

Julia Müller and Thomas N. Friemel

# Meaning-Making through Social Media – Religious Influencers as Sources of Religious Meaning

**Abstract:** In recent years, religious influencers have emerged on social media as sources of meaning. However, few studies have explored the factors that contribute to their perceptions as sources of religious meaning. This study examines three potential factors: the perceived credibility of the influencer, the strength of the parasocial relationship (PSR) between the influencer and their followers and the perceived opinion leadership (POL) of the influencer. A survey was conducted among followers of religious influencers in the German-speaking regions of Europe. Results indicate that the strength of the PSR and POL is positively related with the extend of being regarded as a source of religious meaning. Specifically, the emotional connection through the PSR and cognitive perception attributed to the POL were found to be key mechanisms driving this perception. The study concludes by discussing the implications of these findings and providing suggestions for future research.

In den letzten Jahren haben sich religiöse Influencer:innen zu Sinnquellen auf den Sozialen Medien entwickelt. Die Faktoren, die dazu beitragen, dass sie als Quellen religiösen Sinns wahrgenommen werden, sind jedoch kaum erforscht. Diese Studie untersucht deshalb drei potenzielle Faktoren: die wahrgenommene Glaubwürdigkeit der Influencer:innen, die Stärke der parasozialen Beziehung (PSB) zwischen den Influencer:innen und ihren Follower:innen sowie die wahrgenommene Meinungsführerschaft der Influencer:innen. Dazu wurde eine Umfrage unter Follower:innen religiöser Influencer:innen im deutschsprachigen Raum durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Stärke der PSB und der wahrgenommene Meinungsführerschaft damit zusammenhängt, dass Influencer:innen als Quelle religiösen Sinns angesehen werden. Insbesondere die emotionale Verbindung durch PSB und die kognitive Wahrnehmung, die der wahrgenommenen Meinungsführerschaft zugeschrieben wurde, erwiesen sich als Schlüsselmechanismen. Die Studie schliesst mit einer Diskussion über die Bedeutung dieser Ergebnisse und mit Vorschlägen für die künftige Forschung.

# 1 Digital Media Use of Religious Individuals

In recent years, digital media has been increasingly used by religious individuals to experience and express their own beliefs (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). Within this broader field of research, the present study specifically focuses on the fulfilment of religious functions through digital media. To address this, a functional perspective on religion, which defines religion through the functions it can fulfil for the individual or society (Knoblauch 1999), is adopted and translated into the digital age. The aim of this approach is to understand the role that digital media can play in fulfilling religious functions for religious individuals (Hjarvard 2008; Müller and Friemel 2024). One function appears to be specifically relevant in relation to digital media: the function of religious meaning-making (Hoover and Park 2004; Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021; Schnell 2011). This function describes a process through which meaning is found in an everyday situation by referring to something or someone related to one's own religion (Müller and Friemel 2024; Taves 2018). Religion in general acts as one of the main sources of meaning in the lives of believers (Schnell 2011). Religion helps individuals understand many life questions, hence contributing to the meaningfulness of life (Park 2005; Schnell 2011). By interpreting religious scripture and conveying religious beliefs and attitudes, religious authorities traditionally communicate religious meaning (Müller 2022; Müller 2023). Hence, we refer to religious authorities as the sources of religious meaning.

In recent years, traditional religious authorities have witnessed a shift in religious communication toward the digital sphere, where digital media are increasingly used to express religiosity (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). This digitalisation of religion gave way to the emergence of a new form of religious authority: religious influencers on social media (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Myers et al. 2023; Schlag 2022; Müller 2023; Zaid et al. 2022). Like traditional religious authorities, these online influencers communicate religious information and religious beliefs while creating close relationships with their followers (Smith et al. 2021; Müller 2022). They use both pictures and text in their content to negotiate the bridge between their online and offline identities (Schlag 2022).

With these digital authorities available to religious individuals, it is crucial to understand the role they can play in the lives of religious individuals. Recent research has highlighted religious meaning-making through media (Hoover and Park 2004; Hjarvard 2008), especially social media (Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021). By being communicators of religious ideas, attitudes, interpretations and so forth, religious influencers might help their followers find meaning in their everyday lives (Müller 2023; Zaid et al. 2022), hence acting as a source of religious meaning. Our previous research revealed that, compared with other sources of meaning in

life, such as family or friends, religious influencers are seen as less relevant, thereby challenging their importance as sources of religious meaning compared with offline sources. Therefore, in the present study, we focus on potential factors that can increase the perception of a religious influencer as a source of religious meaning. Hence, we ask, ‘What are the relevant factors that determine whether a religious influencer is perceived to be a source of religious meaning, and how is this related to the general meaning in life?’ To answer this research question, a quantitative survey with Christians who follow religious influencers in Germany, the German-speaking parts of Switzerland and Austria ( $N = 186$ ,  $M_{age} = 22.45$ ;  $SD_{age} = 5.88$ ) was conducted. This study is part of the University Research Priority Programme ‘Digital Religion(s)’ and the project ‘Digital Social Dynamics of Spirituality’. This chapter adds to previous work on religious meaning-making (Müller 2021), interaction in the online sphere (Merian, Todjeras, and Müller 2023) and religious influencers (Schlag 2022; Müller 2023).

This chapter first describes the phenomenon of religious influence (sec. 2). Next, we investigate the role of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning and the potential influencing factors (sec. 3). Afterwards, the main hypothesis model that is used to answer the overarching research question is derived (sec. 4). The method and the sample (sec. 5) are described, followed by the analysis and results of the study (sec. 6). Finally, we discuss the results in light of previous research on religious influencers (sec. 7), name the limitations of the study (sec. 8) and take an outlook on future research in the field (sec. 9).

## 2 Religious Influencers

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on how religious individuals express themselves in the online sphere, especially on social media (Campbell 2020). Some actors actively and regularly post religious content and build a large following (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022): religious influencers.

Influencers are generally social media users who regularly post content on social media platforms, through which they promote brands, products or opinions. With this content and by communicating with their followers, they can influence their followers’ attitudes towards the respective subject (Jahnke 2021). In addition to their posting behaviour, the follower count is an important factor when the term ‘influencer’ is defined. Influencers can be classified into different categories based on their follower count. For example, ‘macro influencers’ can be defined as accounts with more than 100,000 followers, ‘micro influencers’ have between 10,000 and 50,000 followers, and ‘nano influencers’ have fewer than 10,000

followers (Jahnke 2021). In addition to the number of followers, the engagement of influencers with their followers is crucial. Hence, even a nanoinfluencer with fewer than 10,000 followers could have a large impact in their niche topic (Jahnke 2021).

Social media influencers may also aim to promote ideologies, ethics or meanings rather than products (Baake et al. 2022; Schorn, Vinzenz, and Wirth 2022; Müller 2022). These have been labelled ‘Sinnfluencers’. This word stems from a combination of the German word for meaning (*‘sinn’*) and ‘influencer’, marking these types of online creators as sources of meaning. By communicating religious attitudes and beliefs and not primarily focusing on brand marketing, religious influencers also fall under the term ‘Sinnfluencer’ (Schlag 2022; Müller 2022).

Based on previous research, religious influencers are defined here as creators who regularly post content on social media about their faith and religious lifestyle. With this, they aim to influence their followers’ attitudes towards their religion (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022). Through their content, religious influencers communicate personal narratives about faith experiences (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Zaid et al. 2022), religious ideas, attitudes and meanings (Smith et al. 2021; Cheong 2022; Krain and Mößle 2020; Schlag 2022; Müller 2022). A distinct feature that sets religious influencers apart from other influencers is their self-perception: They see themselves as having a transcendent calling to act as influencers on social media and communicate their faith and beliefs to encourage others to adopt their beliefs (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022). These religious influencers can be both a part of a religious organisation, such as a pastor or an imam (Cheong 2022; Zaid et al. 2022), hence being a religious leader who shifted into the online sphere (Schlag 2022), or a person with no such prior affiliation or religious education (Campbell and Bellar 2023). In both cases, utilising the online sphere allows them to become accessible not only through the church or other religious communities but also beyond it (Cheong 2022). Through their content and interactions with their followers, religious influencers aim to build close parasocial relationships with their followers to encourage them to embrace influencers’ beliefs (Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, by including specific religious cues, for example, the naming of God or Jesus, in their content, they can activate their follower’s religious social identity, leading to high engagement among their followers (Myers et al. 2023).

In the past, these religious influencers appeared in different religious traditions, such as Islam (Zaid et al. 2022) and Christianity (Smith et al. 2021; Myers et al. 2023; Müller 2022). As Christianity is the most prevalent religion in the German-speaking regions of Europe (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020; Müller and Pollack 2022; Statistik Austria 2022), we specifically focus on Christian influencers. Especially for German-speaking regions, little is known about how Christian influ-

encers are perceived by their followers. One study surveyed the followers of protestant influencers on Instagram and reported that the influencers were perceived as authentic expressions of lived religiosity that help inspire and strengthen their followers' faith. Furthermore, influencers have been seen as important for followers' religious life (Hörsch 2023). These findings highlight the importance of better understanding the role that religious influencers play as a source of religious meaning.

### 3 Religious Influencers as Sources of Meaning

Referring to religious influencers as 'Sinnfluencers' suggests the communication of meaning to their followers (Schlag 2022; Müller 2021), thereby implying their role as a source of religious meaning. Generally, sources of meaning help individuals in their search for understanding and orientation in life (Schnell 2009). They guide individuals to achieve meaningfulness in their lives and increase happiness and well-being (Grouden and Jose 2015). Meaning in life can generally be seen as a system of beliefs, assumptions and goals of an individual who defines how life events are perceived and interpreted (Park 2005). Meaning in life can be investigated by examining three overarching concepts: the coherence of one's own understanding of the world, the overall purpose in life and the general feeling of significance (Martela and Steger 2022). Religious authorities act as the communicators of religious meaning because they provide interpretations of religious text, religious values and attitudes (Müller 2021; Müller 2023). With the shift to the online sphere, religious influencers use their platform to communicate religious ideas. To better understand the conditions that might favour if an influencer is perceived to be a source of meaning (SoM), we explore three aspects: influencer credibility, the parasocial relationship (PSR) and the perceived opinion leadership (POL) of the influencer. In other domains, these three aspects have been shown to be central in determining an influencer's ability to persuade their followers (Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021; Han and Balabanis 2024; Yuan and Lou 2020).

#### 3.1 Source Credibility

The perceived source credibility is defined through three main aspects: the trustworthiness of the influencer, the expertise of the influencer in their respective field and the physical attractiveness of the influencer (Ohanian 1990; Yuan and Lou 2020). The perceived credibility of the influencer is especially important in a

religious context: With the rise of the internet, an increasing number of opposing opinions on religious issues and interpretations became vocal, and the internet became difficult to navigate for religious individuals (Moberg, Kheir, and Gökce 2020). Therefore, perceived credibility is a central base criterion for following religious influencers and might affect whether the influencer is perceived as a source of religious meaning. This perceived credibility of the influencer has been shown to be related with other perception variables (Fernandes Crespo and Tille 2024; Yuan and Lou 2020).

PSRs with influencers are built based on this perceived trustworthiness, expertise in their field and physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). Additionally, these three dimensions affect if an influencer is seen as an opinion leader (Jegham and Bouzaabia 2022; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid 2018; Peter and Muth 2023). In particular, expertise is relevant: Studies on political influencers on social media could show that they can be perceived as opinion leaders by their followers, especially if the influencers are seen as experts in their field (Baake et al. 2022). Hence, the dimensions of credibility can influence both the PSR with an influencer and the POL of an influencer.

### 3.2 Parasocial Relationships

Research has shown that individuals following influencers build so-called parasocial relationships with these influencers (Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021; Rosaen and Dibble 2016; Yuan and Lou 2020). A parasocial relationship describes ‘a lingering sense of intimacy and connectedness with media personalities’ (Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020, 868). These social connections are long-lasting and go beyond the mere reception experience (Horton and Wohl 1956; Rosaen and Dibble 2016). Religious influencers may work at building these relationships to better persuade their followers of their beliefs (Smith et al. 2021). The relationship between followers and influencers differs from the traditional understanding of the PSR because social media platforms offer space for real-time and asynchronous interactions between followers and influencers. This phenomenon has been referred to as trans-parasocial relationships (Lou 2022). It can be assumed that a strong PSR with an influencer could affect their role as a source of religious meaning. Previous research has shown that social relationships such as friendships and family contribute to the general feeling of having meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015), showing that one main SoM is relationships with others (De Vogler and Ebersole 1981). Because PSRs can be seen as the meaningful connection between the follower and the (social) media person (Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020), having

a PSR with the influencer could contribute to the perception of the influencer as being a source of religious meaning.

### 3.3 Perceived Opinion Leadership

In addition to perceived source credibility and the PSR, the POL of an influencer might affect their role as a SoM. In general, opinion leaders are individuals who can exert a strong influence on the decision-making of others because they are sought out to obtain advice and information (Rogers and Cartano 1962). Influencers, as opinion leaders, ‘can be conceptualized as semi-professional communicators, who range somewhere between friends and role models, which is why followers are more likely to trust their recommendations’ (Peter and Muth 2023, 165). Influencers identified as opinion leaders shape their followers’ attitudes toward certain brands or products and can influence follow-up behaviour (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021; Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). Although this has been shown for marketing influencers (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021), only recently has research examined the role of ‘Sinnfluencers’ in this role of opinion leaders. They are mostly received not as a primary source of information but as the interpreters of prior information from different sources (Peter and Muth 2023). Because the perception of the influencer as an opinion leader can affect the persuasiveness of an influencer and, therefore, can affect attitude formation and behavioural intentions (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Hörsch 2023; Peter and Muth 2023), we assume that the perception of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning might also be shaped by their perception as opinion leaders.

## 4 Hypothesis Model

To answer the research question – ‘What are the relevant factors that determine whether a religious influencer is perceived as being a source of religious meaning and how is this related to the general meaning in life?’ – we pose a hypothesis model (s. Figure 1) based on the previous research presented above.

Because credibility in the form of trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness is especially relevant in today’s online sphere (Moberg, Kheir, and

Gökce 2020), we propose that this credibility predicts whether an influencer is seen as a source of religious meaning:

H1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the more religious influencers are perceived as sources of religious meaning.

Research has shown that higher credibility expressed through trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness is associated with a higher PSR (Yuan and Lou 2020). Because relationships can be seen as important sources of meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015), a PSR with the influencer might also affect if the influencer is perceived as a source of religious meaning. Based on this research, we propose the following mediation:

H2: The relationships among the trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of the influencer and the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning are mediated through the PSR with the influencer.

H2.1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the stronger the PSR with the religious influencer will be.

H2.2: The stronger the PSR with the influencer is, the stronger the degree to which the religious influencer is perceived to be a SoM.

Apart from the PSR with the influencer, influencer credibility has been shown to be associated with a higher POL (Jegham and Bouzaabia 2022). Because the POL can influence the persuasiveness of an influencer (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021), we assume that it might also affect perception as a source of religious meaning. Hence, we propose the following mediation:

H3: The relationships between the trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of the influencer and the perception of the influencer are mediated through POL.

H3.1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the greater the POL will be.

H3.2: The greater the POL of the influencer is, the stronger the religious influencer is perceived to be a SoM.

Finally, because SoMs can be assumed to have an impact on the overall sense of meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015; Schnell 2009), we propose the following hypothesis:



H4: The stronger an influencer is perceived to be a SoM, the greater the overall coherence of the meaning system (a), purpose in life (b) and significance of life (c) of the follower.

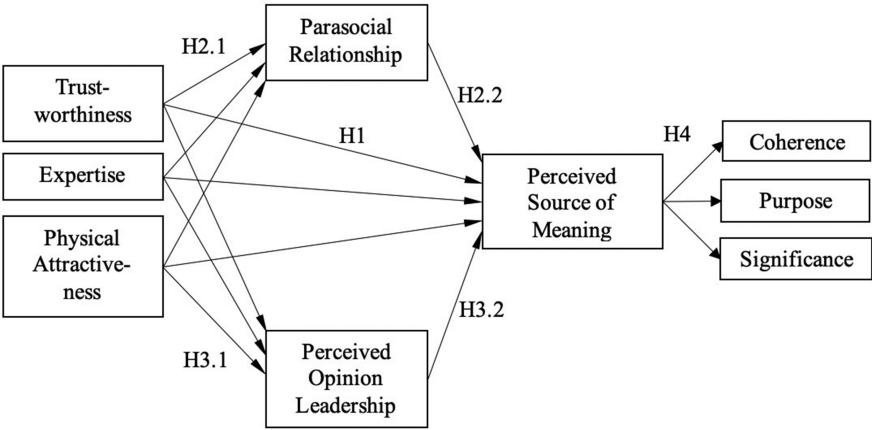


Figure 1: Hypothesis model.

## 5 Methods

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a quantitative survey among young Christians (14+ years old) in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland who follow Christian influencers. Currently, the Christian faith is the most prominent in these three countries; hence, we focus on this faith tradition (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020; Müller and Pollack 2022; Statistik Austria 2022). To recruit the participants for the survey, we contacted all protestant, Catholic and independent regional church organisations in each country and invited them to share our survey with their members. For each regional church organisation, the person responsible for youth or young adults was contacted. Younger participants were specifically targeted because the followers of religious influencers seem to be predominantly young (Hörsch 2023). We then followed up multiple times through e-mail and telephone. In total, 669 individuals participated in our survey. Among the study participants, 289 followed Christian creators on social media, of whom 186 followed religious influencers, as defined in the present paper. On average, the participants were 22 years old ( $M_{age} = 22.4$ ;  $SD_{age} = 5.88$ ), mostly female (73%) and well educated (58% had at least a high school diploma). Regarding religious denominations, the sample included 41% protestants, 13% Catholics and 46% independent church members (e.g., Baptists, Methodists). Most of the partic-

ipants were from Germany (74%), whereas Switzerland (20%) and Austria (4%) made up a smaller proportion of the sample. The participants highly believed in God ( $M = 6.0$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ; 1 = *no faith*; 7 = *very high faith*).

The questionnaire first asked whether the participants viewed religious creators who regularly posted online about their faith. If so, we then asked for the names of religious influencers. The participants were able to enter the names of up to three religious influencers they viewed most frequently. All the following variables then referred to their most frequently seen religious influencer. Here, we first asked for general information about the influencer, followed by questions regarding the perceived credibility of the influencer, the PSR with them, the influencer's POL and the influencer's role as a source of religious meaning. The participants were subsequently asked about their general meaning in life. Finally, the sociodemographic information of the participants was collected.

Regarding the perceptions of religious influencers, the variables were assessed using a seven-point likert scale via the following measures:

*Source credibility* was adopted from Yuan and Lou (2020) and measured through three subdimensions each with three items: trustworthiness (e.g., I consider [name of influencer] to be sincere), expertise (e.g., I consider [name of influencer] to be an expert in religious and faith-related issues), and physical attraction (e.g., I find [name of influencer] very attractive). The reliability of all scales was acceptable ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ).

The *PSR* with the influencer was measured following Rosaen, Sherry and Smith (2011) with three items (e.g., [Name of influencer] is a person I would like to spend time with privately). The reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ).

*POL* was assessed following the attributes for online opinion leadership defined by Jungnickel (2018) and measures with nine items inspired by Casaló, Flavián and Sánchez (2020) (e.g., [Name of influencer] is a role model for me in my faith). We conducted an explorative factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.87, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2(36) = 543.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. However, we found that all nine items loaded on a single dimension. The reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha > 0.8$ ).

*Influencer as a SoM* was measured with three items. The items were adopted from Martela and Steger (2022) and measured meaning in life (e.g., [influencer] makes me feel like my life has a purpose). The reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha > 0.8$ ).

*Meaning in life* was assessed via a scale by Martela and Steger (2022) that measured three dimensions of coherence (e.g., 'On the whole, I understand the world around me') ( $\alpha > 0.6$ ), purpose (e.g., 'I have a set of core goals that give my life direction') ( $\alpha > 0.6$ ) and significance (e.g., 'I have the feeling every day that my life is worth living') ( $\alpha > 0.7$ ).

## 6 Results

To first understand the general perceptions of religious influencers, we explored the data descriptively. We found that religious influencers were perceived as being highly trustworthy ( $M = 6.3$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ), to be experts in their field ( $M = 5.8$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and to be attractive ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ). The PSR revealed that followers seemed to have a PSR with the influencers ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ) and that the influencers were perceived as being opinion leaders ( $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). Furthermore, the descriptive results indicated that religious influencers were perceived as a SoM ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ).

To test the hypothesis, we subsequently conducted a path model in R, including the two mediations. The model was performed via 1000 bootstraps. The fit of the model was acceptable ( $\chi^2(31) = 47.02$ ,  $p = .03$ , CFI = .96; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .06). Table 1 shows all effects between the variables, and Figure 2 depicts the significant direct paths.

The results for H1 showed that the source credibility variables trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness had no significant direct effect on the perception of the influencer as a SoM. Hence, H1 is rejected.

For H2, looking at the direct effects hypothesised in H2.1 and H2.2, we found that trustworthiness ( $\beta = .29$ ) and physical attractiveness ( $\beta = .34$ ) predicted a higher PSR with the influencer, whereas the PSR with the influencer directly predicted the perception of the influencer as a SoM ( $\beta = .14$ ). For the overall assumption of a mediation of trustworthiness ( $\beta = .04$ ) and physical attractiveness ( $\beta = .05$ ) on SoM mediated through the PSR (H2), a significant indirect effect was found, and for trustworthiness, a significant total effect ( $\beta = .19$ ) was found.

Finally, for H3.1 and H3.2, trustworthiness ( $\beta = .24$ ) and expertise ( $\beta = .47$ ) significantly predicted POL. Furthermore, a stronger POL predicted a greater perception of the influencer as a SoM ( $\beta = .28$ ). Regarding the mediation (H3), we found a significant indirect effect of trustworthiness ( $\beta = .07$ ) and expertise ( $\beta = .13$ ) and a significant total effect of trustworthiness ( $\beta = .22$ ) on perceived SoM as mediated through opinion leadership.

Finally, for H4, a significant effect of the influencer as a perceived SoM on coherence of life ( $\beta = .18$ ) was found while no significant effect on purpose and significance of life was found.

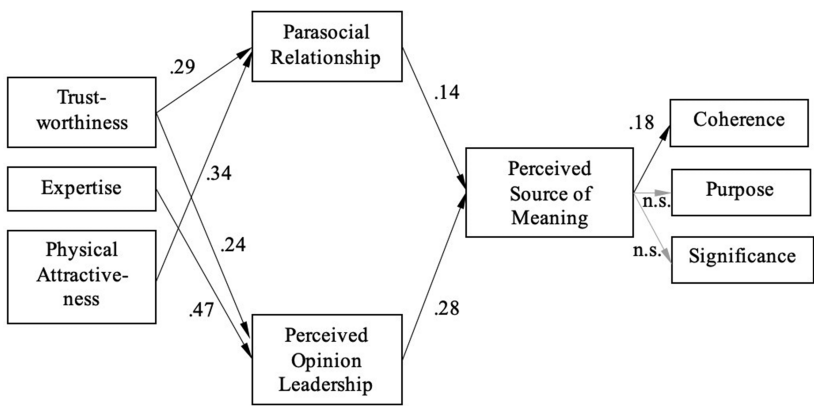
**Table 1:** Structural path estimates.

Path	Path Estimates	Standard Error	Lower confidence interval	Upper confidence interval
<b>Direct Effects</b>				
Trustworthiness → Perceived SoM	.15	.10	-.02	.37
Expertise → Perceived SoM	.06	.11	-.15	.27
Physical Attractiveness → Perceived SoM	.11	.09	-.09	.27
Trustworthiness → PSR	.29	.08	.11	.44
Expertise → PSR	.05	.10	-.17	.23
Physical Attractiveness → PSR	.34	.07	.19	.47
PSR → Perceived SoM	.14	.07	.01	.29
Trustworthiness → POL	.24	.09	.06	.43
Expertise → POL	.47	.08	.31	.61
Physical Attractiveness → POL	.06	.08	-.08	.24
POL → Perceived SoM	.28	.09	.10	.47
Perceived SoM → Coherence	.18	.08	.02	.34
Perceived SoM → Purpose	.13	.08	-.04	.27
Perceived SoM → Significance	.07	.08	-.10	.22
<b>Indirect Effects</b>				
Trustworthiness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.04	.03	.003	.11
Expertise → PSR → Perceived SoM	.01	.02	-.02	.05
Physical Attractiveness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.05	.03	.003	.11
Trustworthiness → POL → Perceived SoM	.07	.04	.01	.17
Expertise → POL → Perceived SoM	.13	.05	.04	.23
Physical Attractiveness → POL → Perceived SoM	.02	.02	-.02	.08
<b>Total Effect</b>				
Trustworthiness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.19	.10	.02	.40
Expertise → PSR → Perceived SoM	.06	.11	-.14	.27
Physical Attractiveness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.15	.09	-.02	.32
Trustworthiness → POL → Perceived SoM	.22	.10	.03	.43

**Table 1** (continued)

Path	Path Estimates	Standard Error	Lower confidence interval	Upper confidence interval
Expertise → POL→ Perceived SoM	.19	.10	-.02	.38
Physical Attractiveness → POL→ Perceived SoM	.12	.10	-.09	.29

Notes: If the upper and lower confidence intervals do not cross 0, the path between two variables is significant.



**Figure 2:** Path model with results.

Notes: The values adjacent to each path describe the strength of prediction (0–1).  
 General model fit:  $\chi^2(31) = 47.02$ ,  $p = .03$ , CFI = .96; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .06.

# 7 Discussion

Our study aimed to understand the factors that can contribute to the perception of religious influencers as a source of religious meaning. Based on our results, we found that, although credibility had no direct effect on perceptions as a SoM there were four significant indirect effects through the PSR and the POL. For trustworthiness, a significant total effect was found for both the PSR and POL. Furthermore, the PSR and POL directly predict perceptions as sources of religious meaning. Our results can be summarised in three main contributions to the academic discussion.

First, we have focused on the role of the influencer’s credibility (consisting of the three subdimensions of expertise, physical attractiveness and trustworthi-

ness). In contrast to our hypotheses, the three source credibility dimensions had no direct effect. This could suggest a reassessment of the importance of credibility which has been a main focus in previous research (Moberg, Kheir, and Gökce 2020). In fact, our findings imply that these effects are mediated via additional dimensions: the PSR with the influencer and the POL. Hence, source credibility should rather be viewed as affecting the emotional/social connection and the POL of the influencer, which, in turn, influence the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Among the three subdimensions, trustworthiness is especially important because it fosters both a PSR and POL. This relevance of trustworthiness has also been highlighted by previous research. The trustworthiness of a ‘Sinnfluencer’ is particularly important because the communicated messages extend beyond mere brand communication (Baake et al. 2022). Therefore, future research on religious influencers should investigate the perceived trustworthiness of the influencer more deeply. Furthermore, although trustworthiness is generally an important factor of ‘Sinnfluencers’ (Baake et al. 2022), physical appearance, although indirectly, also impacts the perception of the influencer as a SoM. This superficial factor can contribute to the building of a PSR with the influencer. Appealing to the aesthetics of social media channels that circulate religious online content has been shown to impact the success of these channels (Beta 2019). Hence, investigating the physical attractiveness of influencers might be interesting for the research on religious influencers.

Second, we discuss the role of the PSR and POL. The results revealed direct effects of the PSR and POL on the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. These pathways highlight the importance of both factors for the perceptions of religious influencers. With the PSR being an important factor, it becomes apparent that the efforts to build relationships taken by religious influencers (Smith et al. 2021) are reciprocated by their followers. Similar to other social connections, such as those with friends or family (Grouden and Jose 2015), the deeper the connection with the influencer is, the more they are perceived as being a source of religious meaning. This PSR is predicted both by the trustworthiness of the influencer and by physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). In addition to the PSR, the POL has also been shown to be a relevant factor for predicting the source of religious meaning. In general, greater opinion leadership of the influencer leads to greater persuasiveness (Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021). This persuasion effect also seems to translate into the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Hence, the religious beliefs and attitudes communicated by the influencer are perceived to be important and relevant by the follower.

In combination, both mediating variables (PSR and POL) contributed to the prediction of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Mediation via the

PSR can be seen as an emotional/social pathway that includes factors, such as trustworthiness and physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). The mediation via POL is related to cognitive factors, including the authority and expertise of the influencer (Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021). Although both mechanisms contribute to the extent to which followers perceive influencers as sources of meaning, opinion leadership appears to have a stronger overall impact, hence reflecting the importance of authority and knowledge in shaping followers' sense of meaning. However, influencers who can engage in both pathways – building emotional bonds while also positioning themselves as opinion leaders – are likely to be the most effective in being seen as meaningful figures. Future research should consider both of these pathways – emotional and cognitive – when aiming at understanding the role of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning.

Third, we show that following religious influencers on social media is positively related to overall meaning in life. If an influencer is perceived as a SoM by the follower, this perception predicts the coherence of the individual's meaning system. More specifically, the content of religious influencers may help followers establish a framework through which life is viewed as coherent and purposeful.

However, these findings need to be interpreted carefully because the present study lacks a longitudinal design. Owing to the cross-sectional design, the causal direction remains subject to theoretical argumentation. Hence, future research is needed to further investigate this possible effect.

## 8 Limitations

The current study is subject to three main limitations.

First, by recruiting participants through church organisations, we have no reports on how many Christians were reached in total and how the sample might be biased. Hence, even though our recruitment was systematically conducted, the final sample needs to be considered a convenience sample of young Christians who engage with local churches. Future research might also consider followers who do not visit an offline organisation. Furthermore, because of the method of recruitment, the sample mostly consists of young people who were visiting a church. Although this has provided insights into a cohort that is strongly engaged with digital media, we cannot make any assumptions for other age groups. Furthermore, all participants were Christians. However, the phenomenon of religious influence is not limited to Christianity; rather, it occurs across religions. Hence, future studies might also aim to consider other religions. Second, for methodological reasons, the perception of the religious influencer was only assessed for one

(the most relevant) influencer per participant. Hence, the model described only between-person effects (and not within-person effects). Third, our questionnaire was cross-sectional. Therefore, we have neither insights into the causal direction of the identified relationships nor into the long-term effects. Future research should utilise a longitudinal design to investigate the causal relationships and potential effects of religious influencers on the meaning of life for their followers.

## 9 Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, the present study explored the extent to which religious influencers can serve as sources of religious meaning, hence fulfilling the role of meaning-making in the digital age. We specifically examined the factors that influence whether followers perceive these influencers as providers of religious meaning. Our findings revealed that there is no direct effect of influencers' credibility on the perception of the influencer as a SoM. However, both the PSR with the influencer and influencer's POL significantly contribute to the perception of the influencer as a SoM. These results suggest two distinct pathways through which religious influencers are recognised as sources of religious meaning: an emotional or social pathway, through the PSR with the influencer, and a cognitive pathway, through the POL, the perceived expertise and authority of the influencer. Finally, the results show that the perception as a SoM predict whether the participants perceived the world around them as being coherent (as one of three dimensions of meaning in life).

We took a follower-driven approach to better understand the phenomenon of religious influencers. Using different research designs, such as experimental and longitudinal designs, will be necessary to translate the correlational findings into causal claims of how religious influencers affect the lives of their followers. Our study indicates that the PSR with the influencer and the POL both contribute to the perception of an influencer as a SoM. However, future research should consider additional factors, such as authenticity or opinion congruity (Han and Balabanis 2024); this might provide a deeper understanding of the two pathways that contribute to perception as a source of religious meaning.

Although many questions remain unanswered about how religious meaning-making operates in the online sphere, our study has addressed a crucial aspect of this phenomenon. By applying the concept of a source of religious meaning and linking it to new religious online authorities, specifically religious influencers, we gain insights into the mechanisms by which religious meaning is created and communicated in digital spaces. This approach has enabled us to better under-



stand how the roles traditionally held by religious institutions and authorities are being fulfilled through digital platforms, where influencers can serve as key figures in shaping religious beliefs, practices and personal spirituality. By focusing on these new dynamics, our research offers deeper insights into how religious meaning-making is fulfilled through the contemporary online environment.

## Bibliography

- Baake, Jasmin, Mareike Gensich, Theresa Kraus, Carolina Müller, Sophie Przyklenk, Patrick Rössler, Chelsae Walpert, and Anne M. Zang. 2022. "Sinnfluencer\*innen: Der Schlüssel Zu Mehr Glaubwürdigkeit? Ein Experiment Zur Wahrnehmung Von Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation Auf Instagram." In *Nachhaltigkeit Als Gegenstand Und Zielgröße Der Rezeptions- Und Wirkungsforschung*, edited by Anna Sophie Kümpel, Christina Peter, Anna Schnauber-Stockmann, and Frank Mangold, 41–62. Baden-Baden: Springer.
- Beta, Annisa R. 2019. "Commerce, Piety and Politics: Indonesian Young Muslim Women's Groups as Religious Influencers." *New Media & Society* 21(10), 2140–2159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774>.
- Bowman, Glen A., Blessing Osueke, and Samantha Baires. 2021. "Effects of Christian Faith Sharing Through Social Media: Examining Belief System Changes, Behavioral Changes, and User Preferences." *ARJHSS* 7 (1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.21694/2378-7031.21016>.
- Bundesamt für Statistik. 2020. *Religiöse Und Spirituelle Praktiken Und Glaubensformen in Der Schweiz: Erste Ergebnisse Der Erhebung Zur Sprache, Religion Und Kultur 2019*. Statistik der Schweiz. Neuchâtel: Bundesamt für Statistik (BFS). <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/hub/api/dam/assets/15023003/master>.
- Campbell, Heidi A. 2020. *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*. Media, Religion and Culture. Abingdon Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Campbell, Heidi A., and Wendi Bellar. 2023. *Digital Religion: The Basics*. First published. The basics series. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Campbell, Heidi A., and Ruth Tsuria, eds. 2022. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*. 2. edition. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Casaló, Luis V., Carlos Flavián, and Sergio Ibáñez-Sánchez. 2020. "Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and Consequences of Opinion Leadership." *Journal of Business Research* 117, 510–519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005>.
- Cheong, Pauline H. 2022. "Authority." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, 87–102, London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- De Vogler, Karen L., and Peter Ebersole. 1981. "Adults' Meaning in Life." *Psychological Reports* 49, 87–90.
- Fakhreddin, Farbod, and Pantea Foroudi. 2021. "Instagram Influencers: The Role of Opinion Leadership in Consumers' Purchase Behavior." *Journal of Promotion Management*, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2021.2015515>.
- Farivar, Samira, Fang Wang, and Yufei Yuan. 2021. "Opinion Leadership Vs. Para-Social Relationship: Key Factors in Influencer Marketing." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 59: 102371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102371>.

- Fernandes Crespo, Cátia, and Melanie Tille. 2024. "Examining the Role of Perceived Source Credibility on Social Media Influencer's Ascribed Opinion Leadership." *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* 36(3), 208–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08961530.2023.2255379>.
- Grouden, Melissa E., and Paul E. Jose. 2015. "Do Sources of Meaning Differentially Predict Search for Meaning, Presence of Meaning, and Wellbeing?" *International Journal of Wellbeing* 5(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v5i1.3>.
- Han, Jiseon, and George Balabanis. 2024. "Meta-analysis of Social Media Influencer Impact: Key Antecedents and Theoretical Foundations." *Psychology and Marketing* 41(2), 394–426. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21927>.
- Hjarvard, Stig. 2008. "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change." *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies* 6(1), 9–26. [https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.6.1.9_1).
- Hoover, Stewart M., and Jin K. Park. 2004. "Religion and Meaning in the Digital Age Field Research on internet/Web Religion 1." In *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, edited by Mary E. Hess, Peter Horsfield, and Adán M. Medrano, 121–136. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Hörsch, Daniel. 2023. "Digitale Communities: Zur Followerschaft von christlichen Influencer:innen auf Instagram." In *Religion auf Instagram: Analysen und Perspektiven* edited by Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke, 276–290. Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder.
- Horton, Donald, and Richard R. Wohl. 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry* 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>.
- Jahnke, Marlis. 2021. *Influencer Marketing*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Jegham, Salma, and Rym Bouzaabia. 2022. "Fashion Influencers on Instagram: Determinants and Impact of Opinion Leadership on Female Millennial Followers." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2050>.
- Jungnickel, Katrin. 2018. "New Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership: A Systematic, Interdisciplinary Literature Analysis." *International Journal of Communication* 12, 2702–2724.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 1999. *Einführung in Die Religionssoziologie* [Introduction to the sociology of religion]. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Krain, Rebekka, and Laura Mößle. 2020. "Christliches Influencing auf YouTube als ‚Doing Emotion‘." *Österr. Religionspädagogisches Forum*, 28(1), 161–178. <https://doi.org/10.25364/10.28:2020.1.9>.
- Lou, Chen. 2022. "Social Media Influencers and Followers: Theorization of a Trans-Parasocial Relation and Explication of Its Implications for Influencer Advertising." *Journal of Advertising* 51(1), 4–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1880345>.
- Mahmudova, Lale, and Giulia Evolvi. 2021. "Likes, Comments, and Follow Requests: The Instagram User Experiences of Young Muslim Women in the Netherlands." *J. Relig. Media Digit. Cult.* 10(1), 50–70. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10038>.
- Martela, Frank, and Michael F. Steger. 2022. "The Role of Significance Relative to the Other Dimensions of Meaning in Life – an Examination Utilizing the Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale (3DM)." *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2022.2070528>.
- Martensen, Anne, Sofia Brockenhuus-Schack, and Anastasia L. Zahid. 2018. "How Citizen Influencers Persuade Their Followers." *JFMM* 22(3), 335–353. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-09-2017-0095>.
- Merian, Katharina, Patrick Todjeras, and Sabrina Müller. 2023. "Digitale Vergemeinschaftung Und Netzworlbildung: Erwartungen, Befürchtungen Und Potenziale." In *Churches Online in Times of Corona*, edited by Thomas Schlag, Ilona Nord, Wolfgang Beck, Arnd Bünker, Georg Lämmlin, Sabrina Müller, Johann Pock, and Martin Rothgangel, 275–291. Wiesbaden: Springer.

- Moberg, Marcus, Sawsan Kheir, and Habibe E. Gökce. 2020. "Religion and Internet Use among Young Adult Muslims in Israel and Turkey: Exploring Issues of Trust and Religious Authority." *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9, 347–367. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-B1A10015>.
- Müller, Julia, and Thomas N. Friemel. 2024. "Dynamics of Digital Media Use in Religious Communities – A Theoretical Model." *Religions* 15(7), 762. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070762>.
- Müller, Olaf, and Detlef Pollack. 2022. "Religiosität, Gesellschaftliche Einstellungen und Politische Orientierungen in Deutschland" [Religiosity, social attitudes and political orientations in Germany]. *Z Religion Ges Polit* 6(2), 669–695. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-022-00108-1>.
- Müller, Sabrina. 2021. "Christlich-Religiöse Sinnstiftungen in einer Kultur der Digitalität: Hermeneutische Dynamiken." *facultativ: Theologisches und Religionswissenschaftliches aus Zürich/Beilage zur Reformierten*, 2021.
- Müller, Sabrina. 2022. "Öffentliche Kommunikation Christlicher Sinnfluencer:Innen." *Pastoraltheologie* 111(6), 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.13109/path.2022.111.6.203>.
- Müller, Sabrina. 2023. "Glaubensinfluencer:innen auf Instagram." In *Religion auf Instagram: Analysen und Perspektiven* edited by Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke, 137–153. Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder.
- Myers, Susan, Holly A. Syrdal, Raj V. Mahto, and Sandipan S. Sen. 2023. "Social Religion: A Cross-Platform Examination of the Impact of Religious Influencer Message Cues on Engagement – The Christian Context." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 191: 122442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122442>.
- Ohanian, Roobina. 1990. "Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness." *Journal of Advertising* 19(3), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191>.
- Park, Crystal L. 2005. "Religion and Meaning." In *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, 295–314. New York: Guilford Press.
- Peter, Christina, and Luisa Muth. 2023. "Social Media Influencers' Role in Shaping Political Opinions and Actions of Young Audiences." *MaC* 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750>.
- Pirker, Viera, and Paula Paschke, eds. 2023. *Religion auf Instagram: Analysen und Perspektiven*. Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder.
- Rogers, Everett M., and David G. Cartano. 1962. "Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 26(3), 435–441.
- Rosaen, Sarah F., and Jayson L. Dibble. 2016. "Clarifying the Role of Attachment and Social Compensation on Parasocial Relationships with Television Characters." *Communication Studies* 67(2), 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2015.1121898>.
- Rosaen, Sarah F., John L. Sherry, and Stacy L. Smith. 2011. "Maltreatment and Parasocial Relationships in US Children." *Journal of Children and Media* 5(4), 379–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2011.599520>.
- Schlag, Thomas. 2022. "Die Macht Der Bilder Als (Praktisch-)Theologische Herausforderung. Beobachtungen Zum Phänomen Evangelischer Influencerinnen Und Influencer Im Horizont Gegenwärtiger Digitalisierungsdynamiken." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 2, 195–216. <https://doi.org/10.5167/UZH-220155>.
- Schnell, Tatjana. 2009. "The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-Being." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4(6), 483–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271074>.

- Schnell, Tatjana. 2011. "Religiosität und Spiritualität als Quellen der Sinnerfüllung." [Religiosity and spirituality as sources of meaning]. In *Gesundheit – Religion – Spiritualität: Konzepte, Befunde und Erklärungsansätze*, edited by Constantin Klein, Hendrik Berth, and Friedrich Balck, 259–271. Weinheim: Juventa-Verlag.
- Schor, Anna, Friederike Vinzenz, and Werner Wirth. 2022. "Promoting Sustainability on Instagram: How Sponsorship Disclosures and Benefit Appeals Affect the Credibility of Sinnfluencers." *YC* 23(3), 345–361. <https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-07-2021-1355>.
- Smith, Brian G., Danielle Hallows, Maggie Vail, Alycia Burnett, and Caleb Porter. 2021. "Social Media Conversion: Lessons from Faith-Based Social Media Influencers for Public Relations." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 33(4), 231–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2021.2011728>.
- Statistik Austria. 2022. *Religionszugehörigkeit 2021: Drei Viertel bekennen sich zu einer Religion*.
- Taves, Ann. 2018. "Finding and Articulating Meaning in Secular Experience." In *Religious Experience and Experiencing Religion in Religious Education*, edited by Ulrich Riegel, Eva-Maria Leven, and Daniel Fleming, 13–22. Research on Religious and Spiritual Education Volume 11. Münster, New York: Waxmann.
- Tsuria, Ruth, and Heidi A. Campbell. 2022. "Introduction to the Study of Digital Religion." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, 1–22. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Tukachinsky, Riva, Nathan Walter, and Camille J. Saucier. 2020. "Antecedents and Effects of Parasocial Relationships: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Communication* 70(6), 868–894. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa034>.
- Veirman, Marijke de, Veroline Cauberghe, and Liselot Hudders. 2017. "Marketing Through Instagram Influencers: The Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude." *International Journal of Advertising* 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>.
- Yuan, Shupei, and Chen Lou. 2020. "How Social Media Influencers Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest." *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 20(2), 133–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>.
- Zaid, Bouziane, Jana Fedtke, Don D. Shin, Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, and Mohammed Ibahrine. 2022. "Digital Islam and Muslim Millennials: How Social Media Influencers Reimagine Religious Authority and Islamic Practices." *Religions* 13(4), 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040335>.