider. However, this factor explains only a fraction of the variance in blame towards the service provider, highlighting the importance of other

factors in blame attribution. These findings underscore the necessity of managing customer expectations through accurate and realistic portrayals by SMIs to mitigate unwarranted blame on service providers.

The study also confirmed hypothesis H2a, which suggested that higher perceived trustworthiness in an SMI is associated with decreased blame attribution towards the SMI. This finding aligns with existing literature, emphasising the protective role of trustworthiness in reducing adverse customer reactions. A trustworthy SMI is perceived as reliable and less likely to intentionally mislead their followers, which mitigates the attribution of blame to them during service failures. This insight highlights the importance of building and maintaining trust for SMIs to preserve their reputation and mitigate potential negative fallout from service failures.

However, hypothesis H2b, which proposed that higher perceived trustworthiness of the SMI would increase blame towards the service provider, was not supported. The results suggest that blame attribution is more significantly influenced by the service provider's performance and ability to meet customer expectations than by the SMI's trustworthiness. This discrepancy highlights that while trustworthiness affects blame attribution towards the SMI, it does not necessarily extend to the service provider. This complexity further underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding blame attribution, which includes additional factors such as the stability and controllability dimensions of attribution theory.

Another crucial finding relates to the impact of blame attribution on overall satisfaction with the service provider. Hypothesis H3a, which anticipated a positive impact of blame attribution towards the SMI on overall satisfaction, was not supported. Instead, the data revealed that blame directed at the SMI negatively affects overall satisfaction with the service provider. This unexpected outcome suggests that service failures can tarnish the entire service experience and lead to dissatisfaction, regardless of who is deemed responsible. This highlights the importance of managing customer expectations because when these expectations are not met, it does not matter who is deemed responsible; overall satisfaction still decreases.

On the other hand, hypothesis H3b was supported, demonstrating that blame attribution towards the service provider significantly reduces overall satisfaction. This finding aligns with the literature, underscoring the detrimental impact of perceived responsibility for service failures on customer satisfaction. When customers blame the service provider, their overall evaluation of the service experience deteriorates, reflecting decreased satisfaction. This supports the notion that perceived responsibility directly influences customers' emotional responses and overall contentment with the service.

Value of the Study

The value of this study lies in its contributions to a theoretical and practical understanding of blame attribution in influencer marketing. Theoretically, this research extends attribution theory by introducing SMIs as a new locus of causality, exploring how relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness influence blame attribution. By combining insights from conventional service failure scenarios and influencer marketing, this study offers a novel perspective on how these dynamics interact in the digital age. The findings highlight the complexity of blame attribution processes, emphasising the importance of customer expectations.

This research provides actionable insights for managers. The recommendations are twofold: optimising influencer marketing strategies to minimise service failures and implementing effective service recovery strategies to mitigate adverse outcomes when failures occur.

- Careful selection of SMIs: Prioritise selecting SMIs with proven transparency and authenticity.
  Do: Select SMIs who have a track record of honesty and reliability.
  Don't: Choose SMIs based solely on their follower count without vetting their credibility.
- Encourage honest reviews: Managers should guide SMIs to share honest reviews and experiences.
  Do: Provide SMIs with clear guidelines on promoting services truthfully.
  Don't: Push SMIs to exaggerate the benefits of the service or embellish the service attributes.
- Manage customer expectations: Ensure that the promotional content sets realistic expectations.
  Do: Collaborate with SMIs to create balanced content that aligns with actual service capabilities.
  Don't: Allow the publication of overly positive portrayals that can lead to unrealistic customer expectations.
- Transparent communication: Maintain open and honest communication with customers when addressing service failures.
  Do: Offer clear explanations and sincere apologies for any issues.
  Don't: Provide vague or insincere responses to customer complaints.
- Proactive service recovery strategies: Implement strategies to address service failures promptly and effectively.
  Do: Train frontline employees to handle complaints empathetically and efficiently.
  Don't: Ignore customer complaints or delay responses.

By implementing these strategies, managers can minimise the occurrence of service failures and maintain positive customer relationships even in the face of service failures. These strategies ensure that endorsements accurately reflect the service standards and that any issues are promptly and effectively addressed, thus sustaining customer satisfaction.

Critical Considerations

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. Using a non-probability convenience sampling method introduces selection bias, limiting the generalisability of the findings. The sample's high percentage of female respondents may not fully represent the broader population. Additionally, while effectively capturing consumer perceptions, the survey method does not allow for controlling variables that impact the independent variables, such as service failure severity and service quality.

Future research should explore factors like customer expectations and prior experiences with service providers, which were not the focus of this study. Incorporating attribution theory's stability and controllability dimensions could yield a more comprehensive understanding of blame attribution. Moreover, a more focused examination of specific service industries or types of service failures may uncover nuanced insights and provide tailored managerial strategies.

In conclusion, this study enhances our understanding of blame attribution in influencer marketing, highlighting the complexity of relationships between SMIs, service providers, and consumers. By addressing the identified limitations and exploring new avenues, future research can build a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, contributing to theoretical knowledge and practical applications in influencer marketing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

In recent years, the digital marketing landscape has been transformed by the rise of social media influencers (SMIs) (Audrezet et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2023). These individuals, who have amassed significant followings on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, leverage their reach and perceived authenticity to promote products and services to their audience (Lee et al., 2022; Morton, 2020). Influencer marketing has quickly become a critical component of many brands' marketing strategies, with companies investing significantly to partner with SMIs to enhance their visibility and credibility (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Hughes et al., 2019).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing lies in the trust (Agnihotri et al., 2023) and relatability (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) that SMIs have built with their followers. Unlike traditional advertisements, which are often viewed with scepticism (Chari et al., 2016), endorsements from SMIs are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy (Ozuem et al., 2023), leading to higher engagement and conversion rates (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Lim et al., 2017). As a result, brands across various industries are increasingly turning to SMIs to drive awareness and sales (Freberg et al., 2011).

However, influencer marketing is not without its challenges, particularly concerning service failures. Service failures occur when the actual service does not meet customer expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1993), a discrepancy that can happen more often due to the idealised portrayals often presented by SMIs (Rundin & Colliander, 2021; Tsai & Hsin, 2023; Wellman et al., 2020) which elevate expectations among customers (Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022). When the actual service fails to meet these expectations, it can result in customer dissatisfaction (Adil et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2003), negative word-of-mouth (WOM) (Adil et al., 2022; Holloway & Beatty, 2003), and a tarnished brand reputation (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; He et al., 2017).

Understanding how consumers attribute blame when a service failure occurs is crucial in this context. Attribution theory, which explores how individuals assign responsibility for events and outcomes, provides a valuable framework for examining these dynamics (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). This study investigates how consumers assign blame in service failure contexts involving SMI recommendations. By exploring the factors that influence blame attribution and examining the subsequent impact on customer satisfaction, this research provides theoretical insights and practical recommendations for businesses navigating the complexities of influencer marketing.

1.2 Research Motivations

1.2.1 Business Economic Motivation

In today's competitive market landscape, businesses increasingly rely on SMIs to promote their services and connect with consumers (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Morton, 2020). The rise of influencer marketing has created new opportunities for companies to reach their target audiences more effectively, as SMIs can sway public opinion and significantly affect brand perceptions (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lee

et al., 2022). However, this has also introduced new challenges, particularly regarding heightened customer expectations. SMIs often embellish services to make them appear more attractive (Tsai & Hsin, 2023), leading to higher customer expectations than the actual service standard (Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022). When service providers fail to meet these elevated expectations, it can damage both the service provider's reputation (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Michel, 2001) and the SMI's credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021).

Service failures can have substantial financial repercussions for companies. When a service fails to meet customer expectations, it can lead to customer dissatisfaction (Adil et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2003), customer defection (Janjua, 2017), negative WOM (Adil et al., 2022; Holloway & Beatty, 2003), and ultimately, a decrease in the profitability of the service organisation (Lewis & McCann, 2004). While dissatisfaction is the immediate and palpable consequence, the broader spectrum of adverse effects underscores the extensive impact that service failure exerts on various business dimensions.

Understanding how customers attribute blame in these scenarios is crucial for managers. Insights into how blame is distributed between service providers and SMIs enable companies to develop targeted strategies to address the root causes of dissatisfaction, improve recovery efforts, and mitigate financial losses. This knowledge equips managers with the tools to manage customer expectations and safeguard profitability in a competitive market.

1.2.2 Academic Motivation

Despite the growing importance of influencer marketing, a notable gap remains in academic literature regarding the attribution of blame in service failure contexts involving SMI recommendations. Existing literature on attribution theory predominantly focuses on traditional service contexts (e.g., Iglesias, 2009; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Swanson & Hsu, 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014; Walton & Hume, 2012) and has provided limited exploration into the role of third-party entities such as SMIs. Recent research has extensively examined the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behaviour (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2023; Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023; Ao et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019; Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022). However, these studies do not address service failure scenarios. Additionally, while Ozuem et al. (2023) explored the use of SMIs in service recovery strategies, their focus was on how SMIs can mitigate the negative effects post-failure rather than on how blame is assigned when an SMI-recommended service fails to meet expectations.

This research seeks to fill this gap by investigating how blame is attributed in service failure scenarios linked to SMI endorsements. By providing a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, this study aims to contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of blame attribution in the digital age and offer novel insights into attribution theory and influencer marketing research.

Furthermore, prior research in various domains — such as service failure, attribution theory, and influencer marketing — highlights several key reasons for conducting academic investigations into blame attribution in the context of SMI endorsements:

- Financial impact of service failures: Service failures can directly affect a company's profitability (Janjua, 2017). Dissatisfied customers are less likely to repurchase (Clark et al., 1992; Keaveney, 1995) and more likely to share their negative experiences with others, amplifying the damage through social networks (Kim, 2016; Swanson & Hsu, 2010). By understanding how blame is

attributed, businesses can develop strategies to mitigate these adverse effects and maintain customer loyalty (Grewal et al., 2008; Swanson & Hsu, 2010).

- Optimising influencer partnerships: Partnering with SMIs involves significant investment (Hughes et al., 2019). Companies need to ensure that these partnerships are beneficial and do not backfire in the event of a service failure. By understanding how different elements of the SMI-customer relationship affect blame attribution, businesses can make more informed decisions about selecting and managing their SMI partnerships.
- Enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty: Companies invest heavily in influencer marketing to enhance their brand image and drive sales (Hughes et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). However, if a service failure occurs, it can undermine these marketing efforts. By identifying the factors influencing blame attribution, businesses can better manage customer expectations and improve their service recovery efforts, enhancing overall customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- Strategic decision-making: Insights from this research can inform strategic decisions related to influencer marketing and service recovery initiatives. Companies can develop more effective communication strategies to address service failures and allocate resources more efficiently to areas with the most significant impact on customer retention and profitability.

1.3 Problem Statement

The central problem this research addresses is understanding how blame attribution for service failures is distributed between SMIs and service providers, and how this distribution impacts overall customer satisfaction with the service provider. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- Main research question:
    - RQ: How do the characteristics of SMIs affect the attribution of blame between SMIs and service providers, and how does this blame distribution impact overall customer satisfaction when a service failure occurs with a service that the SMI recommended?
- Sub-questions:
    - SQ1: Which aspects of SMIs affect how blame is attributed between the SMI and the service provider when a service failure occurs?
    - SQ2: How do the identified aspects of SMIs impact the distribution of blame between the SMI and the service provider in case of a service failure?
    - SQ3: How does blame attribution for a service failure towards the SMI or the service provider affect the overall consumer satisfaction with the service provider?

These questions aim to dissect the intricate dynamics between SMIs, service providers, and customers, providing insights into managing service failures and influencer marketing more effectively.

1.4 Contribution

This study offers several key contributions to both theory and practice:

- Theoretical Contribution: By integrating SMIs into attribution theory, the research extends traditional frameworks to encompass modern influencer marketing dynamics. It provides new insights into how

perceived trustworthiness and relationship strength influence blame attribution and customer satisfaction.

- Practical Contribution: The findings offer actionable recommendations for businesses and influencers. Managers can use these insights to better manage their influencer marketing initiatives, align customer expectations, and develop effective service recovery strategies.

The research fulfils the identified needs by offering a deeper understanding of how blame is assigned in the context of influencer marketing and its implications for customer satisfaction. This understanding helps businesses navigate the complexities of modern marketing and improve their strategies accordingly.

1.5 Approach and Structure

The thesis is organised into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction: Provides the background, research motivation, problem statement, contributions, and structure of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theory: Examines existing research on service failures, attribution theory, influencer marketing, and related concepts to establish the theoretical foundation for the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology: Details the research design, including data collection methods, sample selection, and analytical techniques used to address the research questions.

Chapter 4: Hypothesis Testing: Presents the empirical analysis and statistical results related to the research hypotheses.

Chapter 5: Discussion: Interprets the results in light of the research objectives and theoretical framework, discussing implications and alternative explanations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Summarises the key findings, theoretical and practical contributions, and suggests directions for future research.

This structured approach ensures a thorough exploration of the research topic, examining the complex interplay between SMIs, service providers, and customer satisfaction. By adhering to this outline, the thesis seeks to offer a detailed and nuanced understanding of the dynamics within influencer marketing and service failures, thereby providing valuable insights for academic research and practical marketing strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

2.1 Service Failure

The intricate phenomenon of service failure has captivated the attention of many scholars in service management and marketing, who are dedicated to unravelling its multifaceted dimensions and implications. Numerous research projects have explored the complexities of service failures, demonstrating the profound interest and recognition bestowed upon this crucial aspect of consumer experiences (Kranzbühler et al., 2017). In tandem, the significance of service recovery has gained increasing prominence in recent years. This heightened attention is driven by acknowledging that service failures are inevitable, but the prevention of dissatisfied customers is not (Michel, 2001). Consequently, scholars are directing their focus towards understanding and improving service recovery processes, recognising them as pivotal elements in fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty (Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Lewis & McCann, 2004).

2.1.1 Defining Service Failure

Service failures can be characterised as instances of subpar service performance, where the delivered service falls short of the expectations held by one or more customers (Khamitov et al., 2020; Sands et al., 2020). Within the literature, various perspectives have been proposed to elucidate this concept. Holloway and Beatty (2003) describe service failure as the result of customer perceptions, indicating that it occurs when initial service delivery behaviours are perceived to be below the customer's expected level or zone of tolerance. The concept of the 'zone of tolerance,' coined by Zeithaml et al. (1993), is pivotal in understanding customer perceptions. This zone represents the range within which customers are willing to accept variations in service quality without feeling dissatisfied with the service encounter (Zeithaml et al., 1993). The normative standard of desired service is dynamic, and the zone of tolerance delineates the space between the desired service and the minimum acceptable level, termed adequate service. Customers' recognition and willingness to accommodate heterogeneity in service performance are reflected in this dynamic range, allowing for fluctuations within a certain 'window' of expected levels (Zeithaml et al., 1993). It is essential to recognise that even when the service delivery aligns with the provider's planned performance, it can still be deemed a failure if customer expectations differ (Michel, 2001). As Michel (2001) highlighted, customers may perceive an incident as a service failure, even if it adheres to the service blueprint. This underscores the significance of not only meeting predetermined service standards but also understanding and managing customer expectations to ensure a positive service experience and create long-lasting customer relationships (Ojasalo, 2001). In this thesis, service failure is defined as negative deviations from customer expectations. Given the dynamic nature of customer expectations, effective management becomes crucial in ensuring positive experiences, thereby avoiding service failures. Therefore, this study emphasises the imperative of effective customer expectation management in addressing service failures.

2.1.2 Attribution of Failure

In the realm of service encounters, customers' perceptions of service failures vary considerably (Iglesias, 2009; Sands et al., 2020). Understanding how individuals attribute blame in response to service failures is essential, reflecting a multifaceted phenomenon driven by spontaneous causal thinking (Bitner, 1990). Prior research underscores the significance of contextual variations in attributions of failure, as customers inherently seek to understand the root causes of service failures, desiring clarity on what or who instigated the failure (Leo & Huh, 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Rooted in the fundamental human desire to understand, control, and predict one's environment (Fu et al., 2015; Swanson & Hsu, 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), attribution theory offers invaluable insights into how individuals perceive and assign blame for service failures (Janjua, 2017; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). At its essence, attribution theory elucidates the cognitive processes underlying individuals' attributions of causality and responsibility following a service failure (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). These attributions unfold post-service encounter (Walton & Hume, 2012) but prelude the determination of customers' levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Bitner, 1990), underscoring the significance of attributions in shaping subsequent reactions. Notably, the attribution of failure holds considerable sway over customers' responses to service failures, influencing their attitudes (Fu et al., 2015; Hess et al., 2003; Swanson & Hsu, 2010), emotional states (Fu et al., 2015; Swanson & Hsu, 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), satisfaction levels (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), and behavioural intentions (Iglesias, 2009; Swanson & Hsu, 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). Central to attribution theory are three key dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). These dimensions offer valuable insights into the intricacies of customers' attributions of blame and their effects on post-failure responses. Subsequent sections will explore each dimension in detail to elucidate their impact on customer attributions and responses to service failures.

2.1.2.1 Locus of Causality

The locus of causality, a fundamental concept in attribution theory, refers to the perceived source of service failures, shaping customers' attributions of failure (Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). In other words, the locus of causality for a service failure indicates who is perceived to be responsible for causing the failure (Isabella et al., 2022). Customers may attribute the cause of a service failure to factors within themselves (internal) (Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), factors within the service organisation (external) (Fu et al., 2015; Sands et al., 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), factors within the environment (situational) (Iglesias, 2009; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014; Walton & Hume, 2012), or a combination thereof (Janjua, 2017). These attributions not only shape customers' perceptions of failure causality but also influence the perceived equity of the exchange (Grewal et al., 2008) and subsequent behaviours (Fu et al., 2015; Swanson & Hsu, 2010), thus serving a pivotal role in both service failure and service recovery scenarios (Swanson & Hsu, 2010).

When customers attribute failures to internal factors, such as their own actions or decisions, they may experience feelings of shame or guilt (Janjua, 2017), potentially inhibiting their likelihood to complain (Fu et al., 2015; Janjua, 2017) or seek redress (Fu et al., 2015). However, while some research suggests that customers who blame themselves may not actively seek redress (Fu et al., 2015; Grewal et al., 2008), others argue that they still anticipate some form of recovery as a courtesy from the organisation (Janjua,

2017), despite attributing the failure to themselves. Furthermore, attributing failures to an internal locus tends to result in lower levels of dissatisfaction compared to external attributions (Fu et al., 2015; Janjua, 2017; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), leading to reduced negative post-failure responses (Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). However, prior research indicates a trend among customers to attribute favourable outcomes to internal factors while assigning blame for negative outcomes to external entities (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Swanson & Hsu, 2010). This predisposition suggests that attributions of external locus, wherein customers place the blame on the service provider, are more prevalent, particularly in the context of service failures. This inclination underscores the importance of exploring how external locus attributions shape customer responses. External attributions evoke a sense of distributive injustice among customers (Iglesias, 2009; Isabella et al., 2022), resulting in a higher level of dissatisfaction compared to internal attributions (Fu et al., 2015; Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Consequently, customers exhibit increased negative responses (Iglesias, 2009; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). Moreover, customers tend to voice their dissatisfaction more openly when attributing failures externally, exhibiting a higher tendency to lodge complaints (Fu et al., 2015; Janjua, 2017) and expecting greater redress or compensation from the service provider (Fu et al., 2015; Grewal et al., 2008). Additionally, external locus attributions can cast a halo effect on customers' evaluations of the organisation as a whole, extending the impact of a specific failure to influence broader attitudes (Iglesias, 2009). Consequently, customers may negatively evaluate aspects of the service that were not directly related to the failure itself (Iglesias, 2009). While scholarly focus often centres on internal and external loci of causality, it is also crucial to consider the impact of situational factors on customer responses to service failures (Fu et al., 2015; Iglesias, 2009; Janjua, 2017). Attributing failure to factors within the environment, such as bad weather (Iglesias, 2009), eliminates the possibility of holding any individual accountable for the service failure. This absence of a specific target for blame can lead customers to feel a loss of control over their environment (Fu et al., 2015; Swanson & Hsu, 2010), potentially inducing distress or fear and consequently deterring them from expressing complaints (Janjua, 2017).

In summary, understanding how customers attribute service failures to internal, external, and situational factors is essential for comprehending their responses (Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). Locus of causality attributions not only shape their perceptions of failure (Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014) but also their subsequent behaviours (Fu et al., 2015; Swanson & Hsu, 2010) and attitudes towards service providers (Fu et al., 2015; Iglesias, 2009; Swanson & Hsu, 2010).

2.1.2.2 Stability

The stability dimension in attribution theory pertains to how enduring or lasting the perceived cause of the failure is believed to be over time (Iglesias, 2009), classifying causes as either stable or unstable. Stable causes are perceived as permanent factors that remain consistent over time (Leo & Huh, 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), leading customers to believe that the cause is unlikely to change, and thus the failure is likely to recur in the future (Grewal et al., 2008; Leo & Huh, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). The more stable a cause is perceived to be, the greater the attribution of blame (Akhtar et al., 2019). In contrast, unstable causes are perceived as temporary or rare factors subject to fluctuations over time (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014; Walton & Hume, 2012), suggesting that the failure is a one-off incident and not likely to recur (Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012). Stability attributions are often formed based on consistency principles (Hess et al., 2003), with customers

relying on past experiences with the service provider to determine if the cause of the failure is temporary or persistent (Hess et al., 2003; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). There is some debate in the literature regarding the impact of past service encounters on stability perception. While some scholars argue that customers who have previously experienced satisfactory service encounters are more likely to view a service failure as stemming from an unstable cause (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), others suggest that the quality of past service encounters does not influence their stability attributions, but rather the number of past encounters (Hess et al., 2003).

Stable attributions elicit a range of emotional reactions among customers (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). Foremost among these is a pervasive fear of encountering the same failure in future service encounters (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), instigating uncertainty regarding the service provider's reliability. Consequently, customers are more likely to engage in avoidance and switching behaviours (Walton & Hume, 2012), seeking alternatives to reduce the perceived risk of recurrent failures. Moreover, stable attributions engender a sense of inequity in the customer-provider exchange (Grewal et al., 2008), as customers perceive the cause of the failure as systemic or ongoing issues within the service organisation. This perceived injustice often leads to heightened levels of dissatisfaction (Grewal et al., 2008; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012). Conversely, attributions of unstable causes typically lead to less dissatisfaction (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020) and, subsequently, evoke less negative responses (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Unlike stable attributions, which evoke fear and dissatisfaction, attributing failures to unstable causes tends to result in customers being more forgiving of the service provider's shortcomings (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). As a result, customers are inclined to give the service provider another chance despite the failure, and thus, unstable attributions do not significantly influence customers' repatronage intentions (Grewal et al., 2008). Overall, stability attributions significantly influence several dimensions of customer responses to service failures. They profoundly affect the perceived equity of the exchange between the customer and the service provider (Grewal et al., 2008), shaping immediate post-failure dissatisfaction (Grewal et al., 2008; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012) as well as exerting a long-term effect on cumulative satisfaction with the service provider (Grewal et al., 2008). Additionally, these attributions play a pivotal role in shaping customers' expectations regarding future service performance (Grewal et al., 2008; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014; Walton & Hume, 2012), thereby influencing the likelihood of customer defection (Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012).

Understanding stability attributions is essential for service providers aiming to manage service failures effectively and implement successful recovery strategies. When customers attribute a service failure to stable causes, it disrupts the equity in the customer-provider exchange (Grewal et al., 2008). As a result, customers anticipate the restoration of this imbalance through recovery efforts, such as compensation (Grewal et al., 2008). Failure to provide compensation after stable failures can lead customers to perceive the company as unresponsive, exacerbating dissatisfaction and diminishing repurchase intentions (Grewal et al., 2008). In contrast, in unstable failures, customers are less likely to question the equity of the transaction, and they may give the service provider the benefit of the doubt, resulting in lower expectations of service recovery efforts (Grewal et al., 2008). Additionally, stability attributions are crucial in mediating the effectiveness of service recovery efforts (Grewal et al., 2008). These attributions give rise to different levels of equity, thereby influencing the efficacy of compensation as a recovery strategy (Grewal et al., 2008). Furthermore, studies indicate that stability attributions diminish in response to recovery efforts, such as providing an explanation for service failures (Grewal et al., 2008). This implies that customers view failures as less enduring when insights into their causes are provided.

In summary, stability attributions significantly influence customer responses to service failures (Grewal et al., 2008; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014) and the effectiveness of recovery efforts (Grewal et al., 2008). Acknowledging and addressing stability attributions is essential for service providers aiming to manage service failures effectively (Grewal et al., 2008) and maintain long-lasting customer relationships by decreasing customer defection (Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012).

2.1.2.3 Controllability

The controllability dimension in attribution theory pertains to the extent to which customers perceive the service provider to have influence or control over the occurrence of a service failure (Bitner, 1990; Iglesias, 2009; Walton & Hume, 2012). This perception reflects the degree to which customers believe the failure could have been prevented or avoided by the actions of the service provider (Janjua, 2017; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). When customers believe that the service failure was controllable and thus could have been prevented, their attribution of blame towards the service provider increases (Leo & Huh, 2020). On the other hand, customers tend to be more understanding if they perceive that the service provider had minimal control over the service failure (Fu et al., 2021). The formation of controllability attributions is significantly influenced by explanations provided by the service provider regarding the causes of the service failure (Grewal et al., 2008). Studies suggest that when customers receive explanations detailing the internal or external factors contributing to the failure, their attributions of control diminish (Grewal et al., 2008). Conversely, when no explanation is provided, customers are more inclined to attribute greater control to the service provider (Grewal et al., 2008).

Controllability attributions in service failure situations are complex, and their impact has been examined in various studies, yielding mixed findings. Controllability attributions play a significant role in influencing dissatisfaction among customers following service failures (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Studies have shown that when customers perceive a failure as preventable by the service provider, their dissatisfaction levels tend to increase (Grewal et al., 2008; Janjua, 2017; Walton & Hume, 2012). Conversely, if the failure is deemed uncontrollable, customers' zone of tolerance becomes wider (Walton & Hume, 2012), allowing them to accept variations in service quality without feeling dissatisfied (Zeithaml et al., 1993). However, the impact of controllability attributions on dissatisfaction levels is subject to debate. While some studies support the notion that preventable failures generate higher levels of dissatisfaction (Grewal et al., 2008; Janjua, 2017; Walton & Hume, 2012), others have found no significant evidence for this claim (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Additionally, controllability attributions influence customers' post-failure behaviours, with controllable failures often leading to higher levels of complaining behaviour among customers (Janjua, 2017). In contrast, uncontrollable failures tend to evoke greater forgiveness from customers, as they perceive the service provider as less responsible for the failure (Walton & Hume, 2012). Nonetheless, there is debate regarding the effect of controllability attributions on customer responses. Some studies suggest that controllable failures elicit increased emotions, such as anger among customers (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), while others argue that there is no significant increase in negative emotional or behavioural responses (Walton & Hume, 2012).

In conclusion, controllability attributions significantly shape customer perceptions and reactions following service failures. Most notable is the impact on customer dissatisfaction, with preventable failures typically leading to heightened levels of dissatisfaction (Grewal et al., 2008; Janjua, 2017; Walton & Hume, 2012). However, the effect of controllability on dissatisfaction levels remains debated in the literature (Srivastava

& Gosain, 2020). Overall, understanding the role of controllability attributions is crucial in comprehending customer responses to service failures.

2.1.3 Impact of Service Failure

The repercussions of service failure extend far beyond the immediate dissatisfaction experienced by customers during a service encounter. Kelley et al. (1993) noted that when a service failure occurs, consumers' initial and likely response is dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction, as found by Hess et al. (2003), can escalate, particularly among highly involved customers, leading to greater dissatisfaction with the organisation as a whole. Disconfirmation of service expectations resulting from service failures triggers a chain of adverse outcomes. The literature provides a comprehensive list of consequences, including dissatisfaction (Adil et al., 2022; Lewis & McCann, 2004; Michel, 2001), customer defection (Janjua, 2017; Lewis & McCann, 2004; Michel, 2001), negative WOM (Adil et al., 2022; Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Janjua, 2017), customer switching behaviour (Adil et al., 2022; Janjua, 2017; Smith et al., 1999), a decline in customer confidence (Lewis & McCann, 2004), and a decrease in employee morale and performance (Lewis & McCann, 2004). These adverse outcomes of service failure contribute to decreased revenue streams (Lewis & McCann, 2004) and increased operational costs (Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Smith et al., 1999; Swanson & Hsu, 2010), diminishing a company's profitability. While dissatisfaction is the immediate and palpable consequence, the broader spectrum of adverse effects underscores the extensive impact that service failure exerts on various dimensions.

The extent of the adverse outcomes stemming from service failures is significantly influenced by how consumers attribute blame for the failure. The locus of causality plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction levels. When attributing the failure to the service provider, customers tend to be more dissatisfied with the service than if they had attributed the failure to internal causes (Fu et al., 2015; Iglesias, 2009; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). This is because external attributions directly implicate the service provider, intensifying negative emotions (Leo & Huh, 2020). When consumers perceive the cause of the failure as stable, meaning they believe the failure is likely to recur, they are more prone to engage in switching behaviour to avoid future service failures (Fu et al., 2021; Walton & Hume, 2012). This is driven by a fear of encountering the same issue in subsequent service interactions (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). Moreover, when consumers attribute the failure to controllable factors, they are more likely to spread negative WOM (Leo & Huh, 2020; Weitzl et al., 2018). This reaction stems from the belief that the service provider had the power to prevent the failure but did not (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), resulting in increased frustration and the desire to warn others (Weitzl et al., 2018). Overall, higher attributions of blame, whether stable, controllable, or external, correlate with increased dissatisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012), exacerbating the negative impact on customer behaviours (Fu et al., 2015; Fu et al., 2021; Swanson & Hsu, 2010).

2.2 Social Media Influencers

2.2.1 Defining Social Media Influencers and Influencer Marketing

In modern marketing, the power dynamics between brands and consumers have undergone a profound shift. Unlike traditional advertising, which predominantly originated from firms, today's brand

communication landscape is marked by the widespread prevalence of user-generated content (Chari et al., 2016). Social media platforms have empowered content creation, allowing users to freely voice opinions, share expertise, and convey passions across diverse topics (Audrezet et al., 2020). Consumers have grown increasingly distrustful of traditional advertising tactics, developing a preference for authentic, peer-to-peer communication (Chari et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023). This shift has elevated the importance of content originating from fellow consumers, perceived as more genuine and trustworthy (Ozuem et al., 2023). It is within this context that the concept of SMIs emerges. SMIs are individuals who have honed their skills in crafting sophisticated and engaging content (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Audrezet et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) and have thereby cultivated a substantial following on various social media platforms (Audrezet et al., 2020; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019). This following can vary widely, with some SMIs commanding more than a million followers, while others, known as micro-influencers, have smaller sets of followers ranging around 10 000 (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). SMIs typically define their online identity around particular themes or topics they specialise in (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Ozuem et al., 2023). This niche focus allows them to attract a specialised audience whose interests align with theirs (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023). Consequently, they gain popularity within specific communities and foster more genuine connections with their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019). By actively engaging with their audience on a personal level (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Lim et al., 2017), SMIs can build meaningful relationships with their audience over time (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Ozuem et al., 2023). This relational approach not only enhances the authenticity of their content (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023) but is also central to the success of the social media influences as it strengthens their influence (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Jin et al., 2019), as followers feel personally connected and invested in the SMI's journey (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Jin et al., 2019).

The ability of SMIs to establish an online status and attract a sizable audience has led to comparisons between them and celebrity endorsers (Ozuem et al., 2023). Some scholars even refer to SMIs as a type of micro-celebrity (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). There are certain similarities with celebrity endorsers, however, there are also differences (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Traditional celebrities have created value for themselves through sports, music, movies or TV shows (Jin et al., 2019). However, SMIs refer to people who have gained fame through their presence on social media platforms (Jin et al., 2019). The utilisation of SMIs as brand endorsers has surged in popularity (Lim et al., 2017), signalling a shift towards a new breed of independent third-party endorsers (Audrezet et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs are more akin to other consumers (Ozuem et al., 2023), and some social media users see them as a resemblance to themselves (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Jin et al., 2019). They embody traits of relatability (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023), accessibility (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), and authenticity (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023) that resonate with their audience. Moreover, their messages are perceived as non-commercially motivated (Ozuem et al., 2023), enhancing their reliability (Ozuem et al., 2023), credibility (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023), and trustworthiness (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019). This sincerity and believability foster genuine connections with their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Lim et al., 2017; Ozuem et al., 2023), positioning SMIs as influential figures in shaping audience attitudes (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). By "expressing their opinions in product reviews, offering tips on product usage, and posting pictures or videos containing products or services" (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 557), SMIs become a type of opinion leaders who shape

public opinion (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Moreover, owing to their source credibility (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023), SMIs play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour, as they wield significant power over consumer choices (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), impacting consumption habits (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022) and influencing purchasing intentions (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Jin et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023). Their sway extends beyond shaping consumer buying behaviours to effectively driving electronic WOM communication (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Additionally, SMIs have a profound effect on consumer brand perceptions (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022), driving product engagement (Lim et al., 2017) and fostering brand loyalty among their followers (Lim et al., 2017). This comprehensive influence underscores the vital role that SMIs play in the contemporary landscape of consumer behaviour.

In this thesis, an SMI is defined as an individual who creates compelling and engaging content, thereby cultivating a substantial online following. While the size of their audience may vary, what characterises SMIs is the relationship they establish with their followers, built on perceived authenticity, relatability, credibility, and trustworthiness. Through this relationship, SMIs can sway their audience's opinions, behaviours, and purchasing decisions of their audience.

SMIs present themselves as typical consumers providing advice, yet they may have underlying commercial motives (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Consequently, this has engendered opportunities for corporations to forge alliances with SMIs, leveraging their platforms to endorse brands or organisations (Freberg et al., 2011). This category of marketing activities is commonly denoted as influencer marketing. Influencer marketing, as defined by Audrezet et al. (2020, p. 557), involves "promoting brands through use of specific key individuals who exert influence over potential buyers", while Martínez-López (2020) characterises it as the employment of SMIs to foster favourable attitudinal and behavioural responses among their followers towards the interests of a brand. Influencer marketing combines elements of both paid and earned media (Hughes et al., 2019). Companies compensate SMIs for content creation, which constitutes a form of paid media (Hughes et al., 2019). However, the subsequent engagement among the SMI's followers and the WOM interactions that ensue epitomise elements of earned media (Hughes et al., 2019). SMIs excel in spreading messages, initiating trends, and boosting sales (Jin et al., 2019), thereby significantly influencing how customers perceive information, interact with products, and cultivate brand loyalty (Lim et al., 2017; Ozuem et al., 2023). As a result, companies are increasingly leveraging SMIs as brand endorsers (Lim et al., 2017), making their involvement a key component of social media marketing campaigns (Hughes et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019). Influencer marketing operates on a parallel basis to celebrity endorsements. Within celebrity endorsements, the endorser's attributes, persona, and achievements are imbued onto the endorsed brand (Agnihotri et al., 2023). Similarly, in influencer marketing, followers' positive sentiments and affections for the SMI are transferred onto the endorsed brand, thereby enhancing the likelihood of acceptance and favourable attitudes towards the endorsed product or service (Agnihotri et al., 2023). The emotional connections followers foster towards the SMI hold substantial sway over their disposition to embrace the endorsement (Agnihotri et al., 2023). Due to consumers' inclination to place greater trust in SMIs than in traditional advertising channels (Agnihotri et al., 2023), influencer marketing emerges as a highly effective strategy (Audrezet et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2023). With returns on investment surpassing those of digital marketing by a factor of 11, influencer marketing is recognised as the foremost cost-efficient and effective trend in contemporary marketing practices (Lim et al., 2017). In this thesis, influencer marketing is defined as the strategic practice of leveraging the persuasive power of an SMI to promote brands or organisations and foster favourable attitudes and behaviours among their followers towards the interest of the brand or organisation.

2.2.2 Shaping Customer Expectations

Customer expectations serve as a cornerstone in determining their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service they receive, ultimately influencing the likelihood of service failures (Holloway & Beatty, 2003). According to the expectation confirmation perspective, customer satisfaction hinges on the confirmation or disconfirmation of customer expectations (Hu et al., 2019). Satisfaction arises when customers' perceptions of service performance meet or exceed their expectations (Fornell et al., 1996; Poister & Thomas, 2011; Wong & Dioko, 2013). Meeting expectations results in confirmation, while exceeding expectations leads to positive disconfirmation; both contribute to customer satisfaction (Fornell et al., 1996; Poister & Thomas, 2011; Wong & Dioko, 2013). Conversely, when service performance falls short of expectations, negative expectancy disconfirmation occurs, leading to dissatisfaction (Fornell et al., 1996; Poister & Thomas, 2011; Wong & Dioko, 2013). A study by Wong and Dioko (2013) elucidates that expectations not only serve as a benchmark against which customers evaluate their experiences but also exert a nuanced influence on perceived value. When customer expectations align with or surpass perceived performance, they contribute to higher perceived value and, subsequently, enhance satisfaction (Wong & Dioko, 2013). However, unmet expectations can diminish perceived value, leading to lower satisfaction levels (Wong & Dioko, 2013). In summary, customer expectations play a significant role in shaping satisfaction levels.

These customer expectations can stem from various sources. Explicit service promises, which are commitments conveyed through advertising and other communication channels, represent one aspect (Zeithaml et al., 1993). They are complemented by numerous other factors, including implicit service promises, WOM communications, past experiences, and various individual attributes, such as personal needs (Zeithaml et al., 1993). It is incumbent upon companies to ensure that their commitments and promises align with the service standards they uphold, as any misalignment can lead to a discrepancy between customer expectations and the actual service delivered, resulting in a service failure (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Hence, companies often seek control over communication activities when working with SMIs, as they want to ensure that the messages conveyed align with their service standards (Borchers & Enke, 2021). On the other hand, SMIs expect to retain creative freedom for their activities on their channels, valuing autonomy in their promotional endeavours (Borchers & Enke, 2021). However, this desire for control presents a dilemma for companies. Exerting control over the creative process of SMIs poses a delicate issue, as it could potentially jeopardise the authenticity and impact of the content they produce (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Nevertheless, not managing customer expectations can also be dangerous if the expectations do not reflect the service standards (Zeithaml et al., 1993). To strike a balance between control and creative autonomy, companies can supply SMIs with scripted outlines to guide their content creation (Borchers & Enke, 2021); however, SMIs can still assert their expectation of creative freedom for the content they produce on their channels (Borchers & Enke, 2021). This interplay underscores the significant role that SMIs play in shaping customer expectations, as their endorsements and content contribute to the formation of consumer perceptions and anticipations regarding the promoted services (Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022).

It is essential to recognise that SMIs often embellish the services they promote in order to garner interest and increase their follower count (Tsai & Hsin, 2023). SMIs often adopt a strategic approach to portraying their experiences, employing techniques such as selective presentation and exaggeration (Rundin & Colliander, 2021; Tsai & Hsin, 2023). Rather than sharing an accurate portrayal of their experience, SMIs often deliberately present their experiences in a positive light while downplaying or altogether omitting the

negative aspects (Tsai & Hsin, 2023; Wellman et al., 2020). This selective presentation fosters positive perceptions and connections with their audience (Kim & Read, 2022). These SMIs justify their decision to prioritise positive content over negative experiences, asserting that it better serves their audience (Wellman et al., 2020). They argue that content highlighting positive experiences is more valuable to audiences than negative feedback (Wellman et al., 2020); however, this perspective also serves their own interests. Sharing unattractive content may result in a decline in followers, decreasing income potential as the amount of money SMIs can command for brand promotions hinges on the size of their follower base (Syrdal et al., 2023). Furthermore, many SMIs participate in affiliate marketing programs (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Syrdal et al., 2023). Affiliate marketing is a performance-based strategy where affiliates promote products or services for a commission (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Syrdal et al., 2023). Affiliates earn a commission when somebody makes a purchase or clicks on a link provided by the affiliate (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Syrdal et al., 2023). Consequently, SMIs engaged in affiliate marketing are motivated to emphasise the positive attributes of their experiences, as they receive compensation for each lead generated (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Syrdal et al., 2023). Posting an accurate portrayal of their experience, including the negative aspects, might deter people from purchasing (Syrdal et al., 2023). If nobody purchases through the affiliate link, the SMI does not earn money from this post (Syrdal et al., 2023). In essence, cultivating a positive image is paramount for SMIs, not only for sustaining and growing their follower base but also for maximising their revenue streams through brand promotions, as they stand to earn more by emphasising positive content (Syrdal et al., 2023). In addition to the conscious framing of their experiences, SMIs are more prone to having positive experiences than the average consumer (Wellman et al., 2020). SMIs frequently enjoy perks from service providers, including complimentary services, product coupons, and free samples (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Lu et al., 2014; Petrescu et al., 2018). These benefits contribute to their generally more favourable perceptions of the services they receive (Petrescu et al., 2018). These positive encounters manifest in their content, often resulting in a more optimistic depiction of the services they endorse (Petrescu et al., 2018).

Due to the high source credibility associated with SMIs (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023), consumers often perceive the experiences portrayed by SMIs as authentic (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019; Ozuem et al., 2023) and trustworthy (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Jin et al., 2019). SMIs may also downplay their involvement in brand collaborations, potentially obscuring the fact that they are being compensated for positively reviewing a service (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Rundin & Colliander, 2021). Consequently, consumers may form their expectations of a recommended service based on these depictions. However, if the service standards advertised by SMIs exceed the service standards of the service provider, it can pose challenges for companies in meeting these heightened expectations, potentially leading to an increase in service failures (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Thus, companies need to exercise caution when leveraging influencer marketing strategies, as SMIs play a significant role in shaping customer expectations, affecting their ability to fulfil these expectations during service encounters.

2.2.3 Impact on Social Media Influencers

The following section delves into the multifaceted impact of influencer marketing on SMIs. It explores the potential consequences of failing to maintain authenticity and credibility (Cheah et al., 2024; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Tsai & Hsin, 2023) and the factors that can mitigate adverse outcomes. Additionally, it examines how service failures, occurring when the recommended service falls short of the expectations

created by the SMI, further exacerbate these challenges and affect SMIs' relationships with their audience (Ozuem et al., 2023; Scheer & Stern, 1992; Tsai & Hsin, 2023). By synthesising research findings, this section sheds light on key dynamics within the influencer marketing landscape.

2.2.3.1 Erosion of Authenticity and Credibility

The allure of SMI lies in their perceived authenticity in their communication (Audrezet et al., 2020; Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Ozuem et al., 2023), viewing them as authentic figures amidst a landscape dominated by commercial discourse (Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity, defined as the degree to which consumers perceive that SMIs are driven by internal motivations, underscores the importance of genuine engagement in SMI communication (Audrezet et al., 2020). Unlike traditional marketing channels, SMIs offer a platform for what is perceived to be the voice of the ordinary consumer, sharing unbiased and trustable opinions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2023). Consequently, followers expect SMIs to uphold the pillars of authenticity and credibility in their content (Audrezet et al., 2020). These attributes are the foundation of the SMI-follower relationship, fostering trust and loyalty (Cheah et al., 2024). However, the rise of influencer marketing presents challenges to the authenticity and credibility of SMIs. Their association with brands, through collaborations and sponsored content, may raise doubts about their authenticity and credibility among followers (Audrezet et al., 2020; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021). Moreover, brand encroachment into SMIs' content compromises authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020), leading followers to question the sincerity of endorsements, which are perceived as driven more by financial incentives than genuine experiences (Ozuem et al., 2023). In the eyes of consumers, honesty and trustworthiness are paramount in endorsements (Cheah et al., 2024), and any perception of commercial motivation can undermine trust in both the SMI and the associated brand (Ozuem et al., 2023; Tsai & Hsin, 2023). Additionally, the inclination of SMIs to indiscriminately embrace endorsements and prioritise financial gain at the expense of content integrity contributes to growing consumer scepticism (Cheah et al., 2024). This scepticism is exacerbated by over-endorsement, where excessive promotion of products floods the consumer environment with commercial content, further compromising authenticity and credibility (Cheah et al., 2024). Inauthentic SMIs risk losing followers' interest (Tsai & Hsin, 2023) and diminishing their persuasive power (Cheah et al., 2024), as audiences perceive them as selling out and creating content for the sole purpose of increasing their profits (Audrezet et al., 2020). Hence, SMIs face significant challenges as they grapple with the erosion of authenticity and credibility stemming from over-endorsement and insincere recommendations (Cheah et al., 2024; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Tsai & Hsin, 2023).

2.2.3.2 Loss of Followers

In addition to the challenges posed by the erosion of authenticity and credibility, SMIs risk losing followers. Consumers tend to resist brand communication efforts, so if consumers perceive an SMI as no longer authentic or credible but instead driven by commercial motives, they may actively avoid their content and disassociate from the SMI (Ozuem et al., 2023). Moreover, followers engage with SMIs based on the perceived relevance of the information they provide (Syrdal et al., 2023). If followers discern that an SMI's content is driven primarily by commercial motives and lacks credibility, they may perceive it as less relevant or appealing (Syrdal et al., 2023). Consequently, when SMIs share content deemed irrelevant or unappealing by their followers, those followers are more inclined to discontinue their engagement and unfollow the SMI (Syrdal et al., 2023). Pradhan et al. (2023) introduce the term 'influencer avoidance' to better understand this phenomenon. Influencer avoidance refers to a phenomenon where followers

deliberately distance themselves from SMIs by avoiding or unfollowing their social media pages (Pradhan et al., 2023). This study, which focused on Generation Z individuals, revealed that despite being aware of SMIs receiving compensation for brand endorsements, people still expect SMIs to share information responsibly and provide genuine feedback (Pradhan et al., 2023). When followers perceive endorsements as insincere and SMIs as merely promoting brands without authenticity, they feel deceived and annoyed that their trust has been violated (Pradhan et al., 2023). Consequently, individuals may disengage from SMIs in response to insincere endorsements or misrepresentations (Pradhan et al., 2023). Moreover, a higher perception of brand control over the SMI increases the likelihood of followers engaging in influencer avoidance (Pradhan et al., 2023). Additionally, the phenomenon of influencer avoidance not only impacts the present engagement of SMIs but also has implications for their future revenue streams (Syrdal et al., 2023). A shrinking follower base can significantly diminish the SMI's capacity to command higher fees for brand endorsements, as payment negotiation is largely contingent upon the size of their audience (Syrdal et al., 2023).

2.2.3.3 Determinants of Impact

2.2.3.3.1 Performance Outcomes

Although the adverse consequences discussed previously can affect SMIs, it is essential to recognise that some factors can mitigate these impacts and potentially reduce their severity for SMIs. One of these factors is performance outcomes, which is particularly pertinent to the discussion on service failures. Performance outcomes refer to the external results stemming from the actions the follower takes in response to the SMI's persuasion (Scheer & Stern, 1992). The impact of these outcomes is particularly pronounced when consumers perceive that the actual experience does not align with the SMI's portrayal (Tsai & Hsin, 2023). This misalignment makes the consumer feel deceived and disappointed, underscoring the pivotal role of performance outcomes in shaping consumer attitudes (Tsai & Hsin, 2023). Notably, the performance factor heavily influences the consumer's decision to sustain engagement within the online community (Ozuem et al., 2023). The significance of performance outcomes in determining the impact of influencer marketing is further underscored by research on influencer dynamics in commercial exchanges. This study elucidates how the attitudes of the target audience towards influencers are shaped by the outcomes resulting from compliance (Scheer & Stern, 1992). Particularly relevant to influencer marketing, the study suggests that when performance outcomes become evident, they have the potential to alter attitudes shaped by influencer interactions (Scheer & Stern, 1992). Favourable outcomes can mitigate negative attitudes initially instigated by the influence, while unfavourable outcomes may undermine the positive attitudes initially fostered by influencers (Scheer & Stern, 1992). These findings emphasise the significant mitigating effect of performance outcomes on satisfaction with and trust in the influencer (Scheer & Stern, 1992). In essence, when a service failure ensues after an SMI endorses said service, it can profoundly influence followers' attitudes towards the SMI, underscoring the pivotal role of performance outcomes in shaping consumer perceptions (Ozuem et al., 2023; Scheer & Stern, 1992; Tsai & Hsin, 2023).

2.2.3.3.2 Relationship Strength

Furthermore, in addition to the influence of performance outcomes, the relationship between the SMI and their followers also plays a significant role in determining the impact of influencer marketing. Research conducted by Pradhan et al. (2023) indicates that individuals tend to be more critical of SMIs with whom

they perceive to have weaker connections. Consequently, these individuals are more inclined to punish such SMIs by avoiding their content (Pradhan et al., 2023). Conversely, followers exhibit greater sympathy towards SMIs with whom they feel a strong relationship, resulting in a higher likelihood of forgiveness and reduced tendency to disengage from their content (Pradhan et al., 2023). Thus, the close bond between the SMI and their followers offers a protective shield, helping to safeguard them from adverse effects of influencer marketing, such as loss of followers (Pradhan et al., 2023). This aligns with findings from research on service failure, highlighting the significant role of customer relationships in shaping customer responses to service failures (Hess et al., 2003; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Customer relationships have been shown to act as a protective buffer for service providers when service failures occur, reducing customer dissatisfaction (Hess et al., 2003).

However, the concept of 'relational transgression,' as discussed by Ward and Ostrom (2006), suggests that customers may feel betrayed when the other party, whether a service provider or an SMI, violates their relationship. When the other party disrupts their relationship, it can lead to feelings of rejection because the customer realises that the other party does not hold the relationship in high regard (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). However, it is crucial to recognise that for relational transgression to occur, a relationship must first be established. Thus, when customers perceive a strong relationship with the SMI or the service provider, they can experience higher levels of betrayal than when they have a weak or no relationship (Pradhan et al., 2023). Therefore, the customer relationship can amplify adverse customer reactions in the aftermath of service failures (Hess et al., 2003).

In conclusion, the relationship dynamics between SMIs and their followers significantly influence how customers perceive service failures and their subsequent reactions. This nuanced understanding acknowledges that individual customers may react differently to service failures based on their familiarity and relationship with the SMI (Pradhan et al., 2023). Importantly, these relationships can exert either positive or negative influences on customer responses, as they can either mitigate the impact of service failures through a sense of trust and loyalty or exacerbate dissatisfaction if consumers perceive that their relationship has been betrayed (Hess et al., 2003; Pradhan et al., 2023; Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

2.2.3.3.3 Trustworthiness

The final aspect to consider in addressing the impact of influencer marketing is the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI. In the context of SMIs, trustworthiness pertains to the perceived reliability, honesty, and credibility of an SMI when expressing their opinions and recommending products and services (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023). This quality instils confidence in followers regarding the integrity of the SMI's content and the genuineness of their endorsements (Lim et al., 2017). Trust is a relational quality cultivated over time through repeated actions and consistent behaviour, similar to the trust built in personal relationships (Ao et al., 2023). It holds significant importance as it directly influences how consumers interpret and respond to the messages conveyed by SMIs (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023). When consumers trust an SMI, they anticipate positive outcomes from their relationship with the SMI, leading to increased engagement with their content and a greater likelihood of following their recommendations (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023; Ao et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2017). Nevertheless, trustworthiness is not merely an added benefit but an inherent expectation of followers about SMIs (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Pradhan et al., 2023). SMIs are regarded as trustworthy sources of information that followers turn to for unbiased and genuine opinions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Pradhan et al., 2023). Therefore, in the context of SMIs, trustworthiness is fundamental for establishing and maintaining a loyal follower base.

However, the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs can be significantly undermined when they post commercial content (Ozuem et al., 2023). Studies have shown that consumers' trust in SMIs significantly decreases when they perceive them as deliberately advertising brands without transparency about their commercial relationships (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023). When consumers recognise a brand's presence, they may question the SMI's impartiality, suspecting that their partnership with the brand is motivated by commercial interests (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2023). As a result, consumers may become more wary, doubting whether the SMI's endorsements genuinely reflect their own opinions or if they are merely acting under the direction of the brand (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Pradhan et al., 2023). Thus, the more commercial the content, the lower the trust their followers place in the SMI (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Thus, when followers perceive the SMI as trustworthy, they are more likely to believe that the SMI's statements and endorsements are sincere and based on genuine opinions (Lim et al., 2017). However, when consumers' trust in the SMI is low, they perceive the SMI as deliberately advertising and will see their message as commercial, thus not as genuine opinions (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023).

Moreover, when SMIs provide misleading information favouring a brand, consumers may perceive a breach of trust and feel that the SMI has failed to meet their expectations of being reliable (Ozuem et al., 2023). This breach of trust can trigger negative feelings towards the SMI, leading consumers to hold them accountable for any resultant dissatisfaction (Pradhan et al., 2023). As a result, followers who lose trust in the SMI are more likely to hold them responsible for any resulting consequences (Ozuem et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023).

In conclusion, participation in influencer marketing strategies inherently exposes SMIs to risks concerning their perceived authenticity and credibility (Cheah et al., 2024; Gerrath & Usrey, 2021; Ozuem et al., 2023). The erosion of authenticity and credibility among SMIs may lead to a loss of followers, as audiences who perceive the SMI as no longer authentic may choose to disengage from their content, thereby diminishing the reach and influence of the SMI (Ozuem et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023; Syrdal et al., 2023). However, these adverse outcomes can be mitigated through several mechanisms. Firstly, performance outcomes stemming from actions taken by followers in response to SMI persuasion offer a nuanced perspective (Ozuem et al., 2023; Scheer & Stern, 1992; Tsai & Hsin, 2023). Positive outcomes have the potential to mitigate negative attitudes instigated by brand endorsement, while service failures can undermine the positive attitudes fostered by SMIs with their followers (Scheer & Stern, 1992). Secondly, the strength of the relationship between SMIs and their followers significantly shapes audience perceptions and responses (Hess et al., 2003; Pradhan et al., 2023). Lastly, the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs significantly shapes followers' interpretations of their messages and the genuineness they attribute to their endorsements. These factors collectively underscore the complex dynamics in influencer marketing, highlighting possibilities and challenges for SMIs to navigate and uphold their integrity amidst commercial pressures.

2.2.4 Attribution of Failure

Building upon the attribution theory previously discussed, which examines how individuals attribute blame in the context of service failures (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), this section aims to explore the attribution of blame in the context of service failures involving SMIs. Specifically, we will focus on the potential role of SMIs as a locus of causality for service failures. In essence, the locus of causality refers to the perceived source of service failures; thus, who the customer perceives

is responsible for the service failure (Fu et al., 2015; Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). According to attribution theory, individuals tend to attribute the cause of an event to factors within the service organisation, factors within themselves, or factors within the environment (Fu et al., 2015; Sands et al., 2020; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). However, this study will also examine the SMI as a possible locus of causality. Specifically, it explores how consumers may assign blame to SMIs when a service they recommend fails to meet expectations.

Previous research has examined the attribution of failure in the hospitality industry related to scenarios with fake reviews (Akhtar et al., 2019). Particularly relevant to this thesis, the study considered the impact of fake expert reviews designed to deceive readers into purchasing services from specific firms (Akhtar et al., 2019). The study found that unfair practices in online reviews contribute significantly to consumer deception and, ultimately, to dissatisfaction (Akhtar et al., 2019). Consequently, consumers often attribute the service failure to the fake reviewers, shifting the locus of causality from the service providers to those responsible for the misleading information (Akhtar et al., 2019). Building upon these findings, this thesis explores the attribution of failure in the context of influencer marketing. Just like responsibility can be assigned to the fake reviewer (Akhtar et al., 2019), customers can also blame the SMI who recommended the service (Ozuem et al., 2023). When customers perceive the SMI's role in the failure as minimal, they are less inclined to attribute negative assessments of the service failure to them (Ozuem et al., 2023). Conversely, heightened perceptions of the SMI's responsibility are associated with increased assignment of negative evaluations to the SMI, thereby diminishing the blame directed towards the service provider.

The extent to which SMIs are held accountable for a service failure can vary based on several factors. The strength of the relationship between the SMI and their followers (Pradhan et al., 2023) and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI (Ozuem et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023) have emerged as mitigating factors for the impact of influencer marketing on the SMI. However, no research has looked at these factors in the context of blame attribution in instances where consumers seek services based on SMI recommendations.

2.3 Theory

While extensive research has delved into the dynamics of attributing blame in traditional service failure scenarios, a notable gap persists in the literature regarding the attribution of failure in cases involving SMI recommendations. Existing research has extensively explored attribution theory and its applications within conventional service contexts, meticulously examining how individuals assign responsibility amidst service failures (e.g., Iglesias, 2009; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Swanson & Hsu, 2010; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014; Walton & Hume, 2012). However, very little attention has been devoted to understanding the unique dynamics at play when service failures intersect with influencer marketing. SMIs are a relatively novel topic in marketing research, yet despite their increasing prominence in marketing research, the existing literature predominantly focuses on their effectiveness in influencing consumer behaviour (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2023; Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023; Ao et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019; Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022). Nevertheless, scholars have not yet examined how consumers attribute blame in instances of service failures related to SMI recommendations. This lack of academic research underscores a significant gap in the literature, compelling the need for a comprehensive investigation. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by examining the attribution of blame in service failure scenarios related to SMI recommendations, thereby contributing novel insights to attribution theory and the emerging field of influencer marketing research.

2.3.1 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to examine how consumers attribute blame in cases of service failure related to SMI recommendations. The research focuses on instances of service failures following SMI recommendations. In these scenarios, consumers encounter content created by SMIs endorsing a service provider. Motivated by the SMI's portrayal of the service, consumers patronise the recommended service provider. However, upon experiencing the service firsthand, consumers find it fails to meet their expectations. This disparity between expectation and reality could manifest in various forms, such as the service quality being lower than depicted or the overall experience falling short of the SMI's portrayal. For the purpose of this thesis, the research does not focus on a specific type of service or a particular service industry. Instead, the research adopts a broader perspective in which all types of services spanning various industries will be considered.

The research explores the attribution of blame in such instances and its impact on consumer satisfaction. It examines whether consumers assign responsibility to the SMI for misrepresenting the service or to the service provider for failing to deliver as expected. With the pervasive influence of SMIs on consumer behaviour, understanding how consumers assign responsibility in instances of service failures becomes paramount. The research will examine two key facets of the SMI that influence whether blame is placed on the SMI or the service provider. To achieve this aim, the research is guided by three primary objectives:

- To explore how the relationship strength between the SMI and their followers affects the attribution of blame for a service failure.
- To explore how the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI affects the attribution of blame for a service failure.
- To explore how the blame attribution for a service failure affects the overall consumer satisfaction with the service provider.

2.3.2 Hypotheses

2.3.2.1 Relationship Strength

As highlighted in research on service failures, the strength of customer relationships plays a significant role in shaping customer responses to service failures (Hess et al., 2003; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Customer relationships act as a protective buffer for service providers, reducing customer dissatisfaction (Hess et al., 2003). Importantly, this principle extends beyond traditional customer relationships to the realm of SMIs, where followers demonstrate increased sympathy towards SMIs with whom they share strong relationships (Pradhan et al., 2023). Consequently, customers may react differently to service failures based on their familiarity with the SMI (Ozuem et al., 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023). Favourable attitudes towards the SMI reduce the chances of customers holding the SMI accountable for such failures (Ozuem et al., 2023).

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> **H1a**: Relationship strength between the customer and the SMI is negatively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI.
>
> **H1b**: Relationship strength between the customer and the SMI is positively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider.

These hypotheses aim to explore the complex interplay between customer relationships and blame attribution in the context of service failures related to SMI recommendations.

2.3.2.2 Perceived Trustworthiness

The perceived trustworthiness of SMIs significantly influences how consumers interpret and respond to their messages (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023). When followers view an SMI as highly trustworthy, they place confidence in the integrity and genuineness of their content and endorsements (Lim et al., 2017). Consequently, when followers perceive the SMI as trustworthy, they are more likely to believe that the SMI's statements and endorsements reflect genuine opinions (Lim et al., 2017). This leads them to believe that the SMI's representation of the service is an accurate reflection of their experience. However, when followers detect the presence of a brand in an SMI's content, they may question the SMI's impartiality and suspect that commercial interests drive their partnership with the brand (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2023). Hence, when consumers' trust in the SMI is low, they perceive the SMI as deliberately advertising and will see their message as commercial, thus not as genuine opinions (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023). Consequently, if the SMI's representation of a service experience differs significantly from what followers actually experience, they may feel misled by the SMI's portrayal. Additionally, if SMIs provide misleading information favouring a brand, consumers may perceive a breach of trust and feel that the SMI has failed to meet their expectations of being reliable (Ozuem et al., 2023). This breach of trust can trigger negative feelings towards the SMI, leading consumers to attribute blame to them (Pradhan et al., 2023).

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> **H2a**: Perceived trustworthiness of the SMI is negatively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI.
>
> **H2b**: Perceived trustworthiness of the SMI is positively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider.

These hypotheses aim to explore the intricate relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs and blame attribution in the context of service failures related to SMI recommendations.

2.3.2.3 Overall Satisfaction

The attribution of blame following a service failure is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). In this research, the locus of causality — who is seen as responsible from the customer's point of view (Isabella et al., 2022) — is a central focus. This concept plays a crucial role in determining customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction post-service encounter (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). Attribution of blame towards an external source, such as the service provider, generally leads to feelings of distributive injustice (Iglesias, 2009; Isabella et al., 2022) and heightened dissatisfaction (Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), while internal attributions often result in lower dissatisfaction (Janjua, 2017; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). In the context of service failures following SMI recommendations, attributing blame to either the SMI or the service provider can significantly influence overall customer satisfaction. Previous research on the attribution of failure has demonstrated that high blame attribution towards the service provider can decrease the overall satisfaction of the service provider (Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020), as customers perceive the service

provider as directly accountable for the failure (Isabella et al., 2022). Conversely, high blame attribution towards the SMI is expected to increase satisfaction with the service provider, as customers may absolve the service provider of responsibility for the failure.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> **H3a**: The degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI is positively associated with overall satisfaction with the service provider.
>
> **H3b**: The degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider is negatively associated with overall satisfaction with the service provider.

These hypotheses aim to explore the relationship between blame attribution following a service failure and the level of overall satisfaction that the customer feels towards the service provider in the context of service failures related to SMI recommendations.

2.3.3 Control Variables

2.3.3.1 Service Failure Severity

Service failure severity is incorporated as a control variable in this study due to its potential to influence customer responses to service failures (Hess, 2008). The severity of a service failure — whether it involves minor inconveniences or major disruptions — can shape how consumers perceive responsibility and attribute blame. Research suggests that more severe service failures often elicit stronger negative emotional reactions and a greater tendency to attribute blame externally, typically towards the service provider (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Swanson & Hsu, 2010). Therefore, accounting for the severity of the service failure is essential to isolate the effects of the relationship strength and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI on blame attribution. Moreover, studies indicate that more severe service failures lead to higher customer dissatisfaction than milder incidents (Hess, 2008). Given the established literature demonstrating a direct link between failure severity and customer satisfaction, this study includes this variable in the conceptual model to address its impact on the dependent variable.

2.3.3.2 Service Quality

Service quality is included as a control variable in this study due to its significant impact on customer perceptions and evaluations of services. The quality of service a business provides can profoundly influence how customers assess their overall experience and satisfaction levels (Zeithaml et al., 1993). High service quality generally leads to greater customer satisfaction, whereas poor service quality is often associated with increased dissatisfaction (Falk et al., 2010; Shemwell et al., 1998). Given the established literature indicating a direct relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, this study incorporates this variable into the model to account for its recognised influence on the dependent variable. Including service quality in the regression analysis helps to account for its effects, allowing for a clearer understanding of the impact of the primary variables of interest, namely the relationship strength between the customer and the SMI and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI.

2.3.4 Conceptual Model

The hypotheses form the basis for the development of the conceptual model. This conceptual model elucidates the intricate relationship between customer relationships, the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs, and blame attribution in service failure scenarios related to SMI recommendations. Control variables were included in the conceptual model to account for their known impact on the dependent variables. This ensures that observed relationships are not confounded by service failure severity and service quality.

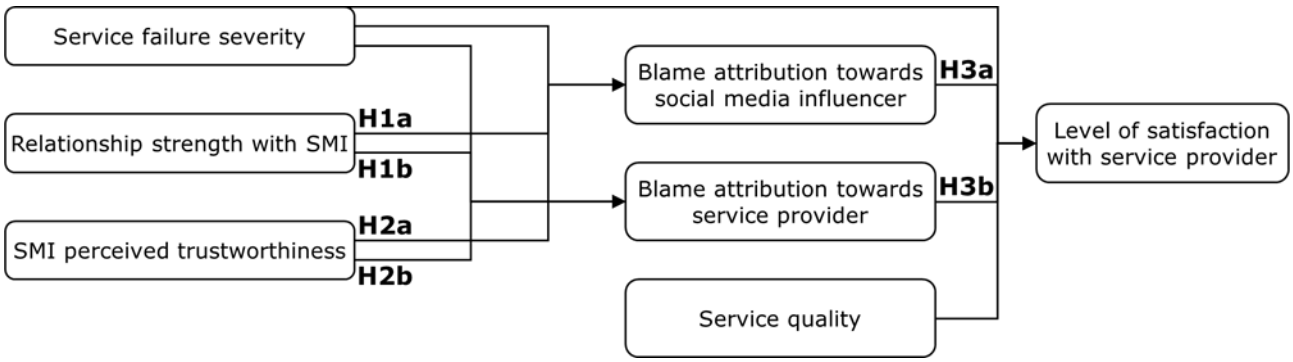

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Given the focus on understanding the relationship between key facets of SMIs and blame attribution following service failures, a quantitative approach was chosen for this study. The quantitative approach was selected because of its capability to test causal relationships between variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). Using a cross-sectional design, data is gathered at a single point in time (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017), which is suitable for capturing the current state of consumer perceptions and attitudes towards SMIs and service providers. This design choice aligns with prevailing research methodologies in service failure and failure attribution research studies. Most studies on service failure attribution use either experimental or cross-sectional data, and longitudinal studies on service failure attributions remain sparse in the literature (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014). Moreover, cross-sectional designs are prevalent in studies examining influencer marketing's impact on consumer behaviour (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021), reinforcing the appropriateness of this approach.

The key variables in this study are:

Relationship Strength: This variable measures the strength of the parasocial relationship between the SMI and their followers. It assesses how closely consumers feel connected to the SMI and the extent of their engagement with the SMI's content (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

Trustworthiness: This variable measures the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI. It evaluates consumers' beliefs about the SMI's honesty and the extent to which they trust the SMI's recommendations (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Blame Attribution SMI: This variable captures how much blame a consumer places on the SMI for the service failure (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). It examines the extent to which the SMI is held responsible, for example, for misrepresenting the service.

Blame Attribution Service Provider: This variable measures how much blame a consumer places on the service provider for the service failure (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). It evaluates the extent to which the service provider is held responsible, for example, for failing to meet expectations.

Satisfaction: This variable measures the level of overall satisfaction that the consumer feels towards the service provider. It is an assessment of the service as a whole made by the consumer, considering the entirety of their service experience (Martins Gonçalves & Sampaio, 2012).

The control variables in this study are:

Service Failure Severity: This variable measures the perceived intensity of the service failure from the consumer's perspective (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2012). It captures how serious the consumer perceives the service failure to be.

Service Quality: This variable captures the customer's overall evaluation of the service based on their experience during the service encounter (Tran & Le, 2020). It reflects the quality of the service as perceived by the customer.

These variables have been selected to explore specific relationships and dynamics within the context of service failures related to SMI recommendations. Multiple regression analyses will be conducted to explore various causal relationships between these variables. Additionally, control variables such as service failure severity and service quality are included in the analysis to mitigate the influence of other factors on the outcomes.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Sample

This thesis explores consumer behaviour following a service failure subsequent to an SMI's recommendation. Therefore, participation in the survey requires prior experience of such an event. The research takes a broad approach by encompassing various types of services, service industries, and service failures without focusing on any specific service type, industry, or type of service failure. Demographically, the study imposes no restrictions based on age, gender, or location. However, given that buying decisions influenced by SMIs predominantly involve Generation Z and Millennial consumers (Chevalier, 2023), the majority of participants are expected to be under 45 years old. Ensuring that the sample reflects this demographic is crucial for maintaining the relevance and applicability of the study's findings (Walliman, 2021).

3.2.2 Research Instrument Design

A questionnaire was selected as the quantitative research instrument for this study. Questionnaires are a popular method for collecting quantitative data due to their ability to minimise researcher bias (Walliman, 2021) and their efficiency in gathering data from a large sample (Flick, 2015). The questionnaire for this research study was created using Qualtrics. The decision to use Qualtrics was primarily based on its availability through the university's research infrastructure. Furthermore, Qualtrics facilitates straightforward survey design and data collection. It offers features such as a wide variety of question types to capture nuanced responses, forced response mechanisms to eliminate missing data, branching logic for adaptive survey paths based on participant responses, and direct export capabilities to SPSS for efficient data analysis. These features make Qualtrics suitable for conducting rigorous quantitative research in an online survey format, aligning well with the study's methodological requirements.

The survey begins with a participant consent process, informing individuals about the study's purpose and obtaining their agreement to participate. Only consenting participants can proceed. Participants are then screened to ensure they meet the selection criteria: having experienced a service failure after following an SMI's recommendation. Participants meeting these criteria proceed to the main survey, while those who do not are excluded from further participation.

To contextualise participants' responses, an initial open-ended question asks them to describe their experience with the service failure. This serves as a priming question to align subsequent responses with their specific service failure event. Although not part of the data analysis, this step ensures participants' alignment with the study's focus and will help to eliminate those who did not meet the required criteria or were not attentive while completing the survey.

The main section of the questionnaire focuses on measuring the seven variables outlined in the conceptual model, with participants using a 1-7 point Likert scale for each item. For this study, existing scales that have been rigorously validated in prior research were selected, ensuring the reliability and validity of the scales in measuring the intended variables effectively within the study context. Detailed descriptions of each variable's measurement, including the number of items and their sources, can be found in table 1. By leveraging established scales, this research benefits from instruments that have demonstrated robustness in assessing constructs such as relationship strength, trustworthiness, blame attribution, overall satisfaction, service quality, and service failure severity in the relevant literature. The scales included:

- Service Failure Severity: Adapted from Tsarenko and Tojib (2012), using a 4-item scale.
- Relationship Strength: Adapted from Leite and Baptista (2022), using a 9-item scale.
- Trustworthiness: Adapted from Lee and Eastin (2021), using a 4-item scale.
- Blame Attribution SMI: Adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), using a 3-item scale.
- Blame Attribution Service Provider: Adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), using a 3-item scale.
- Service Quality: Adapted from Tran and Le (2020), using a 7-item scale.
- Satisfaction: Adapted from Martins Gonçalves and Sampaio (2012), using a single-item scale.

Table 1: Measurement Scales

Variable	Question	Likert scale	Adapted from
Service Failure Severity	How severe do you think this situation was?	Not severe at all (1) Extremely severe (7)	Tsarenko & Tojib (2012)
	What level of inconvenience has this situation caused you?	Not inconvenient at all (1) Extremely inconvenient (7)	
	What level of stress has this situation caused you?	Not stressful at all (1) Extremely stressful (7)	
	How unfair do you think this situation was?	Not unfair at all (1) Extremely unfair (7)	
Relationship Strength	When this influencer shows me how they feel about something, it helps me make up my own mind about the issue.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	Leite & Baptista (2022)
	This influencer makes me feel comfortable, as I am with friends.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	I see this influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	I look forward to viewing or hearing about this influencer.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	If this influencer appeared on a television program, I would watch that program.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	I would like to meet this influencer in person.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	

	I think this influencer is like an old friend.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	I follow what this influencer is saying and doing.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	When I'm viewing this influencer on Instagram/TikTok/YouTube/…, I feel as if I am part of their group.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
Trustworthiness	Although this influencer posts ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	Lee & Eastin (2021)
	This influencer gives very honest reviews on brands.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	The products and brands this influencer endorses vibe well with their personality.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	This influencer promotes products they would actually use.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
Blame Attribution SMI	The problem that I encountered was all the influencer's fault.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	Maxham & Netemeyer (2002)
	To what extent was the influencer responsible for the problem that you experienced?	Not at all responsible (1) Totally responsible (7)	
	To what extent do you blame the influencer for this problem?	Not at all (1) Completely (7)	
Blame Attribution Service Provider	The problem that I encountered was all the service provider's (the company's) fault.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	Maxham & Netemeyer (2002)
	To what extent was the service provider (the company) responsible for the problem that you experienced?	Not at all responsible (1) Totally responsible (7)	
	To what extent do you blame the service provider (the company) for this problem?	Not at all (1) Completely (7)	
Service quality	The employee(s) in the service organisation understood my needs.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	Tran & Le (2020)
	The employee(s) carried out the service exactly as I expected it.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	The employee(s) provided prompt and quick service.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	The employee(s) made me feel comfortable in dealing with them.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	

	The employee(s) provided in-depth information of the service.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	The employee(s) were willing to help me.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
	Generally, the physical facilities and employee(s) are neat and clean.	Strongly disagree (1) Strongly agree (7)	
Satisfaction	Overall, how satisfied are you with the service provider?	Completely dissatisfied (1) Completely satisfied (7)	Martins Gonçalves & Sampaio (2012)

Demographic information was collected at the end of the survey to provide additional context about the sample. For the complete questionnaire used in this study, please refer to Appendix B. The questionnaire was administered exclusively in English, as detailed in Appendix B; no versions in other languages were available.

3.2.3 Research Instrument Distribution

The data was collected in a non-contrived setting, allowing participants to respond in their natural environment (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). This approach enhances the external validity of the study by minimising researcher interference (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017) and ensuring that respondents are more likely to react and behave naturally without being influenced by the presence of the researcher (Walliman, 2021). However, there are limitations to this approach. The non-contrived setting makes it harder to manipulate extraneous factors that are not being tested (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017), such as service failure severity and service quality. Because these variables cannot be controlled in the non-contrived study setting, they are included in the analysis to account for their potential effects on the dependent variables.

Given the nature of the online survey, it was easily distributed through various channels. Due to time and budget constraints, a non-probability convenience sampling method was adopted. This method involves selecting a sample that is readily accessible and convenient, though it may not be representative of the broader population (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). The choice of convenience sampling was further informed by the demographic characteristics of the target population — individuals who have experienced a service failure following an SMI's recommendation. Importantly, this demographic aligns closely with the researcher's age group and network. This alignment increases the likelihood that the convenience sampling strategy would effectively reach an audience that shares relevant characteristics with the broader population of interest. While acknowledging its limitations in generalisability, this approach was deemed suitable to capture insights from individuals who have encountered such service failures, thereby providing valuable quantitative data for the study.

The questionnaire was initially sent to the student body at the University of Hasselt. Leveraging the university's internal mailing lists ensured a broad reach within this academic community. Additionally, the survey was distributed to friends and family to increase reach. The survey was also posted on Reddit and SurveyCircle, platforms where users participate in survey exchanges, to reach a wider audience. These platforms primarily consist of other researchers, such as bachelor, master, or PhD students conducting their own research. Participants on these platforms complete each other's surveys, increasing the response rate through mutual collaboration.

The data collection period ran from the 23rd of May 2024 until the 11th of July 2024. During this period, participants were continually encouraged to complete the survey through follow-up reminders and additional posts on social media platforms.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in the distribution process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity of the responses were assured, and all data was securely stored and handled with care to protect participants' privacy.

The primary data collected from the survey was sent to the SPSS software (version 29.0.2.0) for analysis. The analysis will be explained in more detail in the following section.

3.3 Data Analysis Plan

In order to test the hypotheses, various regression analyses will be performed in this research. Multiple regression analysis is a method to evaluate the degree and nature of a relationship between multiple variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). However, before conducting the regression analysis, certain conditions about the data should first be checked.

The first condition to consider is the sample size. The required sample size depends on the number of independent variables in the regression model. Since more than one regression analysis will be performed, with varying numbers of independent variables, the sample size for this research will be calculated based on the total number of independent variables across all analyses (six: relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, blame attribution towards SMI, blame attribution towards service provider, service failure severity, and service quality). According to Stevens (1996, cited in Pallant, 2020), there should be at least 15 observations per predictor. This study requires a minimum sample size of 90 observations (6 predictors * 15 observations per predictor) for a reliable regression analysis. However, Tabachnick and Fidell (2013, cited in Pallant, 2020) recommend using the formula $N > 50+8m$ (where m is the number of independent variables). Using this formula with six independent variables, the required sample size would be 98 observations ($50 + 8 * 6$). The formula that yields the largest sample size will be applied to ensure robustness, thus necessitating a minimum of 98 observations for this research.

The second condition involves addressing outliers, which are observations that significantly deviate from other data points (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). Outliers do not always indicate an error in the data; they can represent unusual cases referred to as 'influential cases' (Pallant, 2020). The influential cases can unduly influence the regression results as the regression analysis is susceptible to extreme scores (Pallant, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to manage outliers appropriately. Outlying scores can either be deleted or adjusted by assigning a value that is high but not excessively different from the other scores (Pallant, 2020). To ensure that the regression analysis is not adversely affected by outliers, they will be detected during the data preparation stage, after which appropriate actions will be taken to address them.

The third condition for regression analysis pertains to various aspects of the distribution of the data (Pallant, 2020). Firstly, the data should approximate a normal distribution (Pallant, 2020). This can be verified through descriptive statistics and the curves on the histograms of each variable. When there are no extreme values and the curve appears normal, it can be established that the data is approximately normally distributed (Pallant, 2020). Secondly, the relationship between variables should be linear (Pallant, 2020). This can be examined using scatterplots. Scatterplots help explore relationships between variables as they

can indicate whether the variables exhibit a linear (straight-line) relationship or a curvilinear pattern (Pallant, 2020). Lastly, the assumption of homoscedasticity will be evaluated. Homoscedasticity refers to the assumption that the variance of the residuals is constant across all levels of the independent variables (Pallant, 2020). This assumption can be checked by examining the residual plots, where the residuals are plotted against the predicted values or the independent variables. In these plots, a constant spread of residuals indicates homoscedasticity, while a pattern or changing spread indicates heteroscedasticity. All three of these requirements will be checked during the data preparation stage of the study.

The fourth condition that must be met before conducting a regression analysis is the absence of multicollinearity. Multicollinearity occurs when two or more independent variables are highly correlated (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017). This can decrease the precision of the regression coefficients and potentially invalidate the regression model (Nunan et al., 2020). To identify multicollinearity, a correlation matrix will be constructed using SPSS. Multicollinearity is typically indicated when independent variables are strongly correlated, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.7 or higher (Pallant, 2020; Sekaran & Bougie, 2017).

If all these conditions are satisfactorily met, the regression analyses can proceed confidently, ensuring the validity and reliability of the results. The general regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 * X_1 + \beta_2 * X_2 + \cdots + \beta_n * X_n + \varepsilon$$

Y = dependent variable

α = intercept

β_i = coefficient parameters

X_i = independent variable

n = number of variables

ε = error term

Based on the conceptual model, this study involves three dependent variables: blame attribution towards the SMI, blame attribution towards the service provider, and overall satisfaction with the service provider. Consequently, three regression analyses will be performed.

The first regression analysis will test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers, along with the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the SMI. Additionally, service failure severity is included in this model to account for its known impact on blame attribution. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the SMI is the dependent variable, while relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, and service failure severity are the independent variables.

First equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ SMI = \alpha + \beta_1 * (relationship\ strength) + \beta_2 * (trustworthiness) + \beta_3 * (service\ failure\ severity) + \varepsilon$$

The second regression analysis will test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers, along with the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the service provider. Additionally, service failure severity is included in this model to account for its known impact on blame attribution. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the service provider is the dependent variable, while relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, and service failure severity are the independent variables.

Second equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ service\ provider = \alpha + \beta_1 * (relationship\ strength) + \beta_2 * (trustworthiness) + \beta_3 * (service\ failure\ severity) + \varepsilon$$

The third regression analysis will test whether blame attribution has a causal effect on the overall satisfaction with the service provider. Additionally, service failure severity and service quality are included in this model to account for its known impact on overall satisfaction. In this regression model, overall satisfaction is the dependent variable, while blame attribution towards the SMI, blame attribution towards the service provider, service failure severity, and service quality are the independent variables.

Third equation:

$$Overall\ satisfaction = \alpha + \beta_1 * (blame\ attribution\ SMI) + \beta_2 * (blame\ attribution\ service\ provider) + \beta_3 * (service\ failure\ severity) + \beta_4 * (service\ quality) + \varepsilon$$

These regression models will be tested during the data analysis phase to evaluate the proposed hypotheses and understand the relationships between the variables in this study.

3.4 Data Preparation

3.4.1 Sample

A total of 572 participants started the survey. However, not all responses could be used for data analysis for various reasons. The data cleaning process involved several steps to ensure the integrity and quality of the data:

- Consent: Participants were asked to consent to have their data used in the research at the beginning of the survey. Nine participants did not give permission and were thus excluded from the analysis. This reduced the number of usable responses to 563.
- Selection criteria: Participants were then asked if they had experienced a service failure after following an SMI's recommendation. Participants who did not meet these selection criteria were also excluded. This step reduced the number of usable responses to 347.
- Completion rate: Only fully completed surveys are considered for analysis to ensure that all necessary data points are available for a comprehensive and accurate analysis. This further reduced the number of usable responses to 269.
- Nonsense data: This involved examining the descriptions of the service failure experiences that participants were asked to write down in the questionnaire, analysing the response duration to identify unusually fast completions indicative of a lack of thoughtful engagement, and looking for patterns in the responses, such as consistently choosing the same answer for all questions. This step further reduced the number of usable responses to 215.
- Outliers: SPSS was used to detect multivariate outliers in the data, employing the Mahalanobis distance test and scatterplots. This analysis was conducted after completing the factor analyses. For the first regression model (dependent variable: blame attribution towards the SMI), the Mahalanobis distance test showed no data record exceeded the critical value of 16.27 for three independent variables (Pallant, 2020). Standardised residuals were also examined, with values greater than 3.3 or less than -3.3 considered indicative of outliers (Pallant, 2020). This analysis further corroborated

that there were no outliers for this regression model. The same methodology was applied to the regression models for blame attribution towards the service provider and overall satisfaction with the service provider (critical value of 18.47 because of four independent variables). Both analyses confirmed the absence of outliers. As a result, the number of usable responses remains 215. Please refer to Appendix C for the SPSS outputs for the outlier detection tests.

After thorough data cleaning, the final sample comprises 215 usable responses, exceeding the minimum requirement of 98 respondents for regression analysis. The absence of outliers was also confirmed, fulfilling another prerequisite for regression analysis. To provide context for the analysis, a brief overview of the demographic characteristics, specifically the gender and age distribution of the participants, is presented below. For the complete table of demographic frequencies, please refer to Appendix D.

There was a high percentage of female respondents to the survey, at 67.4%. This could be partially attributed to the slightly higher number of female social media users (Ceci, 2024; Dixon, 2024). However, it is more likely a result of convenience sampling, as the researcher is female, and her network likely consists of more female than male potential respondents. While this imbalance does not directly impact the variables analysed, as demographics are not used in the analysis, it could potentially affect the generalisability of the study's findings to the broader population. Therefore, the gender distribution is noted as a limitation of the study.

The sample aligns closely with expectations regarding age distribution. The largest age category among respondents is 18 to 25 years old, comprising 53.5% of the sample. The second largest category is 26 to 35 years old, at 33.0%. In total, 94.4% of respondents were below 45 years old, which aligns with demographic trends indicating that buying decisions influenced by SMIs predominantly involve Generation Z and Millennial consumers (Chevalier, 2023). Notably, the researcher is 26 years old, which might have influenced the sample composition through convenience sampling. Despite this, the age demographic appears to be representative of the target population.

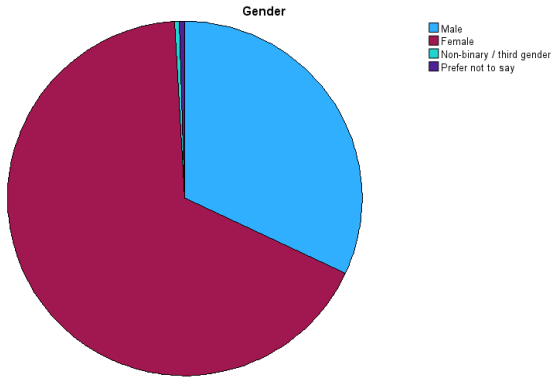

Figure 2: Gender

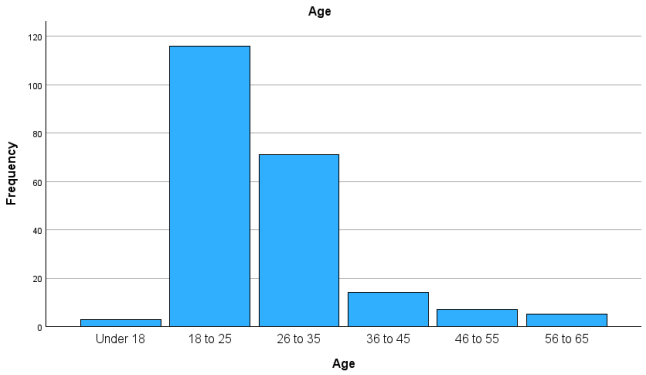

Figure 3: Age

3.4.2 Reliability

Before proceeding with the data analysis, it is essential to establish the reliability of the measurement scales used in the questionnaire. Reliability testing ensures that the items within each scale consistently measure the intended variable and produce stable results across different administrations. Given the cross-sectional design of this study, temporal stability cannot be assessed as data was collected at a single point in time. However, internal consistency can be evaluated. Internal consistency reflects the extent to which items on a scale measure the same underlying attribute (Pallant, 2020). Cronbach's alpha will be employed

to assess the internal consistency of the scales. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.7 or higher is generally considered acceptable, indicating that the scale items reliably measure the same underlying construct (Pallant, 2020).

The relationship strength was measured on a nine-item scale, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.888. The perceived trustworthiness was measured on a four-item scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.823. The blame attribution towards the SMI and towards the service provider were measured on three-item scales, with Cronbach's alphas of 0.867 and 0.903, respectively. The service failure severity was measured on a four-item scale, producing a Cronbach's alpha of 0.877, and the service quality was measured on a seven-item scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.878. These results indicate that all the multi-item scales used in the study are reliable. The overall satisfaction with the service provider was measured on a single-item scale, so internal consistency does not apply to this variable. Please refer to Appendix E for the SPSS output.

3.4.3 Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is employed in this study to condense multiple questionnaire items measuring variables into a more manageable amount of factors. Six factor analyses were conducted to streamline the measurement of relationship strength (9 items), perceived trustworthiness (4 items), blame attribution towards SMI (3 items), blame attribution towards service provider (3 items), service failure severity (4 items), and service quality (7 items). An exploratory factor analysis approach was utilised for each variable.

The first factor analysis focused on the variable relationship strength. Initially, the factorability of the data was assessed using Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy. The outcome of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity should be significant; thus, a p-value of 0.05 or lower and the KMO value should be higher than 0.6 for the data to be considered factorable (Pallant, 2020). For the factor analysis of relationship strength, the p-value for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is less than 0.001, and the KMO value is 0.871, indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis. Next, eigenvalues were examined to determine the number of factors to retain. According to Kaiser's criterion, an eigenvalue greater than one is acceptable (Pallant, 2020). The eigenvalue for one factor showed 4.760, meeting this criterion. The scree plot further validated the single factor, which demonstrated a clear break after one factor, and the number of factors above the elbow should be retained (Catell, 1966, cited in Pallant, 2020). Subsequently, the nine items measuring relationship strength were averaged using the compute variable function in SPSS to create a single composite variable. This computed variable will be used in subsequent analyses instead of the individual questionnaire items.

The factor analyses for the remaining variables (perceived trustworthiness, blame attribution towards SMI, blame attribution towards service provider, service failure severity, and service quality) were performed using the same methodology. Each analysis confirmed the data's factorability and the appropriateness of a single-factor representation for each variable. Detailed SPSS outputs for these analyses can be found in Appendix F.

3.4.4 Descriptive Statistics and Distribution of the Data

This research comprises seven variables: relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, blame attribution towards the SMI, blame attribution towards the service provider, overall satisfaction, service failure severity, and service quality. See the table below for the summary of the descriptive statistics for

these variables. All the variables, except overall satisfaction, are composite variables computed in the factor analysis. For detailed descriptive statistics, refer to Appendix G.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis
Relationship strength	1.00	6.78	3.4594	+0.299	-0.237
Perceived trustworthiness	1.00	6.50	4.2907	-0.337	-0.323
Blame Attribution SMI	1.00	7.00	3.8171	-0.155	-0.500
Blame Attribution Service Provider	1.00	7.00	5.1023	-0.766	-0.200
Overall Satisfaction	1.00	7.00	3.20	+0.456	-0.199
Service Failure Severity	1.00	6.75	3.8512	+0.071	-0.992
Service Quality	1.00	6.29	3.7329	-0.198	-0.266

3.4.4.1 Mean

All the variables in this research are measured on a scale from 1 to 7, where 3.5 is the midpoint. Thus, a mean value below 3.5 indicates a tendency towards the negative side, while a mean value above 3.5 indicates a tendency towards the positive side.

- Relationship strength: The mean value is 3.4594, suggesting that the relationship strength between the SMI and their followers is approximately average.
- Perceived trustworthiness: The mean value is 4.2907, indicating that most respondents consider the SMIs who recommended the service to be trustworthy.
- Blame attribution SMI: The mean value is 3.8171, showing that respondents attributed slightly more than average blame to the SMI when a service they recommended failed to meet expectations.
- Blame attribution service provider: The mean value is 5.1023, suggesting that more blame was directed towards the service provider than towards the SMI.
- Overall satisfaction: The mean value is 3.20, indicating respondents were slightly dissatisfied with the service provider. This is expected, given the focus on service failures, where dissatisfaction is expected.
- Service failure severity: The mean value is 3.8512, indicating that most of the service failures measured in this survey were slightly severe.
- Service quality: The mean value is 3.7329, which is notable since it suggests that despite focusing on service failures, the perceived service quality was still slightly above average. However, it is essential to note that adequate service quality is insufficient to drive strong repurchase intentions. Research indicates that willingness to repurchase increases at a steep rate when service quality ratings improve from fair to good (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Thus, service organisations should aim to offer service quality on the higher end of the scale.

This analysis of the mean values provides a clear picture of how respondents perceived each variable, highlighting areas where perceptions are more positive or negative.

3.4.4.2 Distribution

Understanding whether the data is normally distributed is crucial for conducting a regression analysis, as this test assumes normality to provide valid results. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013, cited in Pallant, 2020)

suggest examining the shape of the histograms to assess whether the data follows a normal distribution. In this study, most of the histograms visually appear to meet the criteria for normal distribution (see Appendix H for histograms). However, the histogram for the variable blame attribution towards the service provider shows significant skewness, and the histogram for the variable service quality appears very leptokurtic. Therefore, the skewness and kurtosis values will be examined to assess the data's normality more accurately.

3.4.4.3 Skewness

Skewness indicates the asymmetry of the distribution of data points within a dataset (Pallant, 2020). A skewness value of zero represents a perfectly symmetrical distribution (Meyers et al., 2013). Positive skewness, or a right-skewed distribution, indicates that data points are clustered towards lower values, creating a tail that extends to the right (Meyers et al., 2013). Conversely, negative skewness, or a left-skewed distribution, indicates that data points are clustered towards higher values, with the tail extending to the left (Meyers et al., 2013).

In this research, three variables are right-skewed: relationship strength, overall satisfaction, and service failure severity. This indicates that the scores are clustered on the scale's lower side for these variables, corresponding to a mean value lower than 3.5. The other four variables — perceived trustworthiness, blame attribution towards the SMI, blame attribution towards the service provider, and service quality — are left-skewed, with scores clustered on the higher end of the scale and tails on the lower end.

The variable with the least skewness is service failure severity (+0.071), suggesting it most closely represents a normal distribution with scores clustered around the scale's midpoint. The variable with the most skewness is blame attribution towards the service provider (-0.766), indicating the presence of many extreme values. Given the negative skewness, these extreme values are on the higher side of the scale. This high skewness value was already anticipated after inspecting the histogram, which showed a high frequency of high scores. Despite this, the skewness value for blame attribution towards the service provider is still within the range of -1 to +1, indicating that the variables are relatively symmetrically distributed (Meyers et al., 2013).

3.4.4.4 Kurtosis

Kurtosis measures a distribution's 'peakedness' or 'flatness' relative to a normal distribution (Pallant, 2020). A positive kurtosis value, known as leptokurtosis, suggests a distribution that is more peaked in the centre with long, thin tails (Meyers et al., 2013). This indicates that most participants provided similar responses, resulting in scores clustered around the mean. In contrast, a negative kurtosis value, referred to as platykurtosis, indicates a flatter distribution with more values in the extremes (Meyers et al., 2013). This suggests that participants had diverse answers, resulting in widely distributed scores.

All seven variables exhibit negative kurtosis values in this research, indicating heavier tails than the normal distribution. Among these variables, overall satisfaction with the service provider has the least kurtosis (-0.199), suggesting a more balanced distribution of data points around the mean. On the other hand, service failure severity exhibits the highest kurtosis (-0.992), indicating the most pronounced deviation from normal distribution characteristics. Despite this, all kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range of -1 to +1, indicating distributions within the normality realm (Meyers et al., 2013). None of the variables' kurtosis values indicates distributions that are overly peaked or too spread out.

After inspecting the histograms, it was anticipated that the variable service quality would also have a high kurtosis value. However, this variable shows a moderate kurtosis value (-0.266), indicating it is slightly platykurtic rather than the expected leptokurtic. The high frequency at central values (3.86 and 4.0) created a misleading visual impression of leptokurtosis due to clustering effects at these points. Despite this central peak, the overall distribution has a broader spread with less pronounced tails, resulting in a negative kurtosis value.

Since all skewness and kurtosis values fall within the acceptable range of -1 to +1, the data is approximately normally distributed.

3.4.4.5 Relationship

Scatterplots were constructed for each regression model to examine the nature of the relationships between variables. This step is crucial before conducting regression analyses, as it aims to determine whether the relationships exhibit a linear trend. The scatterplots plot the residuals against the dependent variable, allowing for an investigation into the form of the relationship. These scatterplots can be found in Appendix I. Across all models assessed, the scatterplots consistently displayed linear patterns, suggesting that linear regression was appropriate for this dataset.

3.4.4.6 Homoscedasticity

A residual plot was constructed (see Appendix J) to evaluate if the variance of the residuals is constant across all levels of the independent variables (i.e. if the data is homoscedastic). The residual plots for the first and second regression models show a random pattern, confirming homoscedasticity. However, the residual plot for the third regression model, where the dependent variable is overall satisfaction, displays a diamond shape. This pattern suggests potential heteroscedasticity in this model. The Breusch-Pagan and White tests were conducted to investigate further, confirming the presence of heteroscedasticity (see Appendix J for SPSS output). This condition can impact the regression analysis, as the inappropriate use of the ordinary least squares method can lead to a loss of precision (Nascimento et al., 2010). In such cases, the weighted least squares method should be employed to correct for heteroscedasticity (Nascimento et al., 2010).

3.4.5 Correlation

To assess the relationships between variables, a bivariate correlation matrix was constructed to display the Pearson correlation coefficient. This coefficient ranges from -1 to +1, where -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation, +1 indicates a perfect positive correlation, and 0 indicates no relationship (McCormick et al., 2015). While the correlation coefficient provides information about the strength and direction of the relationship between variables, it does not imply causality (Pallant, 2020). A condensed version of the correlation table is presented below, with the complete correlation matrix available in Appendix K.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

	Relation	Trustwor	Bla SMI	Bla serv	Satisfac	Severity	Quality
Relationship Strength	1	0.522**	-0.174*	0.182**	-0.020	0.130	-0.040
Trustworthiness		1	-0.319**	0.060	0.110	-0.011	0.055
Blame attribution SMI			1	-0.078	-0.005	0.304**	0.125
Blame attribution service				1	-0.598**	0.335**	-0.454**
Satisfaction					1	-0.293**	0.667**
Service failure severity						1	-0.227**
Service quality							1
* significant at 95% confidence level ** significant at 99% confidence level							

The correlation matrix was analysed to rule out multicollinearity, which can be a concern when variables have a correlation coefficient of 0.7 or above (Pallant, 2020). It is particularly important to examine the correlations between independent variables within the same regression model. In the first and second regression models, which share the same independent variables, the highest correlation is between relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness (0.522). For the third regression model, the highest correlation is between blame attribution towards the service provider and service quality (-0.454). Since none of the correlations among the independent variables exceeds 0.7, multicollinearity is not a concern for this dataset, allowing the regression analysis to proceed.

4. HYPOTHESIS TESTING

After completing the data cleaning and validation processes, the final sample consists of 215 usable responses. The data preparation steps have ensured the integrity and quality of the dataset, with all potential outliers addressed. The reliability of the measurement scales has been confirmed, and factor analyses have consolidated the questionnaire items into coherent factors. Descriptive statistics and distribution analyses indicate that the data is approximately normally distributed, and the relationships between variables have been examined through scatterplots, confirming the suitability of linear regression. Additionally, homoscedasticity has been assessed, and necessary adjustments have been identified. The correlation matrix analysis has ruled out multicollinearity, affirming the appropriateness of the regression models. With all assumptions verified, the dataset is now ready for hypothesis testing.

4.1 Data Analysis

4.1.1 Blame Attribution Social Media Influencer

The first regression analysis aims to test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers, along with the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the SMI. Service failure severity is included in this model to account for its known impact on blame attribution. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the SMI is the dependent variable, while relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, and service failure severity are the independent variables.

R-squared is a statistic that indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable accounted for by the independent variables in the regression model (Pallant, 2020). The value of R-squared ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values signifying a greater proportion of explained variance. To avoid overestimating the impact of multiple independent variables on the explained variability, Anderson et al. (2019) recommend using the adjusted R-squared. Pallant (2020) also notes that in smaller samples, the R-squared value may overestimate the population value. The adjusted R-squared offers a more accurate estimate of the true population value (Pallant, 2020). For the first regression, the adjusted R-squared is 0.184 (see Appendix L), indicating that the model explains 18.4% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI.

The ANOVA table (Appendix L) indicates a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value exceeding the critical value of 3.8758. This is based on 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator (the number of independent variables) and 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator (the number of observations minus the number of independent variables minus 1) at a 99% confidence level (Anderson et al., 2019). The significance of the F-value suggests that at least one regression coefficient differs from zero, implying that the independent variables collectively improve the model's fit (Anderson et al., 2019). Therefore, the sample data provides adequate evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables.

Table 4: Regression Model 1

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	4.367	< 0.001
Relationship strength	-0.068	0.356
Perceived trustworthiness	-0.281	< 0.001
Service failure severity	0.310	< 0.001

The coefficients in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix L) provide the basis for constructing the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ SMI = 4.367 + (-0.068) * (relationship\ strength) + (-0.281) * (trustworthiness) + 0.310 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 1.27867$$

The regression table indicates that the relationship strength does not significantly affect the attribution of blame towards the SMI. A possible explanation for the lack of significant support could be the moderate correlation between relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness, which was observed to be 0.522. This means that these two factors are somewhat related, which might cause overlapping effects. Although the correlation is not high enough to indicate multicollinearity, it could still mean that the unique impact of relationship strength on blame attribution is mixed with the effects of perceived trustworthiness. This overlap might make it harder to see the relationship strength's specific effect in the regression analysis. Therefore, the relationship between strength and trustworthiness could have influenced the results, making it difficult to find a significant causal effect for relationship strength alone. Therefore, a second regression analysis was conducted to test whether relationship strength would significantly affect the blame attribution if the perceived trustworthiness were omitted from the regression model.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 13.1% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 4.7067 (with 2 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 212 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix L.

Table 5: Regression Model 1 – Relationship Strength

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	3.454	< 0.001
Relationship strength	-0.217	< 0.001
Service failure severity	0.333	< 0.001

The coefficients in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix L) provide the basis for constructing the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ SMI = 3.454 + (-0.217) * (relationship\ strength) + 0.333 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 1.31998$$

Additionally, a supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI have a moderating effect on the relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution towards the SMI. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the SMI is the dependent variable, service failure

severity is the independent variable, and relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness are the moderating variables. New variables, called 'interaction terms,' were created for these moderating variables by multiplying each with the service failure severity variable.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 17.0% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 3.8758 (with 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix L.

Table 6: Regression Model 1 – Interaction Terms

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	2.581	< 0.001
Service failure severity	0.689	< 0.001
Service failure severity * Relationship	-0.084	0.474
Service failure severity * Trustworthiness	-0.415	< 0.001

The coefficients in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix L) provide the basis for constructing the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ SMI = 2.581 + 0.689 * (service\ failure\ severity) + (-0.084) * (service\ failure\ severity * relationship\ strength) + (-0.415) * (tservice\ failure\ severity * rustworthiness) + 1.29031$$

4.1.2 Blame Attribution Service Provider

The second regression analysis aims to test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers, along with the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the service provider. Service failure severity is included in this model to account for its known impact on blame attribution. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the service provider is the dependent variable, while relationship strength, perceived trustworthiness, and service failure severity are the independent variables.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 11.9% of the variance in blame attribution towards the service provider. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 3.8758 (with 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix M.

Table 7: Regression Model 2

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	3.119	< 0.001
Relationship strength	0.149	0.052
Perceived trustworthiness	-0.015	0.845
Service failure severity	0.315	< 0.001

The coefficients listed in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix M) are used to formulate the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ service\ provider = 3.119 + 0.149 * (relationship\ strength) + (-0.015) * (trustworthiness) + 0.315 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 1.43416$$

The regression analysis for relationship strength yielded a p-value of 0.052, which is marginally above the conventional threshold of 0.05. Given the proximity to the significance threshold, this result can be considered marginally significant. Although it does not meet the strict criteria for statistical significance, the p-value suggests that the observed effect is very close to being significant.

As the regression table indicates, perceived trustworthiness does not significantly affect the blame attribution towards the service provider. The correlation (0.522) between the relationship strength and the perceived trustworthiness might explain the lack of significant support. Therefore, a second and third regression analysis was conducted to test whether the relationship strength (which was only marginally significant in the complete model) and the perceived trustworthiness (which was not significant in the complete model) would significantly affect the blame attribution if the other variable were left out of the regression model.

For the model with relationship strength, the adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 12.3% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 4.7067 (with 2 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 212 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix M.

Table 8: Regression Model 2 – Relationship Strength

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	3.067	< 0.001
Relationship strength	0.141	0.030
Service failure severity	0.316	< 0.001

The coefficients listed in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix M) are used to formulate the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ service\ provider = 3.067 + 0.141 * (relationship\ strength) + 0.316 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 1.43090$$

For the model with perceived trustworthiness, the adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 10.8% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 4.7067 (with 2 degrees of

freedom for the numerator, 212 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix M.

Table 9: Regression Model 2 – Perceived Trustworthiness

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	3.297	< 0.001
Perceived trustworthiness	0.063	0.330
Service failure severity	0.335	< 0.001

The coefficients listed in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix M) are used to formulate the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ service\ provider = 3.297 + 0.063 * (perceived\ trustworthiness) + 0.335 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 1.44363$$

Additionally, a supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test whether the strength of the relationship between an SMI and their followers, as well as the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, have a moderating effect on the relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution towards the service provider. In this regression model, blame attribution towards the service provider is the dependent variable, service failure severity is the independent variable, and relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness are the moderating variables, with the interaction terms previously created used for these variables.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 11.4% of the variance in blame attribution towards the service provider. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 3.8758 (with 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix M.

Table 10: Regression Model 2 – Interaction Terms

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	3.738	< 0.001
Service failure severity	0.209	0.053
Service failure severity * Relationship	0.201	0.097
Service failure severity * Trustworthiness	-0.033	0.791

The coefficients listed in the regression table and the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix M) are used to formulate the following regression equation:

$$Blame\ attribution\ service\ provider = 3.728 + 0.209 * (service\ failure\ severity) + 0.201 * (service\ failure\ severity * relationship\ strength) + (-0.033) * (tservice\ failure\ severity * rustworthiness) + 1.43830$$

The regression analysis for service failure severity yielded a p-value of 0.053, which is marginally above the conventional threshold of 0.05. Given the close proximity to the significance threshold, this result can

be considered marginally significant. Although it does not meet the strict criteria for statistical significance, the p-value suggests that the observed effect is very close to being significant.

4.1.3 Overall Satisfaction

The third regression analysis examines whether blame attribution has a causal effect on overall satisfaction with the service provider. Service failure severity and service quality are included in this model to control for their known impacts on overall satisfaction. In this regression model, overall satisfaction with the service provider is designated as the dependent variable, while blame attribution towards the SMI, blame attribution towards the service provider, service failure severity, and service quality are independent variables.

Given the detection of heteroscedasticity during data preparation, a weighted least squares regression approach will be employed instead of ordinary least squares regression. The absolute values of the unstandardised residuals from an initial ordinary least squares regression analysis were first computed to establish weights. Subsequently, an auxiliary regression utilised these absolute residuals as the dependent variable, from which weights were calculated as the inverse of the squared predicted values.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation explains 64.3% of the variance in overall satisfaction with the service provider. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value exceeding the critical value of 3.4097 (with 4 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 210 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results demonstrate that the sample data supports the conclusion that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, indicating that the independent variables significantly improve the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix N.

Table 11: Regression Model 3.1

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	2.814	< 0.001
Blame attribution towards SMI	-0.084	0.047
Blame attribution towards service provider	-0.308	< 0.001
Service failure severity	-0.064	0.176
Service quality	0.569	< 0.001

The coefficients presented in the regression table, along with the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix N), serve as the foundation for developing the following regression equation:

$$Overall\ satisfaction = 2.814 + (-0.084) * (blame\ attribution\ SMI) + (-0.308) * (blame\ attribution\ service\ provider) + (-0.064) * (service\ failure\ severity) + 0.569 * (service\ quality) + 1.282$$

The variables service failure severity (Hess, 2008; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Swanson & Hsu, 2010) and service quality (Falk et al., 2010; Shemwell et al., 1998; Zeithaml et al., 1993) were added to this regression model to account for their effects on overall satisfaction, as indicated by previous literature. However, the regression table revealed that service failure severity does not significantly impact the dependent variable. Since service failure severity was not a primary variable under investigation and showed no significant impact, a second regression analysis was conducted, excluding this variable. This approach ensures that

the model focuses on the primary variables of interest while simplifying the analysis by removing non-significant variables.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 64.2% of the variance in blame attribution towards the service provider. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 3.8758 (with 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix N.

Table 12: Regression Model 3.2

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	2.640	< 0.001
Blame attribution towards SMI	-0.097	0.020
Blame attribution towards service provider	-0.328	< 0.001
Service quality	0.584	< 0.001

The coefficients presented in the regression table, along with the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix N), serve as the foundation for developing the following regression equation:

$$Overall\ satisfaction = 2.640 + (-0.097) * (blame\ attribution\ SMI) + (-0.328) * (blame\ attribution\ service\ provider) + 0.584 * (service\ quality) + 1.285$$

A supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test whether blame attribution moderates the relationship between service quality and overall satisfaction with the service provider. In this regression model, overall satisfaction with the service provider is the dependent variable, service quality is the independent variable, and blame attribution towards the SMI and blame attribution towards the service provider are the moderating variables. New interaction terms were created for these moderating variables by multiplying each with the service quality variable. The weight variable previously computed was utilised for this weighted least squares regression.

The adjusted R-squared indicates that the regression equation can explain 64.9% of the variance in overall satisfaction with the service provider. The ANOVA table reveals a p-value of less than 0.001 and an F-value surpassing the critical value of 3.8758 (with 3 degrees of freedom for the numerator, 211 degrees of freedom for the denominator, and a 99% confidence level). These results suggest that the sample data provides significant evidence that the regression model fits the data better than a model without independent variables, demonstrating that the independent variables enhance the model's fit. For detailed statistical outputs, please refer to Appendix N.

Table 13: Regression Model 3 – Interaction Terms

	Standardised coefficient β	P-value (2-tailed)
Constant	0.449	0.008
Service quality	1.093	< 0.001
Service quality * blame attribution SMI	-0.145	0.020
Service quality * blame attribution service	-0.368	< 0.001

The coefficients presented in the regression table, along with the standard error of the estimate from the model summary (Appendix N), serve as the foundation for developing the following regression equation:

$$Overall\ satisfaction = 0.449 + 1.093 * (service\ quality) + (-0.145) * (service\ quality * blame\ attribution\ SMI) + (-0.368) * (service\ quality * blame\ attribution\ service\ provider) + 1.272$$

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Blame Attribution Social Media Influencer

H1a: Relationship strength between the customer and the SMI is negatively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI.

H2a: Perceived trustworthiness of the SMI is negatively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI.

The first regression analysis was conducted to test hypotheses H1a and H2a, aiming to determine whether a significant relationship exists between the independent variables (relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness) and the dependent variable (blame attribution towards the SMI). The p-value is used to evaluate this relationship, with a threshold of less than 0.05, indicating that the null hypothesis can be rejected with 95% confidence. This would demonstrate a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The analysis results are summarised in the following table, where the dependent variable is blame attribution towards the SMI.

Table 14: Blame Attribution towards Social Media Influencer

	Correlation matrix	Regression model
	Pearson coefficient	Standardised coefficient β
Relationship strength	-0.174**	-0.068
Perceived trustworthiness	-0.319***	-0.281***
* significant at 90% confidence level ** significant at 95% confidence level *** significant at 99% confidence level		

The table shows that although the regression model is significant, there is inconclusive evidence to conclude that the strength of the relationship between the SMI and their followers has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the SMI. The data did confirm (at the 95% confidence level) that the relationship between these variables is negative, as anticipated in the hypothesis; however, this conclusion is based on the correlation matrix, which does not establish causation. Therefore, hypothesis H1a is not supported based on the regression analysis. However, a second regression was run without the independent variable perceived trustworthiness. This was conducted because relationship strength and trustworthiness are intercorrelated. This second regression shows that, without perceived trustworthiness in the regression model, there is a causal relationship between relationship strength and blame attribution towards the SMI. However, the hypothesis is still unsupported based on the complete regression model.

In contrast to relationship strength, the research found conclusive evidence that the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI has a causal effect on blame attribution towards the SMI. The correlation matrix

indicates a negative relationship between these variables, and the regression analysis confirms significant causation. Specifically, an increase of 1 in perceived trustworthiness results in a decrease of 0.281 in blame attribution towards the SMI. Therefore, hypothesis H2a is supported based on the regression analysis. This research demonstrated a causal relationship between perceived trustworthiness and blame attribution towards the SMI.

A supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test if relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness have a moderating impact on the causal relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution towards the SMI. The regression results indicated a negative moderating impact (-0.415) of perceived trustworthiness on this relationship, while relationship strength showed no significant moderating effect.

4.2.2 Blame Attribution Service Provider

H1b: Relationship strength between the customer and the SMI is positively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider.

H2b: Perceived trustworthiness of the SMI is positively associated with the degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider.

The second regression analysis was conducted to test hypotheses H1b and H2b, aiming to determine whether a significant relationship exists between the independent variables (relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness) and the dependent variable (blame attribution towards the service provider). The analysis results are summarised in the following table, where the dependent variable is blame attribution towards the service provider.

Table 15: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

	Correlation matrix	Regression model
	Pearson coefficient	Standardised coefficient β
Relationship strength	0.182***	0.149**
Perceived trustworthiness	0.060	-0.015
* significant at 90% confidence level ** significant at 95% confidence level *** significant at 99% confidence level		

The regression analysis yielded a p-value of 0.052 for relationship strength, which is marginally above the threshold of 0.05. Given the proximity to the conventional significance threshold, this result is considered marginally significant. Thus, there is some evidence that the strength of the relationship between the SMI and their followers has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the service provider. The data also confirmed that the relationship between these variables is positive, as anticipated in the hypothesis. Therefore, hypothesis H1b is accepted as supported, albeit with caution. Given the marginal significance, a second regression was run without the independent variable perceived trustworthiness. This was conducted because relationship strength and trustworthiness are intercorrelated. This second regression shows that, without perceived trustworthiness in the regression model, there is a more apparent causal relationship between relationship strength and blame attribution towards the service provider.

Furthermore, the table shows that there is inconclusive evidence to conclude that the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI has a causal effect on the blame attribution towards the service provider.

Therefore, hypothesis H2b is not supported based on the regression analysis. However, a second regression was run without the independent variable relationship strength. This was conducted because relationship strength and trustworthiness are intercorrelated. This second regression shows that, even without relationship strength in the regression model, a causal relationship between perceived trustworthiness and blame attribution towards the service provider could not be demonstrated. This research could not demonstrate a causal relationship between perceived trustworthiness and blame attribution towards the service provider.

A supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test whether relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness moderate the causal relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution towards the service provider. The regression results indicated that neither relationship strength nor perceived trustworthiness significantly moderates this relationship.

4.2.3 Overall Satisfaction

H3a: The degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the SMI is positively associated with overall satisfaction with the service provider.

H3b: The degree to which blame for service failure is attributed to the service provider is negatively associated with overall satisfaction with the service provider.

The third regression analysis was conducted to test hypotheses H3a and H3b, aiming to determine whether a significant relationship exists between the independent variables (blame attribution towards the SMI and blame attribution towards the service provider) and the dependent variable (overall satisfaction with the service provider). The analysis results are summarised in the following table, where the dependent variable is overall satisfaction with the service provider.

Table 16: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

	Correlation matrix	Regression model
	Pearson coefficient	Standardised coefficient β
Blame attribution towards SMI	-0.005	-0.097**
Blame attribution towards service provider	-0.598***	-0.328***
* significant at 90% confidence level ** significant at 95% confidence level *** significant at 99% confidence level		

The table shows that the research found conclusive evidence that blame attribution towards the SMI has a causal effect on overall satisfaction with the service provider at the 95% confidence level. Contrary to the positive relationship anticipated in the hypothesis, the relationship between these variables is negative. Specifically, an increase of 1 in blame attribution towards the SMI results in a decrease of 0.097 in overall satisfaction with the service provider. Therefore, hypothesis H3a is not supported based on the regression analysis. This research demonstrated a negative causal relationship between blame attribution towards the SMI and overall satisfaction with the service provider instead of the anticipated positive relationship.

Furthermore, the table shows conclusive evidence that blame attribution towards the service provider has a causal effect on overall satisfaction with the service provider. The correlation matrix indicates a negative relationship between these variables, and the regression analysis confirms significant causation. Specifically, an increase of 1 in blame attribution towards the service provider results in a decrease of 0.328

in overall satisfaction with the service provider. Therefore, hypothesis H3b is supported based on the regression analysis. This research demonstrated a causal relationship between blame attribution towards the service provider and overall satisfaction with the service provider.

A supplementary regression analysis was conducted to test whether blame attribution moderates the causal relationship between service quality and overall satisfaction with the service provider. The regression results indicated a negative moderating impact of both blame attribution towards the SMI and blame attribution towards the service provider.

4.2.4 Summary of the Results

Table 17: Summary Table

Dependent variable	Independent variable	F	β	p-value	Hypothesis	
Blame attribution towards SMI	Relationship	17.134	-0.068	0.356	H1a	Not supported*
	Trustworthiness		-0.281	< 0.001	H2a	Supported
Blame attribution towards service provider	Relationship	10.658	0.149	0.052	H1b	Supported
	Trustworthiness		-0.015	0.845	H2b	Not supported*
Overall satisfaction with service provider	Blame attribution SMI	128.742	-0.097	0.020	H3a	Not supported**
	Blame attribution service		-0.328	< 0.001	H3b	Supported
*Not supported because p-value > 0.05 **Not supported because the effect was opposite as hypothesised						

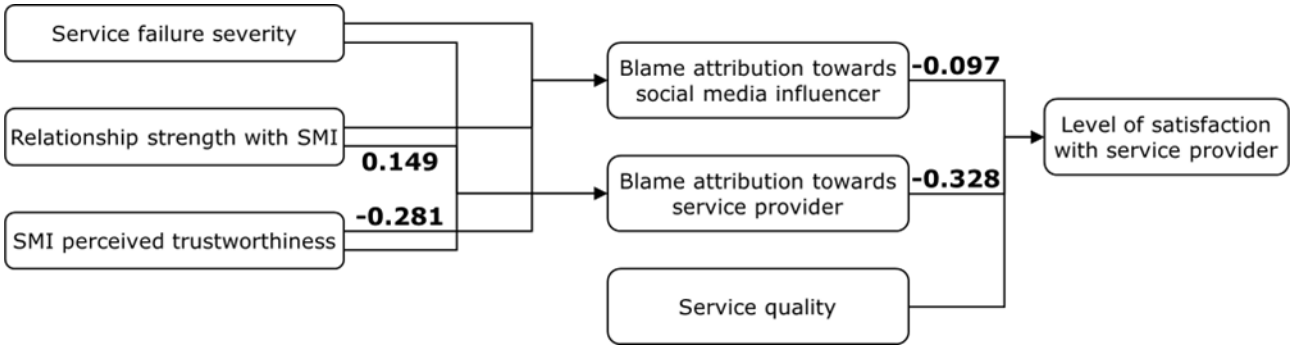

Figure 4: Conceptual Model with Standardised Regression Coefficients

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Relationship Strength

The analysis did not support hypothesis H1a, which posited that stronger relationships between customers and SMIs would lead to decreased blame attribution towards the SMI. The complete regression model did not show a significant causal effect, suggesting that the strength of the relationship with the SMI does not necessarily translate into decreased blame towards the SMI.

One possible explanation could be the moderate correlation between relationship strength and perceived trustworthiness, which suggests overlapping effects. A regression analysis excluding perceived trustworthiness revealed a significant negative effect of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the SMI. Despite this finding, the adjusted R-squared values for the complete model (0.184) and the isolated regression (0.131) highlight that over 80% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI remains unexplained, indicating the presence of additional influencing factors.

One potential factor not included in this research is the extent of the influence of the SMI's portrayal of the service on customer expectations. Literature indicates that SMI endorsements contribute to the formation of consumer expectations of promoted services (Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022). SMIs often embellish their endorsements to attract interest, using selective presentation and exaggeration to highlight positive aspects while omitting negatives (Tsai & Hsin, 2023; Rundin & Colliander, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). This enhanced portrayal may set unrealistic expectations. How this portrayal of the service shaped the customers' expectations might influence how blame is attributed to the SMI when the service fails to meet those expectations.

Additionally, the strength of the relationship may influence blame attribution in opposing directions. While the literature suggests that stronger relationships can foster greater sympathy (Pradhan et al., 2023) and act as a buffer during negative events (Hess et al., 2003), potentially leading to reduced blame attribution, the concept of 'relational transgression' indicates that a strong relationship can also amplify adverse reactions if it is perceived as violated (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). This sense of betrayal might increase blame attribution, potentially contributing to the insignificant results observed. Consequently, the effect of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the SMI may vary based on individual perceptions and experiences.

The analysis revealed a marginally significant causal effect of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the service provider in the complete regression model. Given the proximity to the conventional significance threshold, hypothesis H1b is supported. This causal effect is positive, as anticipated, indicating that if the relationship between the SMI and their followers is strong, more blame will be attributed to the service provider if a service failure occurs. The regression results of a second analysis, which excluded the variable perceived trustworthiness, also demonstrated a significant causal effect of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the service provider. However, the adjusted R-squared values for the complete model (0.119) and the isolated regression (0.123) reveal that over 85% of the variance in blame attribution towards the service provider remains unexplained. This suggests that other factors likely contribute to blame attribution and warrants further investigation into additional influences on this outcome.

Attribution theory, which explores how blame is assigned, indicates that blame attribution in response to service failures is multifaceted (Bitner, 1990). This research primarily focuses on the locus of causality, the entity perceived as responsible for the service failure (Isabella et al., 2022). The hypothesis assumed that blame would be attributed to either the SMI who recommended the service or the service provider. However, literature suggests that blame attribution sometimes involves a combination of multiple factors (Janjua, 2017).

Furthermore, this research did not include the stability and controllability dimensions, which are integral to attribution theory. If a service failure is perceived as a rare, non-recurring event, blame towards the service provider might be reduced (Bitner, 1990; Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012). Similarly, blame attribution towards the service provider could be lower if the failure is seen as unavoidable or out of the service provider's control (Fu et al., 2021). These factors were not measured in this study but could influence the results.

Lastly, customers' expectations of the service provider may play a more critical role in blame attribution than their relationship with the SMI. According to the expectation confirmation perspective, satisfaction is primarily driven by the gap between expectations and actual performance (Hu et al., 2019; Zeithaml et al., 1993). Therefore, if the service provider fails to meet customer expectations, blame will likely be directed at the service provider, regardless of the customer's relationship with the SMI.

In summary, the lack of support for hypotheses H1a and H1b highlights the complexity of blame attribution processes (Bitner, 1990) and suggests that factors such as customer expectations (Hu et al., 2019; Zeithaml et al., 1993), the nature of the service failure (Fu et al., 2021; Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012), and the portrayal of services by SMIs (Tsai & Hsin, 2023; Rundin & Colliander, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020) may play more significant roles than the strength of the relationship alone.

5.2 Perceived Trustworthiness

Hypothesis H2a posited that higher perceived trustworthiness in an SMI would decrease blame attribution towards the SMI. The analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant negative effect of perceived trustworthiness on blame attribution towards the SMI. Specifically, an increase in the SMI's perceived trustworthiness was associated with reduced blame attribution towards the SMI. This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that trustworthiness plays a critical role in shaping consumer responses to SMIs' messages (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023).

This finding indicates that trustworthiness plays a crucial role in mitigating adverse reactions from customers. When an SMI is perceived as highly trustworthy, customers are less likely to hold them fully accountable for severe service failures. Perceived trustworthiness acts as a protective factor, reducing the extent to which customers blame the SMI for service failures. Trustworthiness pertains to the perceived reliability, honesty, and credibility of an SMI when expressing their opinions and recommending products and services (Al-Mu'ani et al., 2023). This leads followers to believe that the SMI's recommendations are genuine (Lim et al., 2017), leading followers to attribute less blame to them when service failures occur. Conversely, when consumers' trust in the SMI is low, they perceive the SMI as deliberately advertising and will see their message as commercial, thus not as genuine opinions (Mangiò & Di Domenico, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023), consequently leading followers to attribute more blame to them when service failures occur on a service they recommended. Therefore, the negative effect of perceived trustworthiness on blame

attribution towards the SMI can be linked to customers' belief that a trustworthy SMI would not intentionally mislead them and may view the failure as more attributable to the service provider rather than the SMI.

A supplementary regression analysis explored whether perceived trustworthiness moderates the relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution towards the SMI. The results revealed a significant negative moderating effect. This implies that, while a more severe service failure leads to more blame being attributed to the SMI, perceived trustworthiness can weaken this relationship. This interaction suggests that even when service failures are severe, the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI can buffer the negative impact on blame attribution towards themselves.

The direct and indirect effects (via moderating the relationship between service failure severity and blame attribution) of the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI on blame attribution towards the SMI underscore the importance of trust in the dynamic between SMIs and their followers. High perceived trustworthiness can create a buffer that softens the blow of negative experiences, suggesting that building and maintaining trust with followers is essential for SMIs. It highlights that while trust cannot entirely shield an SMI from blame in a severe service failure, it can alleviate some of the blame directed at them, potentially preserving the SMI's reputation and relationship with their audience.

However, it is essential to note that the adjusted R-squared value for the regression model examining perceived trustworthiness was 0.184, indicating that over 80% of the variance in blame attribution towards the SMI remains unexplained. This suggests that other factors beyond perceived trustworthiness also play a significant role in influencing blame attribution. The previous section on relationship strength discussed additional variables that could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of blame attribution

Hypothesis H2b proposed that higher perceived trustworthiness in an SMI would increase blame attribution towards the service provider. This hypothesis was not supported, as the analysis did not find a significant effect of perceived trustworthiness on blame attribution towards the service provider. A second regression analysis was conducted without the variable relationship strength to try to separate the effects of the independent variables and eliminate the overlapping effects of these variables. This regression also did not show a significant causal effect of the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI on blame attribution towards the service provider. This result may seem counterintuitive given the findings for H2a, but several factors could explain this discrepancy.

Firstly, the hypothesis assumed that blame would be attributed to either the SMI who recommended the service or to the service provider, and did not consider the possibility of a combination of multiple loci of causality (Janjua, 2017). Additionally, the other dimensions of attribution theory, namely stability and controllability, can also influence how blame is attributed after a service failure. If the service failure is perceived as having an unstable cause, which is unlikely to recur, blame towards the service provider might be reduced (Bitner, 1990; Grewal et al., 2008; Walton & Hume, 2012). Similarly, if the service failure is perceived as uncontrollable, meaning the service provider could not have prevented it, blame attribution towards the service provider could be lower (Fu et al., 2021). The service provider's role and responsibility in the service failure might be more relevant in determining blame, irrespective of the SMI's trustworthiness.

Secondly, customers' expectations of the service provider may play a more critical role in blame attribution than their perception of the SMI's trustworthiness. According to the expectation confirmation perspective, customer satisfaction hinges on whether actual service performance meets or exceeds customer expectations (Hu et al., 2019; Zeithaml et al., 1993). Therefore, if the service provider fails to meet

customer expectations, blame may be assigned directly to them rather than being influenced by the SMI's perceived trustworthiness.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that prior experiences with the service provider can influence how blame is attributed (Hess et al., 2003; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Zeithaml et al., 1993). While this research focuses on service failures after a customer followed a recommendation by an SMI, this does not eliminate the possibility that the customer had prior encounters with the service provider. The prior service encounter not only influences the expectations of the service (Zeithaml et al., 1993) but also impacts the stability attributions (Hess et al., 2003; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). Therefore, these prior service encounters could impact how blame is attributed after experiencing a service failure.

In summary, the findings affirm that perceived trustworthiness significantly reduces blame attribution towards the SMI, confirming hypothesis H2a. However, this effect does not extend to increasing blame attribution towards the service provider, leading to a lack of support for hypothesis H2b. These results underscore the complexity of blame attribution processes and highlight that perceived trustworthiness affects blame attribution in nuanced ways depending on the target of the blame.

5.3 Overall Satisfaction

Hypothesis H3a posited that blame attribution towards the SMI would positively impact overall satisfaction with the service provider. However, the analysis found that blame attribution towards the SMI negatively impacts overall satisfaction with the service provider, contrary to the hypothesised direction. Furthermore, the supplementary regression analysis revealed a significant negative moderating effect of blame attribution towards the SMI on the relationship between service quality and overall satisfaction with the service provider. This suggests that even when service quality is high, attributing blame to the SMI can still negatively affect overall satisfaction with the service provider. The moderating effect indicates that blame attribution towards the SMI can weaken the positive impact of service quality on overall satisfaction. These surprising results warrant a thorough explanation.

This hypothesis was formulated with the understanding that external attributions evoke a sense of distributed injustice among customers (Iglesias, 2009; Isabella et al., 2022), leading to a decrease in overall satisfaction with the service provider (Fu et al., 2015; Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). In the literature, 'external' factors are often seen as those within the service organisation. Consequently, it was expected that if another entity (in this case, the SMI) were perceived as responsible for the service failure, overall satisfaction with the service provider would increase. However, as the SMI is also an external factor relative to the customer, their involvement might similarly contribute to a decrease in overall satisfaction. The negative impact of blame attribution towards the SMI on overall satisfaction with the service provider suggests a more complex interplay between blame attribution and customer satisfaction than initially hypothesised.

Additionally, the literature suggests that external locus attributions can cast a halo effect on customers' evaluations of the organisation as a whole, leading them to negatively evaluate aspects of the service that were not directly related to the failure itself (Iglesias, 2009). This indicates that a service failure casts a negative halo effect on the entire service experience and everything related to it. As a result, even if the SMI is deemed responsible for the service failure, the negative perception caused by the failure can still decrease the overall satisfaction with the service provider.

The findings related to hypothesis H3a underscore the critical need for managing the messages conveyed by SMIs (Borchers & Enke, 2021). It reveals that even if an SMI is blamed for a service failure, overall satisfaction with the service provider can still decrease, and the provider's reputation may suffer. Consequently, companies need to manage the content of SMI endorsements carefully. When SMIs present an embellished or idealised version of a service, it can create customer expectations that diverge from the actual service delivered (Zeithaml et al., 1993). As indicated by the results, even if the SMI is held responsible for this misalignment, it can still lead to dissatisfaction with the service provider when the service fails to meet these heightened expectations. Therefore, companies must collaborate closely with SMIs to ensure their messages accurately reflect service standards. This collaboration helps to minimise discrepancies between customer expectations and service delivery, which can otherwise lead to dissatisfaction and reputational damage (Zeithaml et al., 1993). While SMIs value creative freedom in their promotions, companies must strike a balance by providing guidelines that preserve authenticity while aligning with service realities (Borchers & Enke, 2021). By managing this balance, companies can reduce the risk of negative impacts on satisfaction and protect their brand's integrity amid SMI endorsements.

Hypothesis H3b proposed that blame attribution towards the service provider would negatively affect overall satisfaction with the service provider. The analysis supported this hypothesis, confirming that blame directed at the service provider significantly reduces overall satisfaction. This finding aligns with the broader literature, which emphasises the adverse impact of perceived responsibility for service failures on customer satisfaction (Fu et al., 2015; Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020).

The supplementary regression analysis found a significant negative moderating effect of blame attribution towards the service provider on the relationship between service quality and overall satisfaction. This means that when customers blame the service provider, the positive effects of high service quality on overall satisfaction are diminished. In other words, even if the service quality is high, customers who perceive the service provider as responsible for the service failure will have lower overall satisfaction. This moderating effect underscores the significant role of perceived accountability in shaping customer satisfaction.

The support for H3b and the observed negative moderating effect underscores the crucial need for service providers to manage blame perceptions effectively. This highlights the importance of clear communication and problem resolution in mitigating the adverse effects of blame on overall satisfaction. Service providers should focus on service recovery strategies to address blame and enhance customer satisfaction. For instance, providing a detailed explanation of the internal or external factors contributing to the service failure can help reduce controllability attributions (Grewal et al., 2008). Additionally, offering compensation can improve customer perceptions of the company's responsiveness and reduce attributions of stability (Grewal et al., 2008). By implementing these strategies, service providers can better manage blame and protect overall customer satisfaction.

The adjusted R-squared value for the regression model examining blame attribution indicates that the regression model explains approximately 65% of the variance in overall satisfaction with the service provider. This demonstrates that service quality and blame attribution towards the SMI and the service provider substantially shape overall satisfaction. However, the remaining variance suggests that other factors also contribute to overall satisfaction. One such factor could be service recovery efforts. The effectiveness and promptness of how a service provider addresses and resolves the service failure can significantly impact overall satisfaction (Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Lewis & McCann, 2004).

In summary, the findings illustrate the complex dynamics between blame attribution and overall satisfaction. The results for H3a and H3b indicate that blame attribution, whether directed at the SMI or

the service provider, has significant implications for customer satisfaction. Service providers must consider these dynamics in their strategies to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty in the context of influencer marketing.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study delves into the intricate dynamics between SMIs, service providers, and consumer blame attribution, offering valuable insights into how various factors affect customer satisfaction. The results reveal significant complexities in the relationships among these variables, highlighting the intricate roles of perceived trustworthiness, relationship strength, and blame attribution.

The analysis found that the strength of the relationship between customers and SMIs does not have a straightforward impact on blame attribution towards the SMI. Contrary to hypothesis H1a, which proposed a direct influence of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the SMI, the results showed more nuanced interactions. While a separate analysis indicated a significant negative effect of relationship strength on blame attribution towards the SMI while isolated — suggesting that stronger relationships might reduce blame — the insignificance of relationship strength in the complete model suggests other factors play more critical roles. For example, the SMI's portrayal of the service, which can set unrealistic expectations (Kumar & Kuldeep, 2022), and the potential for increased blame if a strong relationship is perceived as violated (Ward & Ostrom, 2006), could influence the results. Thus, the effect of relationship strength on blame attribution is complex and may vary based on individual perceptions.

Conversely, the analysis found that the strength of the relationship between customers and SMIs directly impacts blame attribution towards the service provider. The support for hypothesis H1b indicates that stronger connections between customers and SMIs might increase blame towards the service provider. However, the adjusted R-squared suggests that other factors are also influential. Notably, customer expectations are critical in this context. When service performance fails to meet these expectations, the service is deemed a failure (Zeithaml et al., 1993), leading to increased blame directed at the service provider.

The analysis supported hypothesis H2a, confirming that higher perceived trustworthiness in an SMI is associated with decreased blame attribution towards the SMI. This finding aligns with the existing literature, highlighting the protective role of trustworthiness in mitigating adverse customer reactions. A trustworthy SMI is perceived as more reliable and less likely to intentionally mislead (Lim et al., 2017; Ozuem et al., 2023), leading customers to attribute less blame to them during service failures. This suggests that building and maintaining trust is crucial for SMIs to preserve their reputation and mitigate potential negative fallout from service failures.

However, hypothesis H2b, which proposed that higher perceived trustworthiness would increase blame towards the service provider, was not supported. The results suggest that blame attribution is influenced more by the service provider's performance and customer expectations than by the SMI's trustworthiness (Hu et al., 2019; Zeithaml et al., 1993). This discrepancy highlights that while trustworthiness affects blame attribution towards the SMI, it does not necessarily extend to blame towards the service provider. This complexity further emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding blame attribution that includes additional factors, such as stability and controllability dimensions of attribution theory, as they may play a crucial role in shaping how blame is assigned in service failure contexts.

The study also examined the impact of blame attribution on overall satisfaction with the service provider. Hypothesis H3a, which anticipated a positive impact of blame attribution towards the SMI on overall satisfaction, was not supported. Instead, the data demonstrated that blame directed at the SMI negatively affects overall satisfaction with the service provider. This unexpected outcome indicates that even if the SMI is blamed, the overall perception of the service provider can still suffer. This finding indicates a negative halo effect where service failures tarnish the entire service experience and lead to dissatisfaction, regardless of who is deemed responsible (Iglesias, 2009).

On the other hand, hypothesis H3b was supported, demonstrating that blame attribution towards the service provider reduces overall satisfaction. This finding aligns with the literature, underscoring the detrimental impact of perceived responsibility for service failures on customer satisfaction (Fu et al., 2015; Isabella et al., 2022; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020). When customers blame the service provider, their overall evaluation of the service experience deteriorates, reflecting decreased satisfaction. This supports the notion that perceived responsibility directly influences customers' emotional responses and overall contentment with the service (Iglesias, 2009; Srivastava & Gosain, 2020; Walton & Hume, 2012).

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This thesis makes significant contributions to the theoretical understanding of blame attribution within the context of influencer marketing and service failures, extending the application of attribution theory to a novel and increasingly relevant domain. This study offers several theoretical contributions by combining insights from research on conventional service failure scenarios and influencer marketing's impact on consumer behaviour.

This research extends the application of attribution theory by examining the role of SMIs in shaping blame attribution during service failures. Traditional attribution theory often focuses on internal, external, or situational loci of causality, typically considering 'external factors' as factors within the service organisation. This study introduces SMIs as a new locus of causality, exploring how the strength of the relationship between SMIs and their followers and the SMIs' perceived trustworthiness influence blame attribution. While relationship strength does not significantly impact blame attribution towards the SMI, it does influence blame attribution towards the service provider. Conversely, perceived trustworthiness does not play a crucial role in determining blame towards the service provider, but it does influence blame attribution towards the SMI. This aligns with existing literature emphasising the importance of trustworthiness in influencer marketing. Trustworthiness, defined by perceived reliability, honesty, and credibility, acts as a protective factor for the SMI, mitigating adverse consumer reactions even amid severe service failures.

The research underscores the importance of customer expectations in shaping blame attributions and overall satisfaction with the service provider. The inability to find a significant causal effect of relationship strength or perceived trustworthiness on blame attribution towards the service provider suggests that other factors are more influential. When service providers fail to meet customer expectations, blame is likely directed at them regardless of the SMI's perceived trustworthiness or the strength of their relationship with their followers. This highlights the importance of managing customer expectations in service delivery and influencer marketing.

The study provides new insights into the complex relationship between blame attribution and overall satisfaction with the service provider. The findings indicate that blame directed at the SMI negatively

impacts overall satisfaction with the service provider. This challenges traditional assumptions that attributing blame to factors external to the service organisation would serve as a buffer and reduce dissatisfaction with the service provider. Instead, it reveals a more intricate interplay where negative perceptions of the SMI can still detract from satisfaction with the service provider.

In summary, this thesis contributes to the theoretical landscape by expanding attribution theory to include SMIs as a potential locus of causality in the context of influencer marketing. It challenges existing assumptions, highlights the complexity of blame attribution processes, and underscores the importance of trust and customer expectations in shaping consumer responses. These insights pave the way for future research to further explore the intricate dynamics between SMIs, service providers, and consumers in the digital age.

6.3 Managerial Implications and Recommendations for Managers

This thesis provides valuable managerial insights into the dynamics of blame attribution in the context of influencer marketing and service failures. This research offers actionable recommendations for managers looking to optimise their influencer marketing strategies and improve service delivery.

Managers should focus on minimising service failures by strategically managing their influencer marketing initiatives. It is crucial to select SMIs with a proven track record of transparency and authenticity and encourage them to share honest reviews without embellishing service attributes. This approach ensures that endorsements accurately reflect the service's capabilities. Overly positive portrayals can create unrealistic expectations that are hard to meet, leading to service failures. As this research indicates, even if the SMI is perceived as responsible for misleading and exaggerated portrayals, satisfaction with the service provider will still decrease if the service provider fails to meet these heightened expectations. Therefore, managers should work closely with SMIs to ensure accurate representations of the service. Effective strategies include:

- Providing SMIs with detailed and accurate information about the service.
- Establishing clear guidelines for promotional content to avoid misrepresentation.
- Encouraging SMIs to highlight both strengths and limitations of the service.
- Monitoring SMI content while balancing control with the SMI's creative autonomy.

Managers should develop and implement robust, proactive service recovery strategies to promptly address service failures when they occur. Given that blame attribution towards both SMIs and service providers can negatively impact overall customer satisfaction, effective service recovery is crucial. Effective service recovery can restore customer trust and satisfaction following a service failure. Managers should think about service recovery proactively to ensure a quick response when failures occur. Effective strategies include:

- Transparent communication, providing explanations for service failures to alleviate blame.
- Compensation or corrective actions that address specific customer concerns to improve perceptions of responsiveness.
- Training of frontline employees to handle complaints empathetically and efficiently

In summary, this thesis provides practical insights for managers aiming to leverage influencer marketing effectively while managing blame attribution and customer satisfaction. By aligning expectations and

implementing robust service recovery strategies, managers can enhance the effectiveness of their influencer marketing efforts and maintain positive customer relationships in the face of service failures.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This research has significantly contributed to understanding the dynamics of blame attribution in the context of influencer marketing and service failures. However, several limitations should be acknowledged, and these limitations offer avenues for future research.

One fundamental limitation is the sampling strategy employed for this research. Due to time and budget constraints, a non-probability convenience sampling method was employed. While this method is cost-effective and efficient, it introduces a selection bias and limits the generalisability of the findings. The sample had a high percentage of female respondents, likely due to the chosen sampling strategy, as the researcher is female. Consequently, the sample may not fully represent the entire population, impacting the results' external validity.

Another limitation concerns the selected research method. The data for this study was collected via a survey, which, although suitable for capturing the current state of consumer perceptions and attitudes, does not allow for controlling variables that have a known impact on the independent variables. Service failure severity and service quality were included in the model but were not kept stable. A factorial experiment could have controlled these variables and minimised confounding effects unrelated to the variables being tested.

The final limitation is the scope of the variables measured in this study. While this study focused on the strength of the relationship between the SMI and their followers and the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI, many other potential influential variables were not included. Factors such as the extent of the influence of the SMI's portrayal of the service on customer expectations and the customer's prior experiences with the service provider could significantly impact blame attribution and overall satisfaction. Furthermore, this study primarily focused on the locus of causality dimension of attribution theory. Other dimensions, namely stability and controllability, were not measured or examined. These dimensions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of blame attribution.

Given these limitations, several areas for future research emerge. Investigating how factors such as customer expectations and prior experiences with the service provider affect blame attribution and overall satisfaction would provide a more holistic view of the blame attribution process. While this has been researched in conventional service failure scenarios, it has yet to be examined in the context of service failure scenarios related to SMI recommendations. Additionally, incorporating the stability and controllability dimensions of attribution theory into future research could yield a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact with the locus of causality in service failure scenarios related to SMI recommendations.

Moreover, this research is among the first to examine blame attribution in the context of influencer marketing. Therefore, a broader exploratory approach was adopted, including data from various service industries and types of service failures. This broad approach provides a general understanding but may overlook industry-specific or failure-specific nuances. Future research could benefit from a more focused examination of specific service industries or types of service failures. By analysing blame attribution in a

particular industry or for specific service failures, researchers could uncover nuanced insights and tailor managerial strategies that are more relevant to particular contexts.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into blame attribution in influencer marketing, acknowledging its limitations helps to identify further research areas. Addressing these limitations and exploring new avenues can build a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon and enhance theoretical and practical knowledge in this field.

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8. APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix A: List of Abbreviations

SMI	Social media influencer
WOM	Word-of-mouth
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy

8.2 Appendix B: Questionnaire

I'm a Master of Management student at the University of Hasselt, specialising in International Marketing Strategy. My research explores customer experiences with influencers, focusing on service failures related to their recommendations. A service failure occurs when a service does not meet your expectations. Your input is valuable and will help me to better understand consumer behaviour.

This survey takes about 15 minutes. Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. All responses are recorded anonymously, and information will be kept strictly confidential and used for research purposes only.

Do you agree to participate in this survey?

- I agree and would like to take the survey.
- I disagree and do not wish to proceed.

To participate in this survey, you must have experienced a service failure after following an influencer's recommendation. A service failure happens when a service doesn't meet your expectations.

Consider this scenario:

You see an influencer's content about a service provider (e.g., a TikTok video, Instagram post, YouTube video). Inspired by what you saw, you decide to try the service. This service could involve anything from eating at restaurant, staying at a hotel, visiting a wellness centre, attending an event, hiring a personal trainer, using a bank, choosing a delivery service, consulting an accounting firm, hiring a construction company, consulting a travel agency, participating in a leisure activity, visiting a salon, participating in gym classes, employing cleaning services, or using a car rental service, among other services. However, when you tried the service, you found that it was not as good as you expected. It did not meet the standards that the influencer had suggested.

Have you experienced something similar?

- Yes, I have experienced a similar situation.
- No, I have not experienced a similar situation.

Let's start with the survey. Please read each question carefully and provide your honest opinions and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, and your input is appreciated, no matter your viewpoint.

Please think about one specific instance where you experienced a service failure after following an influencer's recommendation. Can you briefly explain what happened in your experience?

Throughout the survey, please refer to the specific experience you described above. All following questions should be answered based on that single instance.

Please think about the situation that you described when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not severe at all and 7 being Extremely severe) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
How severe do you think this situation was?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation that you described when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not inconvenient at all and 7 being Extremely inconvenient) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
What level of inconvenience has this situation caused you?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation that you described when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not stressful at all and 7 being Extremely stressful) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
What level of stress has this situation caused you?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation that you described when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not unfair at all and 7 being Extremely unfair) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
How unfair do you think this situation was?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the influencer that recommended the service when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Strongly disagree and 7 being Strongly agree) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When this influencer shows me how they feel about something, it helps me make up my own mind about the issue.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This influencer makes me feel comfortable, as I am with friends.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I see this influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I look forward to viewing or hearing about this influencer.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
If this influencer appeared on a television program, I would watch that program.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I would like to meet this influencer in person.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think this influencer is like an old friend.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I follow what this influencer is saying and doing.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I'm viewing this influencer on Instagram/TikTok/YouTube/…, I feel as if I am part of their group.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the influencer that recommended the service when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Strongly disagree and 7 being Strongly agree) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Although this influencer posts ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This influencer gives very honest reviews on brands.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The products and brands this influencer endorses vibe well with their personality.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This influencer promotes products they would actually use.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation where the recommended service failed to meet your expectations. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Strongly disagree and 7 being Strongly agree) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The problem that I encountered was all the influencer's fault.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The problem that I encountered was all the service provider's (the company's) fault.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation where the recommended service failed to meet your expectations. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not at all responsible and 7 being Totally responsible) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To what extent was the influencer responsible for the problem that you experienced?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent was the service provider (the company) responsible for the problem that you experienced?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation where the recommended service failed to meet your expectations. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Not at all and 7 being Completely) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To what extent do you blame the influencer for this problem?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
To what extent do you blame the service provider (the company) for this problem?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the situation where the recommended service failed to meet your expectations. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Strongly disagree and 7 being Strongly agree) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The employee(s) in the service organisation understood my needs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The employee(s) carried out the service exactly as I expected it.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The employee(s) provided prompt and quick service.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The employee(s) made me feel comfortable in dealing with them.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The employee(s) provided in-depth information of the service.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The employee(s) were willing to help me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Generally, the physical facilities and employee(s) are neat and clean.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please think about the service provider (the company) that you visited/used when answering these questions. On a scale of 1-7 (1 being Completely dissatisfied and 7 being Completely satisfied) rate the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Overall, how satisfied are you with the service provider?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

What gender do you identify yourself as?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

What is your age in years?

- Below 18
- 18 – 25
- 26 – 35
- 36 – 45
- 46 – 55
- 56 Above

Thank you for completing this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

Your feedback is invaluable to this research. If you have any further questions, comments or suggestions, please feel free to email babette.heines@student.uhasselt.be

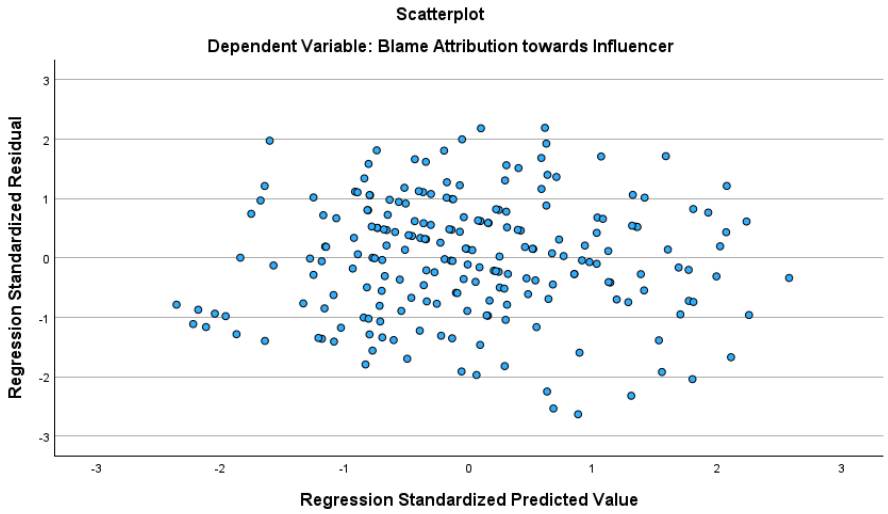
8.3 Appendix C: Outlier Detection

8.3.1 Regression Model 1

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	2,3414	5,4330	3,8171	,62667	215
Std. Predicted Value	-2,355	2,579	,000	1,000	215
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,088	,321	,168	,047	215
Adjusted Predicted Value	2,3751	5,4493	3,8189	,62549	215
Residual	-3,36793	2,79935	,00000	1,26968	215
Std. Residual	-2,634	2,189	,000	,993	215
Stud. Residual	-2,683	2,210	-,001	1,003	215
Deleted Residual	-3,49463	2,85374	-,00189	1,29589	215
Stud. Deleted Residual	-2,724	2,231	-,001	1,007	215
Mahal. Distance	,026	12,499	2,986	2,239	215
Cook's Distance	,000	,068	,005	,009	215
Centered Leverage Value	,000	,058	,014	,010	215

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

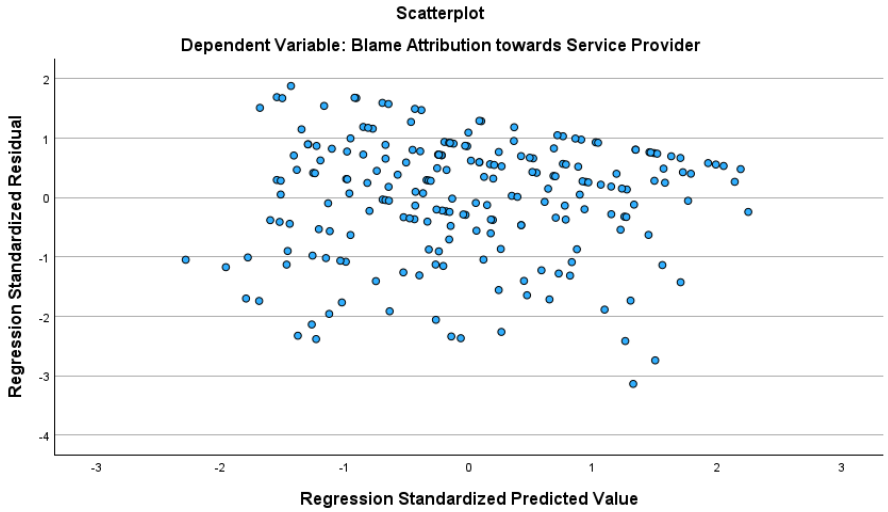


8.3.2 Regression Model 2

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	3,8378	6,3494	5,1023	,55435	215
Std. Predicted Value	-2,281	2,250	,000	1,000	215
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,099	,360	,188	,053	215
Adjusted Predicted Value	3,9094	6,3599	5,1029	,55296	215
Residual	-4,50242	2,69221	,00000	1,42407	215
Std. Residual	-3,139	1,877	,000	,993	215
Stud. Residual	-3,160	1,901	,000	1,003	215
Deleted Residual	-4,56103	2,76216	-,00053	1,45352	215
Stud. Deleted Residual	-3,230	1,913	-,002	1,008	215
Mahal. Distance	,026	12,499	2,986	2,239	215
Cook's Distance	,000	,076	,005	,009	215
Centered Leverage Value	,000	,058	,014	,010	215

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

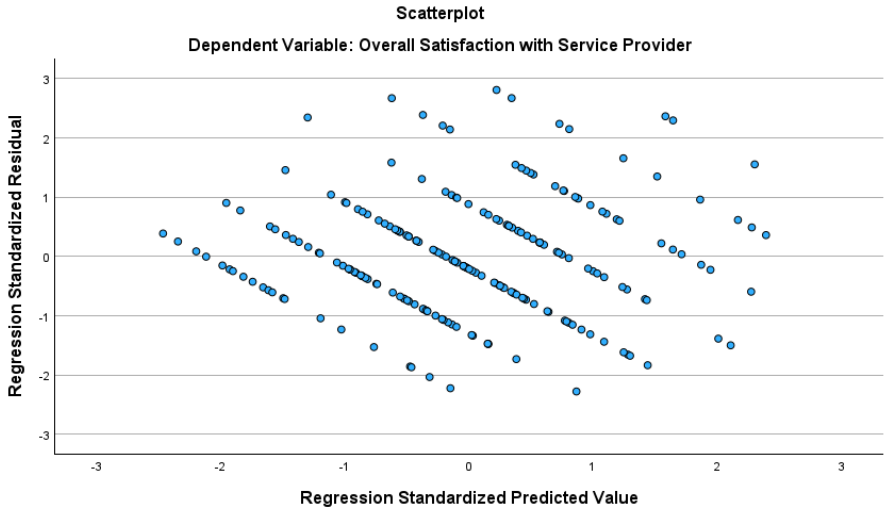


8.3.3 Regression Model 3

Residuals Statistics[a]

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Predicted Value	,65	5,67	3,20	1,035	215
Std. Predicted Value	-2,463	2,393	,000	1,000	215
Standard Error of Predicted Value	,072	,267	,135	,038	215
Adjusted Predicted Value	,61	5,66	3,20	1,035	215
Residual	-2,091	2,575	,000	,909	215
Std. Residual	-2,280	2,807	,000	,991	215
Stud. Residual	-2,322	2,817	,000	1,003	215
Deleted Residual	-2,168	2,593	,000	,932	215
Stud. Deleted Residual	-2,346	2,865	,001	1,009	215
Mahal. Distance	,341	17,197	3,981	2,789	215
Cook's Distance	,000	,077	,005	,010	215
Centered Leverage Value	,002	,080	,019	,013	215

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider



8.4 Appendix D: Demographics

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	68	31,6	31,6	31,6
	Female	145	67,4	67,4	99,1
	Non-binary / third gender	1	,5	,5	99,5
	Prefer not to say	1	,5	,5	100,0
	Total	215	100,0	100,0	

Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 18	3	1,4	1,4	1,4
	18 to 25	115	53,5	53,5	54,9
	26 to 35	71	33,0	33,0	87,9
	36 to 45	14	6,5	6,5	94,4
	46 to 55	7	3,3	3,3	97,7
	56 to 65	5	2,3	2,3	100,0
	Total	215	100,0	100,0	

8.5 Appendix E: Reliability Statistics

8.5.1 Relationship Strength

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,888	,887	9

8.5.2 Perceived Trustworthiness

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,823	,825	4

8.5.3 Blame Attribution Social Media Influencer

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,867	,867	3

8.5.4 Blame Attribution Service Provider

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,903	,906	3

8.5.5 Service Failure Severity

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,877	,879	4

8.5.6 Service Quality

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,878	,878	7

8.6 Appendix F: Factor Analysis

8.6.1 Relationship Strength

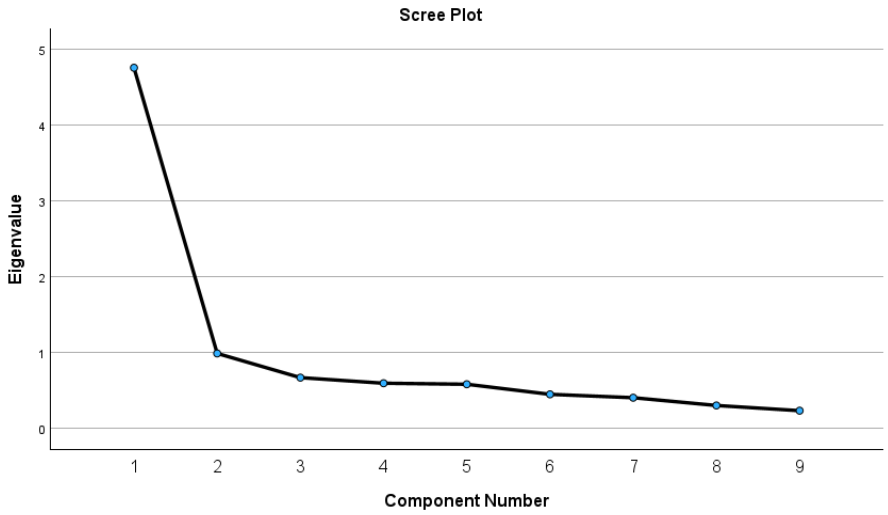
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,871
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	890,343
	df	36
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4,760	52,894	52,894	4,760	52,894	52,894
2	,991	11,007	63,901			
3	,671	7,459	71,360			
4	,597	6,637	77,996			
5	,584	6,489	84,485			
6	,451	5,011	89,496			
7	,406	4,515	94,011			
8	,304	3,376	97,387			
9	,235	2,613	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.6.2 Perceived Trustworthiness

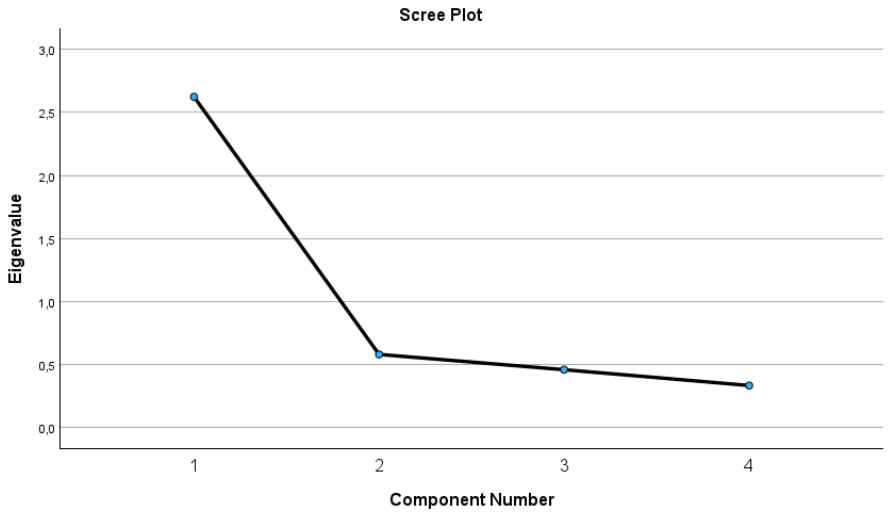
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,776
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	307,144
	df	6
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2,625	65,613	65,613	2,625	65,613	65,613
2	,581	14,529	80,142			
3	,460	11,499	91,640			
4	,334	8,360	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.6.3 Blame Attribution Social Media Influencer

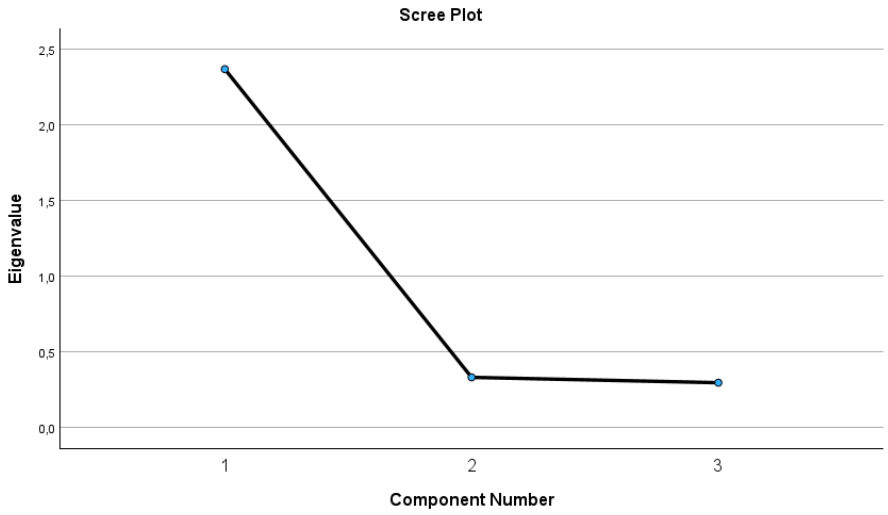
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,738
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	307,858
	df	3
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2,370	79,005	79,005	2,370	79,005	79,005
2	,333	11,085	90,090			
3	,297	9,910	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.6.4 Blame Attribution Service Provider

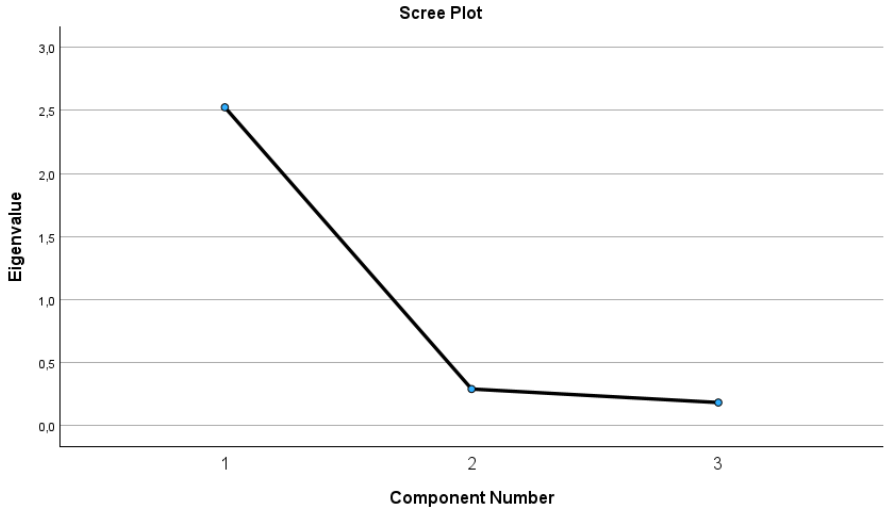
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,745
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	425,198
	df	3
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2,526	84,190	84,190	2,526	84,190	84,190
2	,291	9,692	93,882			
3	,184	6,118	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.6.5 Service Failure Severity

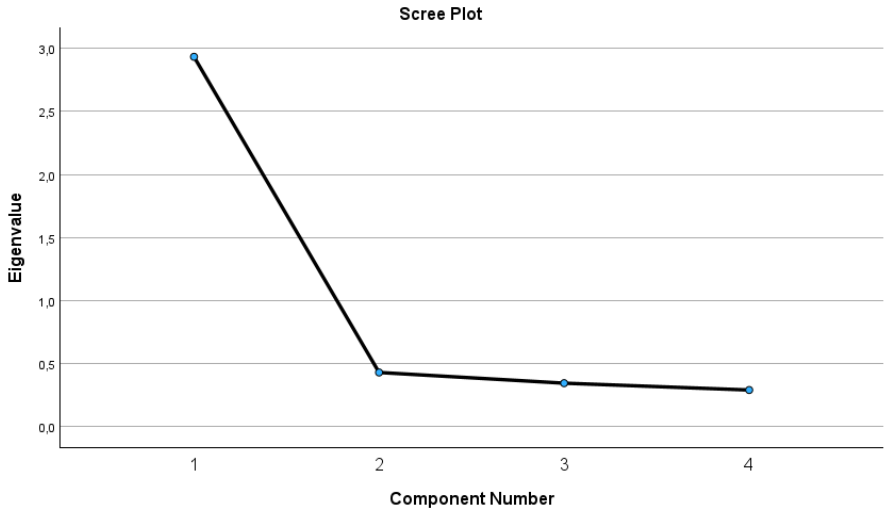
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,835
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	437,789
	df	6
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2,934	73,354	73,354	2,934	73,354	73,354
2	,430	10,748	84,102			
3	,345	8,627	92,729			
4	,291	7,271	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.6.6 Service Quality

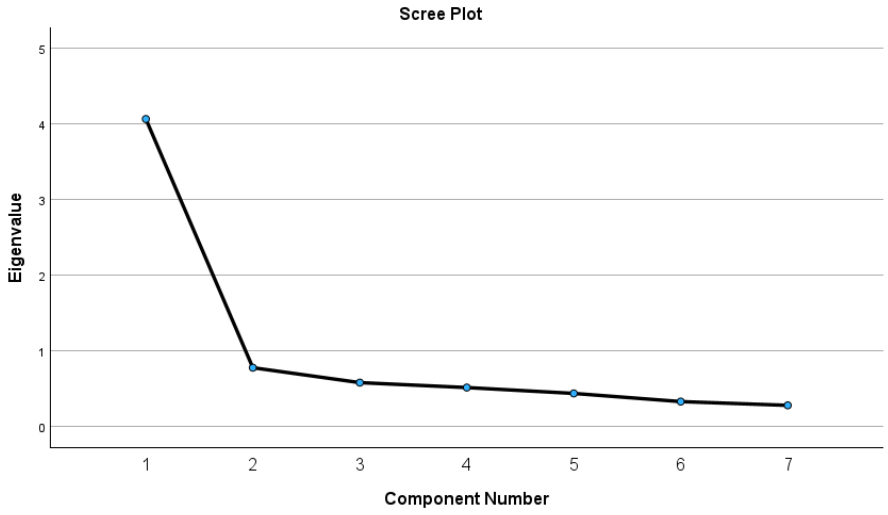
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,887
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	682,562
	df	21
	Sig.	<,001

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4,068	58,110	58,110	4,068	58,110	58,110
2	,780	11,136	69,245			
3	,582	8,319	77,564			
4	,517	7,388	84,953			
5	,440	6,282	91,234			
6	,332	4,738	95,972			
7	,282	4,028	100,000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.



8.7 Appendix G: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics

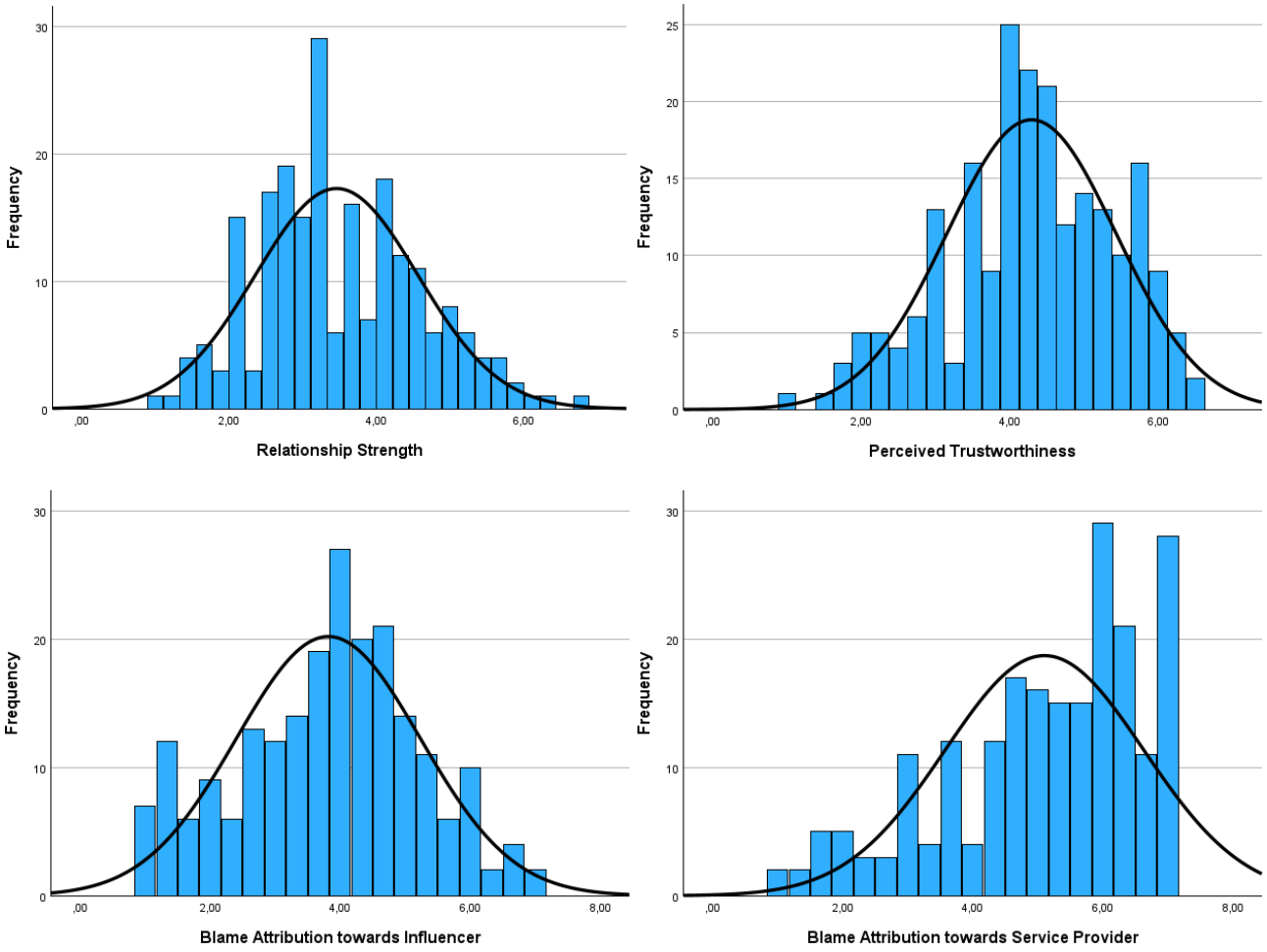
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Relationship Strength	215	1,00	6,78	3,4594	1,10348	,299	,166	-,237	,330
Perceived Trustworthiness	215	1,00	6,50	4,2907	1,14019	-,337	,166	-,323	,330
Blame Attribution towards Influencer	215	1,00	7,00	3,8171	1,41591	-,155	,166	-,500	,330
Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	215	1,00	7,00	5,1023	1,52816	-,766	,166	-,200	,330
Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider	215	1	7	3,20	1,377	,456	,166	-,199	,330
Service Failure Severity	215	1,00	6,75	3,8512	1,36736	,071	,166	-,992	,330
Service Quality	215	1,00	6,29	3,7329	1,13660	-,198	,166	-,266	,330
Valid N (listwise)	215								

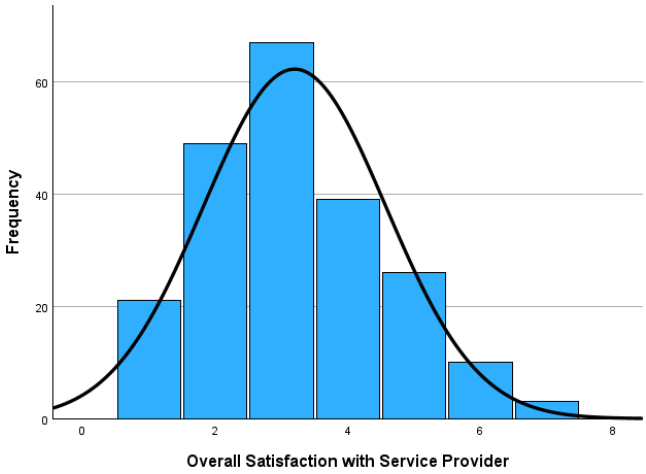
Statistics

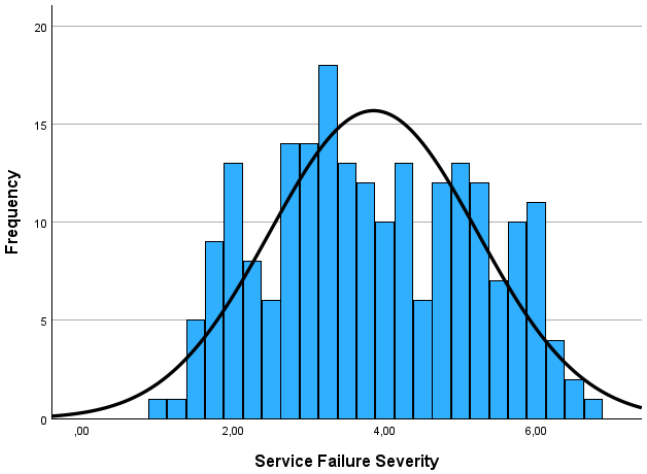
		Relationship Strength	Perceived Trustworthiness	Blame Attribution towards Influencer	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider	Service Failure Severity	Service Quality
N	Valid	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3,4594	4,2907	3,8171	5,1023	3,20	3,8512	3,7329
Median		3,3333	4,2500	4,0000	5,3333	3,00	3,7500	3,8571
Mode		3,22[a]	4,00	4,00	6,00	3	3,25	4,00
Std. Deviation		1,10348	1,14019	1,41591	1,52816	1,377	1,36736	1,13660
Skewness		,299	-,337	-,155	-,766	,456	,071	-,198
Std. Error of Skewness		,166	,166	,166	,166	,166	,166	,166
Kurtosis		-,237	-,323	-,500	-,200	-,199	-,992	-,266
Std. Error of Kurtosis		,330	,330	,330	,330	,330	,330	,330
Minimum		1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1	1,00	1,00
Maximum		6,78	6,50	7,00	7,00	7	6,75	6,29

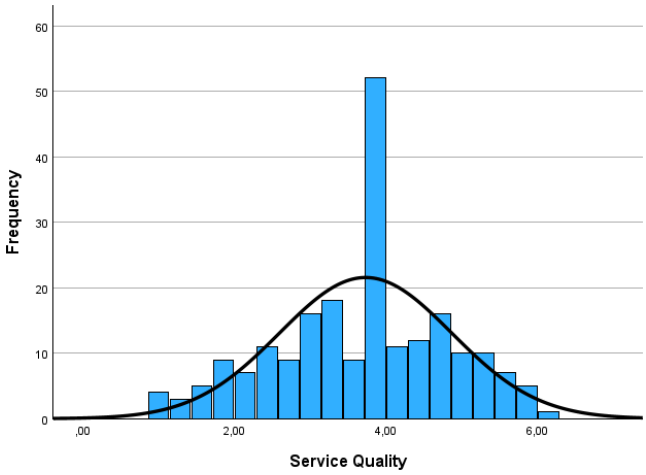
a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

8.8 Appendix H: Histograms



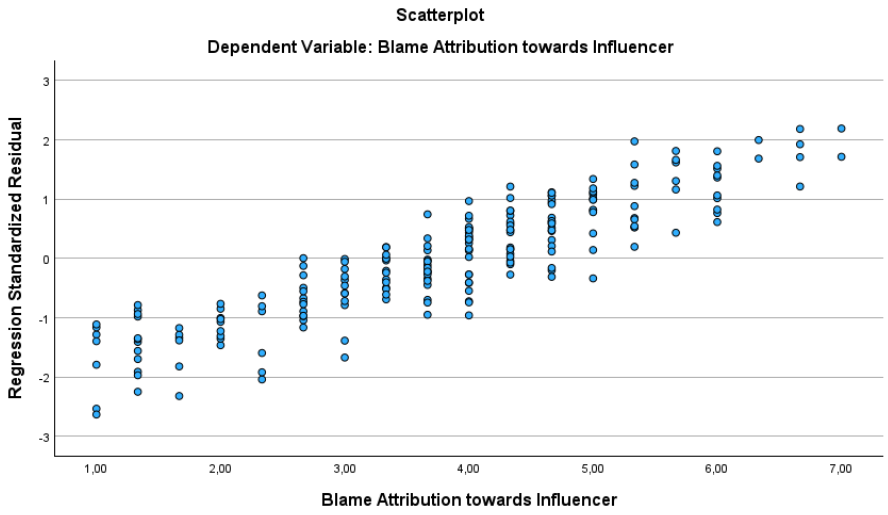




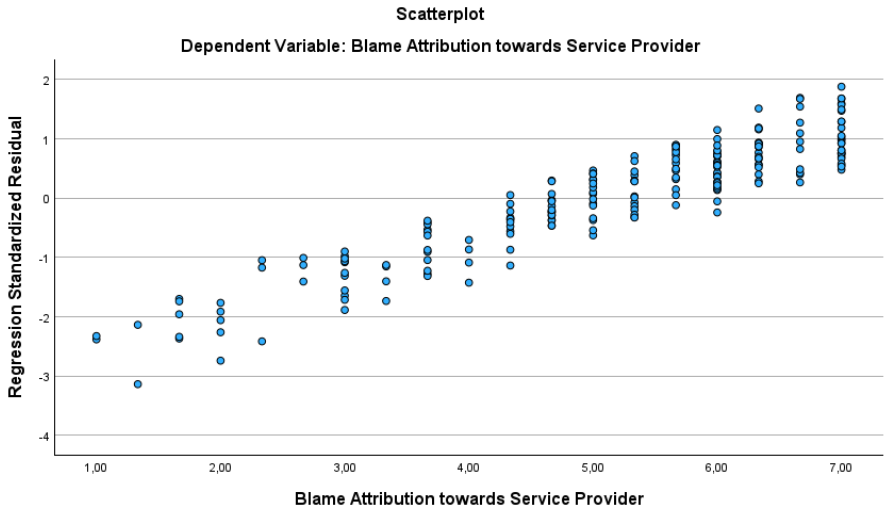


8.9 Appendix I: Linear Relationship

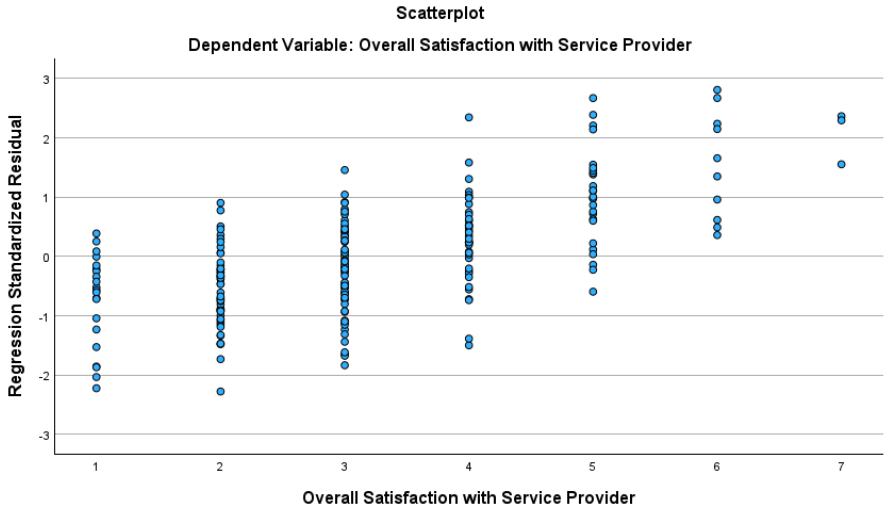
8.9.1 Regression Model 1



8.9.2 Regression Model 2

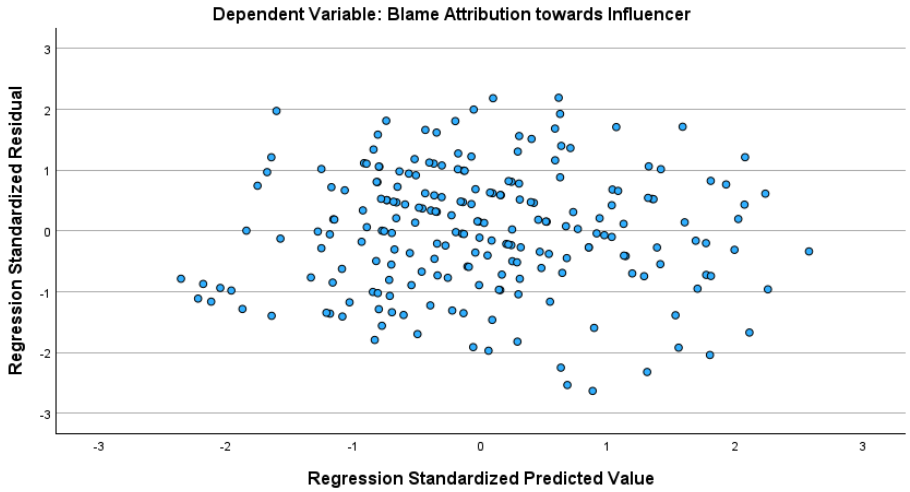


8.9.3 Regression Model 3

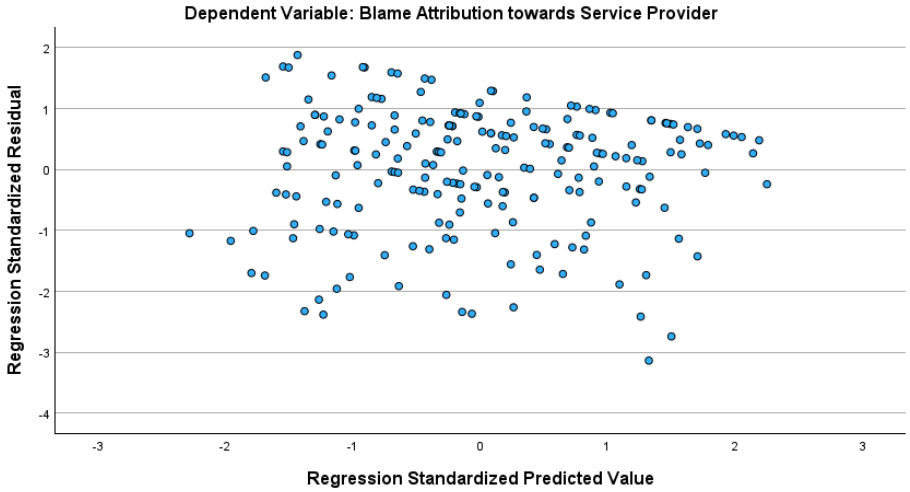


8.10 Appendix J: Homoscedasticity

8.10.1 Regression Model 1



8.10.2 Regression Model 2



8.10.3 Regression Model 3

Breusch-Pagan Test

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9,576	1	9,576	6,529	,011[b]
	Residual	312,424	213	1,467		
	Total	322,000	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Squared_Residuals

b. Predictors: (Constant), Unstandardized Predicted Value

White Test

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	39,582	14	2,827	2,002	,019[b]
	Residual	282,418	200	1,412		
	Total	322,000	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Squared_Residuals2

b. Predictors: (Constant), Severity_Quality, Blame Attribution towards Service Provider, Blame_Influencer_Sq, Severity_Sq, Quality_Sq, Blame_Influencer_Blame_Service, Blame_Service_Quality, Blame_Influencer_Quality, Blame_Influencer_Severity, Blame_Service_Severity, Blame_Service_Sq, Blame Attribution towards Influencer, Service Failure Severity, Service Quality

8.11 Appendix K: Correlation

8.11.1 All Variables

Correlations

		Relationship Strength	Perceived Trustworthiness	Blame Attribution towards Influencer	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider	Service Failure Severity	Service Quality
Relationship Strength	Pearson Correlation	1	,522**	-,174*	,182**	-,020	,130	-,040
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	,011	,007	,770	,056	,558
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Perceived Trustworthiness	Pearson Correlation	,522**	1	-,319**	,060	,110	-,011	,055
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	,385	,107	,878	,419
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Blame Attribution towards Influencer	Pearson Correlation	-,174*	-,319**	1	-,078	-,005	,304**	,125
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,011	<,001		,255	,945	<,001	,067
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	Pearson Correlation	,182**	,060	-,078	1	-,598**	,335**	-,454**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,007	,385	,255		<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider	Pearson Correlation	-,020	,110	-,005	-,598**	1	-,293**	,667**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,770	,107	,945	<,001		<,001	<,001
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Service Failure Severity	Pearson Correlation	,130	-,011	,304**	,335**	-,293**	1	-,227**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,056	,878	<,001	<,001	<,001		<,001
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	-,040	,055	,125	-,454**	,667**	-,227**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,558	,419	,067	<,001	<,001	<,001	
	N	215	215	215	215	215	215	215

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

8.11.2 Regression Model 1 and 2

Correlations

		Relationship Strength	Perceived Trustworthiness	Service Failure Severity
Relationship Strength	Pearson Correlation	1	,522**	,130
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	,056
	N	215	215	215
Perceived Trustworthiness	Pearson Correlation	,522**	1	-,011
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		,878
	N	215	215	215
Service Failure Severity	Pearson Correlation	,130	-,011	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,056	,878	
	N	215	215	215

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

8.11.3 Regression Model 3

Correlations

		Blame Attribution towards Influencer	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	Service Failure Severity	Service Quality
Blame Attribution towards Influencer	Pearson Correlation	1	-,078	,304**	,125
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,255	<,001	,067
	N	215	215	215	215
Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	Pearson Correlation	-,078	1	,335**	-,454**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,255		<,001	<,001
	N	215	215	215	215
Service Failure Severity	Pearson Correlation	,304**	,335**	1	-,227**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001
	N	215	215	215	215
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	,125	-,454**	-,227**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,067	<,001	<,001	
	N	215	215	215	215

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

8.12 Appendix L: Regression Model 1

8.12.1 Direct Relationship – All Variables

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,443[a]	,196	,184	1,27867

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness, Relationship Strength

b. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	84,042	3	28,014	17,134	<,001[b]
	Residual	344,984	211	1,635		
	Total	429,026	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness, Relationship Strength

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4,376	,430		10,181	<,001
	Relationship Strength	-,087	,094	-,068	-,924	,356
	Perceived Trustworthiness	-,349	,090	-,281	-3,863	<,001
	Service Failure Severity	,321	,065	,310	4,963	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

8.12.2 Direct Relationship – Relationship Strength

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,373[a]	,139	,131	1,31998

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	59,649	2	29,824	17,117	<,001[b]
	Residual	369,378	212	1,742		
	Total	429,026	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3,454	,369		9,360	<,001
	Relationship Strength	-,279	,082	-,217	-3,378	<,001
	Service Failure Severity	,345	,067	,333	5,177	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

8.12.3 Moderating Relationship

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,426[a]	,181	,170	1,29031

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity, Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	77,730	3	25,910	15,562	<,001[b]
	Residual	351,297	211	1,665		
	Total	429,026	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

b. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity, Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,581	,266		9,702	<,001
	Service Failure Severity	,713	,108	,689	6,626	<,001
	Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity	-,017	,023	-,084	-,717	,474
	Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity	-,078	,023	-,415	-3,418	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Influencer

8.13 Appendix M: Regression Model 2

8.13.1 Direct Relationship – All Variables

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,363[a]	,132	,119	1,43416

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness, Relationship Strength

b. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	65,763	3	21,921	10,658	<,001[b]
	Residual	433,986	211	2,057		
	Total	499,749	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness, Relationship Strength

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3,119	,482		6,470	<,001
	Relationship Strength	,206	,105	,149	1,952	,052
	Perceived Trustworthiness	-,020	,101	-,015	-,195	,845
	Service Failure Severity	,352	,073	,315	4,847	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

8.13.2 Direct Relationship – Relationship Strength

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,363[a]	,131	,123	1,43090

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	65,684	2	32,842	16,040	<,001[b]
	Residual	434,064	212	2,047		
	Total	499,749	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3,067	,400		7,667	<,001
	Relationship Strength	,195	,089	,141	2,182	,030
	Service Failure Severity	,353	,072	,316	4,898	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

8.13.3 Direct Relationship – Perceived Trustworthiness

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,340[a]	,116	,108	1,44363

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	57,926	2	28,963	13,897	<,001[b]
	Residual	441,823	212	2,084		
	Total	499,749	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

b. Predictors: (Constant), Service Failure Severity, Perceived Trustworthiness

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3,297	,477		6,919	<,001
	Perceived Trustworthiness	,084	,087	,063	,976	,330
	Service Failure Severity	,375	,072	,335	5,191	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

8.13.4 Moderating Relationship

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,356[a]	,127	,114	1,43830

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity, Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	63,250	3	21,083	10,192	<,001[b]
	Residual	436,498	211	2,069		
	Total	499,749	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

b. Predictors: (Constant), Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity, Service Failure Severity, Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3,728	,296		12,575	<,001
	Service Failure Severity	,234	,120	,209	1,950	,053
	Relationship Strength interaction Service Failure Severity	,043	,026	,201	1,667	,097
	Perceived Trustworthiness interaction Service Failure Severity	-,007	,025	-,033	-,265	,791

a. Dependent Variable: Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

8.14 Appendix N: Regression Model 3

8.14.1 Direct Relationship 3.1

Model Summary[b,c]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,806[a]	,650	,643	1,282

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer, Service Failure Severity, Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

b. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

c. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

ANOVA[a,b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	640,850	4	160,213	97,406	<,001[c]
	Residual	345,407	210	1,645		
	Total	986,257	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

c. Predictors: (Constant), Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer, Service Failure Severity, Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

Coefficients[a,b]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2,814	,427		6,586	<,001
	Blame Attribution towards Influencer	-,079	,040	-,084	-1,997	,047
	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	-,287	,048	-,308	-6,006	<,001
	Service Failure Severity	-,062	,046	-,064	-1,359	,176
	Service Quality	,640	,056	,569	11,367	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

8.14.2 Direct Relationship 3.2

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,804[a]	,647	,642	1,285

a. Predictors: (Constant), Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer, Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

ANOVA[a,b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	637,813	3	212,604	128,742	<,001[c]
	Residual	348,445	211	1,651		
	Total	986,257	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

c. Predictors: (Constant), Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer, Blame Attribution towards Service Provider

Coefficients[a,b]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2,640	,408		6,464	<,001
	Blame Attribution towards Influencer	-,091	,039	-,097	-2,338	,020
	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider	-,306	,046	-,328	-6,678	<,001
	Service Quality	,656	,055	,584	11,912	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

8.14.3 Moderating Relationship

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,809[a]	,654	,649	1,272

a. Predictors: (Constant), Blame Attribution towards Service Provider interaction Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer interaction Service Quality, Service Quality

ANOVA[a,b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	644,991	3	214,997	132,929	<,001[c]
	Residual	341,267	211	1,617		
	Total	986,257	214			

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable

c. Predictors: (Constant), Blame Attribution towards Service Provider interaction Service Quality, Blame Attribution towards Influencer interaction Service Quality, Service Quality

Coefficients[a,b]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	,449	,168		2,680	,008
	Service Quality	1,229	,080	1,093	15,327	<,001
	Blame Attribution towards Influencer interaction Service Quality	-,028	,012	-,145	-2,351	,020
	Blame Attribution towards Service Provider interaction Service Quality	-,079	,011	-,368	-7,038	<,001

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Satisfaction with Service Provider

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by Weight Variable