

Navigating Criticism: The Experiences of Social Media Influencers in New Zealand

Venesse Cheng Yan Tong

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Business (MBus)

2025

School of Business, Economics and Law
Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of criticism faced by social media influencers (SMIs) in New Zealand. While SMIs are admired for their authenticity and persuasive influence in shaping consumer attitudes and brand perceptions, they are also vulnerable to negative feedback and public criticism. In cultural contexts that value humility and discourage self-promotion, such as New Zealand and Australia, individuals who stand out or achieve success may be more likely to be criticised or “cut down,” a phenomenon known as the Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS). TPS shapes both the intensity and nature of this criticism directed at SMIs, influencing not only their personal wellbeing but also their perceived credibility and effectiveness as marketing communicators.

This research is significant because it addresses an underexplored issue within the marketing and influencer literature by examining how cultural values influence consumer responses to influencers and how much criticism affects the authenticity and trust central to the effectiveness of influencer marketing. It offers crucial insights into how cultural norms shape the norms and motivations of criticism, the personal and professional consequences for SMIs, and their coping strategies, all of which are vital for supporting influencer wellbeing and sustaining authentic brand-audience relationships. To explore this, five research questions are developed:

1. What motivates New Zealand consumers to criticise social media influencers?
2. What forms does such criticism take?
3. In what ways might cultural differences amongst New Zealand followers affect the intensity and nature of criticism directed at social media influencers?
4. What are the potential impacts (social, emotional, psychological and professional) of criticism on New Zealand social media influencers?
5. What strategies, if any, do New Zealand’s social media influencers employ to cope with the effects of criticism?

The research adopts a qualitative approach, including individual interviews with six SMIs and three focus groups with a total of fifteen followers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and data analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that criticism of SMIs is motivated by moral misalignment, cultural expectations of humility, over-

commercialisation, envy, and the anonymity of social media. Criticism typically takes indirect and subtle forms, including liking negative comments, private discussions, and passive disengagement, shaped by cultural norms and concerns about personal exposure. Cultural differences strongly influence criticism's nature and intensity, with shared cultural identity fostering greater support and increased expectations, especially within Māori and Pasifika communities.

Criticism impacts SMIs' social, emotional, psychological and professional selves, leading to isolation, distress, self-doubt, and career challenges. In response, SMIs adopt various coping strategies, such as content moderation, cognitive reframing, emotional detachment, support networks, and social media breaks, to manage criticism while balancing authenticity and wellbeing.

Theoretically, this research extends the understanding of TPS into the context of influencer marketing, integrates cultural and psychological theories to explain influencer-follower interactions, and reframes subtle criticism as a form of online harassment that affects influencer credibility and brand trust. Practically, it informs SMIs, followers, marketers, brands, agencies, and platforms on managing criticism through culturally informed strategies, helping maintain authenticity, enhance influencer-follower relationship, and protect the wellbeing of SMIs who serve vital roles in the digital marketing environment.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Table of Contents</i>	4
<i>List of Tables</i>	8
<i>Attestation of Authorship</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	10
<i>Ethical Approval</i>	11
Chapter 1 Introduction	12
1.1 Introduction.....	12
1.2 Background to the Issue.....	12
1.3 Brief Overview of the Literature.....	14
1.4 Research Questions.....	19
1.5 Overview of the Research Design.....	20
1.6 Contribution.....	21
1.7 Structure of the Thesis.....	23
Chapter 2 Literature Review	24
2.1 Introduction.....	24
2.2 What Are Social Media Influencers?.....	24
2.2.1 Social Media Influencer Types.....	25
2.2.2 Source Credibility in Social Media Influencers.....	27
2.2.2.1 Expertise.....	27
2.2.2.2 Trustworthiness.....	28
2.2.2.3 Attractiveness.....	29
2.2.2.4 Similarity/Homophily.....	30
2.2.2.5 Authenticity.....	31
2.3 Online Harassment and SMIs.....	32

2.4 Tall Poppy Syndrome and SMIs	36
2.5 Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions: Focus on Power Distance	41
2.6 Social Comparison Theory	42
2.7 Cognitive Dissonance	46
2.8 Conclusion	48
Chapter 3 Research Design	49
3.1 Introduction.....	49
3.2 Ethics Approval	49
3.3 Social Media Influencers	49
3.4 Followers.....	52
3.5 Data Analysis.....	54
3.6 Conclusion	55
Chapter 4 Findings	56
4.1 Finding from SMIs.....	56
4.1.1 Theme 1: Driving Criticisms	57
4.1.1.1 Comments Typically Received.....	58
4.1.1.2 Content Type Influences the Level of Criticism Received.....	59
4.1.1.3 The Challenge in Gaining Local Support	59
4.1.1.4 Tall Poppy Syndrome and Personal Experiences with TPS	60
4.1.1.5 What Drives Criticisms Towards SMIs	61
4.1.2 Theme 2: Community Support.....	66
4.1.2.1 Cultural Influence	66
4.1.2.2 Motivation from Community Support	69
4.1.3 Theme 3: Personal Impacts of Being an SMI	71
4.1.3.1 The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Criticisms.....	72
4.1.3.2 The Professional Impact of Being an SMI.....	76
4.1.3.3 Social Impacts of Being an SMI	80
4.1.4 Theme 4: Coping with Criticisms	84
4.1.4.1 Hard to Balance Success and Bragging	85

4.1.4.2 Change in Content Due to Criticisms	86
4.1.4.3 The Intention of Being an SMI Can Affect How They View Criticisms	88
4.1.4.4 Coping Methods Towards Criticisms	90
4.2 Findings from Followers.....	99
4.2.1 Theme 1: Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand	100
4.2.1.1 Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand.....	101
4.2.1.2 Supportive to SMIs in the Same Cultural Group	103
4.2.1.3 New Zealand People Are Only Supportive Towards SMIs When New Zealand Is Recognised.....	104
4.2.2 Theme 2: Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs.....	106
4.2.2.1 Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs.....	106
4.2.2.2 New Zealand SMIs Do Not Have Many New Zealand Followers	108
4.2.3 Theme 3: Methods of Expressing Support.....	109
4.2.3.1 Ways of Showing Support to New Zealand SMIs.....	109
4.2.4 Theme 4: Methods of Expressing Criticisms.....	111
4.2.4.1 Liking Critical Comments.....	112
4.2.4.2 Reasons for Avoiding Commenting Criticisms	113
4.2.4.3 Other Methods of Criticising SMIs (Word-of-Mouth, Unfollowing, Blocking and Hiding content)	116
4.2.4.4 Moral Misalignment as a Trigger for Actions	118
4.2.5 Theme 5: What Drives Criticisms Towards SMIs.....	120
4.2.5.1 New Zealand's Culture of Humility Is Leading to SMIs Getting Criticised.....	121
4.2.5.2 Criticisms Driven by Envy.....	123
4.2.5.3 Negative Perceptions of New Zealand SMIs.....	125
4.2.5.4 Criticisms as an Inherent Aspect of SMIs' Role.....	128
4.2.5.5 SMIs in New Zealand Who Do Too Many Ads Will Feel Disingenuous	129
4.2.5.6 Other Reasons That Drive Criticisms Toward SMIs in New Zealand.....	129
4.2.5.7 Positive Perception of New Zealand SMI.....	132
4.2.6 Theme 6: How SMIs Handle Criticisms.....	133
4.2.6.1 How Does Criticism Impact SMIs.....	134
4.3 Comparison SMIs and Followers' Findings	141

4.3.1 Cultural Influence in Support.....	142
4.3.2 The Role of Humility	142
4.3.3 Method of Expressing and Receiving Support	143
4.3.4 The Challenge in Building Local Support	144
4.3.5 What Drives Criticism	145
4.3.6 Vulnerability to Criticism	147
4.3.7 SMIs Adjust Content Strategy Due to Criticisms and Use It as a Coping Method ..	148
4.3.8 Impact of Criticism	148
4.3.9 Coping Methods.....	149
Chapter 5 Discussion	150
5.1 Introduction.....	150
5.2 Discussion of Findings.....	150
5.3 Theoretical Contributions	167
5.4 Managerial (Practical) Contributions.....	170
5.5 Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	172
5.6 Conclusion	173
References	174
Appendices.....	183
Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Letter	183
Appendix 2: Information Sheet for SMIs	184
Appendix 3: Information Sheet for Followers	186
Appendix 4: Content Form for SMIs	188
Appendix 5: Content Form for Followers.....	189
Appendix 6: Interview Guide for SMIs	190
Appendix 7: Interview Guide for Followers.....	193

List of Tables

Table 1	51
Table 2	53
Table 3	53
Table 4	53
Table 5	56
Table 6	57
Table 7	66
Table 8	71
Table 9	84
Table 10	99
Table 11	100
Table 12	106
Table 13	109
Table 14	111
Table 15	120
Table 16	133
Table 17	141

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor use artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor materials which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature_____

Date__10th July 2025_____

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Dr Ken Hyde, for his unwavering support and guidance throughout my Master's research. His insightful feedback, encouragement, and immense knowledge have been invaluable at every stage of this journey, from refining my research focus to navigating the complexities of data analysis. His patience and belief in my work have truly shaped the development and completion of this thesis.

I am also sincerely grateful to all the participants who generously shared their personal experiences and perspectives for this study. Without their openness and time, this research would not have been possible.

Lastly, I would like to extend my appreciation to the Faculty of Business, Economics And Law, especially the Marketing Department at Auckland University of Technology, for providing a supportive academic environment. The resources, feedback, and encouragement I received during this time greatly contributed to my growth as a researcher.

Ethical Approval

This research was granted ethical approval by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8 November 2024 (application number 24/304).

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

With the rise of social media, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as influential figures in shaping public opinion and consumer behaviour (Chen & Lu, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Liu & Zheng, 2024). They form strong connections with followers by sharing authentic and engaging content (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). However, increased visibility also makes them vulnerable to criticism, particularly within cultures where success can be met with social backlash. This study focuses on such criticism as a form of personal identity threat, how negative feedback challenges SMIs' sense of self and authenticity rather than as a threat to their commercial or brand image. In New Zealand and Australia, the Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS), a cultural tendency to criticise individuals who stand out or achieve success, may influence how SMIs are perceived and treated by their audiences (Feather, 1989). New Zealand provides a particularly valuable context for examining this dynamic. Its relatively small and interconnected social media landscape often fosters close, more personal relationships between influencers and their audiences, which can intensify both positive engagement and negative scrutiny. Additionally, the country's strong egalitarian values and modest market size make visibility and success more noticeable, amplifying the social pressures associated with standing out online.

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the background of the research, including a brief overview of relevant literature on SMIs and the theoretical foundations to explain criticism of SMIs. It then presents the research questions guiding this study, followed by an outline of the qualitative research design used to explore the perspectives of both SMIs and their followers. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's theoretical and managerial contributions and an overview of the thesis's structure.

1.2 Background to the Issue

Social media's rise has significantly transformed how individuals engage with public figures, giving rise to a new category of digital personalities known as SMIs. These individuals are typically seen as ordinary individuals who cultivate large followings by sharing original,

authentic and relatable content about aspects of their lives, offering opinions and promoting products on social media platforms (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). The two-way relationship enabled by social media between SMIs and their followers, and the source credibility factors that SMIs have, all play an important role in how SMIs are received and sustained online (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Lou, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ohanian, 1990; Weismueller et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

The interactive nature of social media facilitates real-time communication between SMIs and their followers across time and space, allowing for both public and private engagement (Ooi et al., 2023). Followers can respond through likes, comments, shares, or direct messages, fostering a sense of connection and authenticity (Jun & Yi, 2020; Ooi et al., 2023). However, this interactivity also increases SMIs' exposure to public scrutiny and criticism.

While scholarly work has extensively explored SMIs' credibility and audience engagement, less attention has been paid to the darker side of visibility, particularly regarding public backlash and online criticism, despite it being a common topic in mainstream media. For example, an SMI, Gabriela Moura, was criticised for wearing an inappropriate outfit at the 2025 Kentucky Derby (Gaydos, 2025). Similarly, Marques Brownlee, a well-known technology reviewer, faced backlash for his negative review of the Humane AI Pin (Shepherd, 2024). Despite offering a detailed and reasoned analysis, he was accused of being "unethical" and "careless," with some suggesting that his comments could kill innovation (Shepherd, 2024). These incidents demonstrate the complex expectations placed on SMIs, who must navigate authenticity, professionalism and public approval, often under intense scrutiny. Some SMIs, in response to criticism, choose to turn off comment sections to protect their mental health; however, this strategy may have unintended consequences. Daniels and Wu (2024) found that removing comment functionality can reduce perceived sincerity, persuasiveness and likeability, suggesting that managing criticism often comes at the cost of perceived authenticity.

In the New Zealand and Australian context, public criticism of SMIs may be intensified by a broader cultural phenomenon, known as TPS. TPS reflects a societal tendency to cut down individuals who stand out due to success, visibility, or self-promotion (Feather, 1989, 1991; Deverson, 1998, as cited in Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). This stems from New Zealand's egalitarian cultural ideals that promote modesty and discourage excessive displays

of superiority (Holmes et al., 2017; Packer, 2014; McLeod, 1968; as cited in Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). This cultural norm can often create tension between celebrating achievement and enforcing humility.

Within this environment, SMIs perceived as overly confident, self-promotional, or successful may violate cultural expectations of humility, making them targets for criticism (Marques, 2023; Peeters, 2015). A relevant example is Australian SMI Sarah Stevenson, who faced criticism after teasing a “life-changing” announcement that was her purchase of a second home for holidays and photoshoots (O’Loughlin, 2023). With the increased cost-of-living crisis, her audience quickly labelled her as “tone-deaf,” and accusing her of using clickbait to drive views and show off her privilege (O’Loughlin, 2023). Such responses suggest that TPS may amplify public backlash towards SMIs in New Zealand and Australia more than in other cultural contexts.

This cultural lens illustrates the growing tension within SMI culture and the rising public criticism surrounding it. While such backlash exists globally, it may be particularly noticeable in New Zealand and Australia due to the culturally embedded norms surrounding success and visibility (Feather, 1989). Consequently, SMIs in these societies may face additional pressures to uphold credibility and authenticity within environments that quickly critique those who stand out. This study explores how and why followers’ direct criticism at New Zealand SMIs, and the impact of such criticism on SMIs.

1.3 Brief Overview of the Literature

The literature review is broken into two sections. The first section introduces the concept of SMIs and examines extant literature on the credibility and authenticity of SMIs, the harassment and criticism of SMIs and the TPS in New Zealand and Australia. The second section provides three alternative explanations for the criticism of SMIs by followers: Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, social comparison theory and cognitive dissonance.

The first section begins with an overview of SMIs, mentioning their emergence on social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok and their growing importance in marketing, influencing consumers behaviours and purchase decisions (Chen & Lu, 2024; Haenlein & Libai, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021). SMIs engage audiences by creating original, relatable,

authentic content and establishing trust and credibility through consistency and niche specialisation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022). SMIs are typically categorised based on their follower counts, each category carrying different implications for their reach and influence, which includes nano-influencers (1,000 to 10,000 followers), micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers), macro-influencers (100,000 to 1 million followers), and mega-influencers (exceeding 1 million followers) (Balaji et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Haenlein & Libai, 2017). However, a growing body of research suggests that the effectiveness of SMIs is not solely determined by their follower, as while macro-influencers may have a broader reach, micro-influencers often demonstrate higher engagement rates and influence over their followers (Haenlein & Libai, 2017; Kay et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021).

A key focus of the review is the comparison between parasocial relationships and trans-parasocial relationships, which provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics between SMIs and their followers. Parasocial relationships are traditionally understood as one-side, non-reciprocal bonds in which audiences feel a deep connection with media figures, such as celebrities and public personalities, through mediated channels, such as television and radio (Chung & Cho, 2017; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). There is no real interaction in these relationships, and the media figure typically remains unaware of the audience's engagement (Bond, 2018; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). While this concept has been widely applied to explain influencer-follower relationships, Lou (2022) argues that it does not fully capture the complexities of contemporary social media interactions (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Masuda et al., 2022; Yuan & Lou, 2020). To address this, Lou (2022) introduces the concept of trans-parasocial relationships, which are defined by reciprocal engagement, both asynchronously and synchronously, and are co-created by influencers and followers. This distinction is important in understanding how SMIs build deeper, more engaging relationships with their audiences.

The review also delves into the concept of source credibility, which is central to the influence of SMIs and a key factor in how SMIs shape audience perception and behaviour. Credibility is commonly defined by expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and authenticity, influencing how audiences interpret SMI messages (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Labrecque et al., 2011; Ohanian, 1990). These dimensions do not operate uniformly but are shaped by contextual factors, including the social media platform, industry, and types of influencers

(Pradhan et al., 2023). For example, perceived expertise can enhance trust and influence purchase intentions. At the same time, trustworthiness often mediates how followers respond to SMIs' brand endorsements due to SMIs' higher level of relatability compared to traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Masuda et al., 2022). Furthermore, perceived attractiveness has been found to link to stronger parasocial relationships and increased purchase intentions, whereas perceived similarity fosters relatability and trust, strengthening SMIs' credibility and endorsement effectiveness (Jin et al., 2019; Ohanian, 1990; Weismueller et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Authenticity has also become vital due to increased commercialised SMI content, deeply affecting trust and consumer responses (Kapitan et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021). These dimensions collectively illustrate source credibility's complex nature in influencer-follower dynamics.

The literature review also looked into the growing issue of online harassment faced by SMIs, who are increasingly exposed to more frequent and varied forms of abuse compared to general social media users (Hassan et al., 2018; Takano et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). These forms of harassment, ranging from insults and intimidation to sexualised and personal attacks, are often amplified by the SMI's public visibility and perceived social privilege (Hassan et al., 2018; Takano et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). As a result, SMIs are frequently regarded as “non-ideal victims,” receiving less public empathy and making such abuse easier to justify or overlook (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). This has significant implications for their psychological lives, including reputational damage, loss of brand partnerships, and audience disengagement (Hassan et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2022). In response, SMIs adopt various coping strategies, including avoidance, social support, self-censorship, and, at times, public rebuttals (Abidin, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022). Furthermore, platform governance tools are increasingly weaponised through tactics such as mass reporting, which can further threaten SMIs' visibility and career stability (Meisner, 2023).

While existing literature focused heavily on more extreme types of online harassment, less attention has been given to how SMIs interpret and respond to criticism, a less obvious but intense form of harassment, particularly in contexts where the boundary between constructive and harmful feedback is ambiguous. This study addresses this gap by exploring how SMIs in New Zealand interpret criticism, how it affects them personally and professionally, and their coping strategies. In doing so, it seeks to understand how SMIs differentiate between helpful

critique and harmful attacks and how cultural dynamics may shape the tone, frequency, and reception of such interaction.

This study also draws on TPS as a theoretical lens to explore how SMIs in New Zealand interpret and respond to criticism. TPS, a socio-cultural phenomenon significant in New Zealand and Australia, refers to the tendency to criticise or cut down individuals who achieve visible success (Feather, 1989; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). Rooted in the country's egalitarian values, TPS reflects discomfort with the display of superiority and promotes humility and conformity (Holmes et al., 2017; Packer, 2014; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). Existing research has examined TPS in contexts such as entrepreneurship, academia, sport, and the workplace, highlighting its psychological and professional impacts on high achievers and the coping strategies they adopt (Feather, 1989; Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). However, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring TPS within digital spaces, particularly among SMIs who publicly display success and self-promotion as part of their branding (Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Marques et al., 2022). This research addresses these gaps using a qualitative approach to investigate how TPS manifests online and how SMIs navigate the tension between visibility and cultural expectations of modesty within New Zealand's complex cultural landscape (Harrington & Liu, 2002; Mancl & Penington, 2011).

The second section outlines the theoretical foundations used to understand the criticism of SMIs by followers in the cultural contexts of New Zealand and Australia. The three theoretical frameworks discussed are Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, social comparison theory, and cognitive dissonance theory. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly the power distance dimension, provide a foundational lens to examine why TPS may be more significant in societies that value egalitarianism. New Zealand, with a low power distance score of 22, tends to reject hierarchical structures and emphasises social equality, which aligns with its egalitarian culture (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; The Culture Factor Group, 2023; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). This egalitarianism is rooted in New Zealand's colonial history, where early settlers rejected the class-based system of Britain (McLeod, 1968; as cited in Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). This cultural orientation often results in discomfort with over-displays of success, encouraging conformity and modesty, conditions under which TPS is more likely to emerge (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). Research suggests that TPS is more prominent in egalitarian societies, where

visible success or achievement can provoke a social backlash, leading to attempts to downplay or undermine the accomplishments of individuals who stand out (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). These cultural foundations provide a valuable lens for understanding how TPS manifests in New Zealand society and its broader implications for social expectations regarding individual success.

Furthermore, social comparison theory helps explain how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing to others, often those perceived as similar (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). This comparison can be upward, which is when individuals compare themselves to those perceived as better, which often leads to motivation or can cause feelings of envy and inadequacy, or downward, where individuals compare themselves to others worse off to boost self-esteem (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009; Vogel et al., 2014; Wills, 1981). Upward social comparison is particularly relevant to TPS. In egalitarian cultures like New Zealand and Australia, where modesty is valued, observing others' success can evoke envy and prompt backlash (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Li, 2019; Schmuck et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; White et al., 2006). Studies show that frequent exposure to idealised portrayals online can lower self-esteem and wellbeing, leading to TPS behaviours where successful individuals are “cut down” to restore social balance (Feather, 1989; Vogel et al., 2014). Thus, social comparison theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how TPS can emerge through upward social comparison, and social backlash is used to restore social balance.

Moreover, cognitive dissonance theory explains how individuals experience discomfort when their beliefs and behaviours conflict, motivating them to restore internal consistency (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a). In the context of TPS, this dissonance occurs when admiration of success clashes with social values of modesty, particularly in egalitarian cultures like New Zealand and Australia (McLeod, 1968; as cited in Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). To reduce this discomfort, individuals may criticise or diminish high achievers, aligning with societal norms and relieving psychological tension (Feather, 1989). Cultural factors also influence how dissonance is managed; individualistic societies like New Zealand tend to experience stronger internal conflict between personal success and collective equality than collectivistic cultures (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; The Culture Factor Group, 2023). Thus, cognitive dissonance theory offers valuable insight into

the psychological mechanisms that drive TPS, particularly in cultures where social harmony and quality are prioritised over individual achievement.

These three theoretical frameworks provide potential understanding of criticism directed at SMIs by followers in New Zealand and Australia. Low power distance and egalitarian values challenge hierarchical recognition, upward comparisons fuel envy, and internal conflict between valuing success and modesty prompts social backlash against high achievers.

1.4 Research Questions

Despite extensive research on influencer credibility, authenticity and follower engagement, limited attention has been paid to the dark side of SMI visibility, specifically, public criticism and backlash. Existing studies tend to examine how SMUs build trust and influence purchasing behaviour, but few explore how criticism affects influencers personally, or how cultural factors shape these dynamics. Furthermore, while research on TPS has revealed how success and visibility can provoke social backlash in New Zealand and Australia, little is known about how this cultural tendency operates within digital SMI contexts. This study addresses these gaps by exploring criticism of SMIs as a form of personal identity threat within the New Zealand social media landscape, where close audience-influencer ties and egalitarian cultural values may intensify scrutiny.

To better understand the dynamics of SMI-follower relationships and the cultural context in which they operate, this study addresses the following research questions:

Research question 1:

What motivates New Zealand consumers to criticise social media influencers?

Research question 2:

What forms does such criticism take?

Research question 3:

In what ways might cultural differences amongst New Zealand followers affect the intensity and nature of criticism directed at social media influencers?

Research question 4:

What are the potential impacts (social, emotional, psychological and professional) of criticism on New Zealand social media influencers?

Research question 5:

What strategies, if any, do New Zealand's social media influencers employ to cope with the effects of criticism?

These questions aim to uncover the complex expectations placed on SMIs by both themselves and their audiences. By examining both perspectives, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the SMI-follower relationship in New Zealand, where cultural values such as humility and egalitarianism, as reflected in the TPS, may influence how visibility, success, and criticism are navigated online.

1.5 Overview of the Research Design

This chapter outlines the qualitative research design used to explore how New Zealand SMIs and their followers perceive the role of SMIs. The study was conducted in two phases: firstly, three focus groups were conducted with a total of fifteen followers, then semi-structured interviews were conducted with six culturally diverse SMIs. Ethical approval was obtained from AUT Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent. Participants were selected based on clear inclusion criteria to ensure cultural diversity and meaningful engagement with social media. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was used to analyse the data and NVivo 15 software was used for qualitative data management (Lumivero, n.d.). The analysis was enhanced using the Gioia et al's (2013) method to systematically categorise and present findings into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. This approach allowed for a clear comparison of perspectives between SMIs and followers within a New Zealand cultural context.

1.6 Contribution

This thesis makes several theoretical and managerial contributions by examining the perception of SMIs and their followers within the unique cultural landscape of New Zealand.

Theoretically, the thesis extends the existing body of work on TPS to the context of SMIs, an area that has not been extensively explored (Feather, 1989; Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). Prior TPS studies have predominantly focused on traditional domains such as entrepreneurship, sport, and academia, whereas this research situates TPS within the online visibility environment, where success and self-promotion are central to SMI identity (Feather, 1989; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). By examining how New Zealand SMIs experience and interpret criticism through this lens, this thesis builds on and extends Feather's (1989) conceptualisation of TPS as a socially acceptable response to visible success, highlighting its manifestation in the social media era.

This research also draws on and integrates social comparison theory to explain how upward comparisons on social media can evoke envy and motivate critical behaviours, thereby linking psychological processes of comparison to culturally grounded expressions of TPS (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014). By doing so, it extends social comparison theory beyond individual-level cognition to include culturally specific manifestations of criticism and humility within New Zealand's low power distance society (Hofstede, 2011; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003).

In addition, this thesis employs Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to contextualise how New Zealand's strong egalitarian values and low power distance shape public perceptions of success and authenticity (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). By applying this framework to influencer-follower dynamics, this study contests the assumption that influencer criticism operates purely at the individual level, arguing instead that cultural norms play a central role in how visibility, success, and modesty are negotiated online.

Furthermore, cognitive dissonance theory is employed to explain how followers experience psychological discomfort when their admiration for SMIs conflicts with social expectations of humility (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019b). This study extends the theoretical lens by showing how dissonance manifests in online criticism, where followers

may “cut down” influencers to restore psychological and cultural equilibrium (Feather, 1989).

This research also contributes to literature on source credibility and authenticity by demonstrating how credibility is not static but culturally constructed and negotiated in response to public criticism (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Ohanian, 1990). It highlights how SMIs actively manage credibility through relational strategies, such as displaying vulnerability, setting boundaries, and authentic engagement to align with New Zealand’s cultural expectations of modesty and genuineness. This extends existing frameworks by positioning credibility as a continuous, culturally influenced process where SMIs navigate between authentic expression and audience expectations.

Moreover, this study builds on Lou’s (2022) concept of trans-parasocial relationships, extending it into the New Zealand context to illustrate the reciprocal and culturally mediated nature of influencer-follower engagement. It contests the traditional, one-sided view of parasocial relationships by showing that followers in egalitarian cultures not only connect emotionally with SMIs but also feel socially entitled to hold them accountable, shaping the nature and tone of online criticism (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956).

Finally, this thesis contributes to the broader SMI literature by uncovering the often-overlooked “dark side” of visibility, including the emotional, psychological, and professional repercussions of public scrutiny (Abidin, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022). By documenting the coping strategies SMIs adopt, ranging from self-censorship to seeking social support, it advances understanding of resilience and identity work among digital professionals navigating culturally specific forms of social regulation.

This study also offers several important managerial contributions relevant to SMIs, followers, marketers, brands, influencer management agencies, social media platforms and policymakers. For SMIs, the findings provide practical insights into how New Zealand's cultural values, particularly egalitarianism and humility, influence public expectations around authenticity, visibility and self-promotion (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020). Understanding these dynamics can help SMIs manage their public image, build trust with their audiences, and navigate criticism's emotional, social and professional impacts. Importantly, the research shared the perspectives of other SMIs on how they have effectively

coped with TPS and online criticism, offering encouragement, practical coping strategies, and the reassurance that they are not only facing these challenges.

For social media followers, this study raises awareness about how their engagement, comments, and expectations, often shaped by cultural values, can significantly impact the mental health and credibility of SMIs. It encourages followers to reflect on their behaviour and consider how their interaction can support or harm SMIs. This promotes more mindful, empathetic, and responsible participation in online spaces.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the background of the research, a brief overview of the literature review and methodology sections, introduced the research questions, and highlighted the theoretical and managerial contribution of the research. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, establishing the foundation for the study. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative approach design, including the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, participant recruitment criteria, data collection, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases framework, and the systematic presentation of findings using Gioia et al.'s (2013) approach. Ethical considerations are also discussed. Chapter 4 presents the key findings, identifying themes from both SMIs and followers, supported by direct quotes, and highlights similarities and differences in the perception of SMIs versus followers to offer deeper insights. Chapter 5 interprets and summarises the findings, outlines theoretical and managerial contributions, offers recommendations for future research, and concludes with reflections and limitations.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by introducing the concept of SMIs and reviewing the existing literature surrounding this phenomenon. It will then delve into the theoretical foundations that offer potential explanations for the criticism of SMIs by followers within the contexts of New Zealand and Australia. This exploration will include an examination of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, with a particular focus on the power distance dimension, as well as social comparison theory and cognitive dissonance.

2.2 What Are Social Media Influencers?

SMIs have become increasingly important with the emergence of social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, establishing themselves as crucial players in the digital marketing landscape (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). SMIs are defined as individuals who can engage audiences, stimulate discussions, and promote products or services to targeted groups (Kim & Kim, 2021). Unlike traditional celebrities, who achieve fame through offline activities, such as film, sports, or politics, SMIs are often perceived as ordinary individuals or grassroots figures. They gain widespread visibility by consistently creating and sharing original, authentic, and relatable content on social media platforms (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Generally, SMIs are online personalities with significant followings across one or more social media platforms (Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). They typically specialise in specific niches, such as fitness, beauty, or fashion, and are viewed by consumers as credible sources of information due to their personal interests and insights (Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022). Research indicates that SMIs increasingly influence consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions (Chen & Lu, 2024; Masuda et al., 2022). The success of SMIs is often evaluated through engagement metrics, which measure audience interaction through likes, shares, comments, retweets, and favourites (Arora et al., 2019). High engagement levels suggest that followers not only consume content but also actively participate in discussions, thus enhancing the content's reach and impact. Consequently, SMIs

play a vital role in shaping consumer behaviour and influencing brand perceptions and marketing strategies, making them essential in contemporary marketing efforts (Chen & Lu, 2024; Haenlein & Libai, 2017; Masuda et al., 2022).

2.2.1 Social Media Influencer Types

SIMs can be classified based on their follower counts, each category carrying distinct implications for their reach and influence. Research has identified four primary types of SIMs: nano-influencers, micro-influencers, macro-influencers, and mega-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Nano-influencers, who typically have follower counts ranging from 1,000 to 10,000, are often at the early stages of their careers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). They exert considerable influence within local or regional contexts and are known for producing high-quality content focused on specialised or niche topics (Balaji et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Followed by, micro-influencers, with follower counts between 10,000 to 100,000, impact smaller yet highly engaged social circles (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). Furthermore, macro-influencers, who have follower counts ranging from 100,000 and 1 million, are recognised as experts in their respective domains but have not yet attained the status of traditional celebrities (Balaji et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Finally, mega-influencers, with follower counts exceeding 1 million, gaining globally recognition and possess a level of fame comparable to those who are traditional celebrities (Balaji et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023).

However, a growing body of research suggests that the effectiveness of SIMs is not solely determined by their follower count. While macro-influencers have a broad reach, micro-influencers often exhibit higher engagement rates and greater influence over their followers (Kay et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021). For example, a study shows that micro-influencers generate over 20 times more conversations than the average consumer, and about 80 percent of their followers are highly likely to act on their recommendations (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). Furthermore, research indicates that micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers due to their higher perceived authenticity, which enhances the credibility of the brands they endorse (Park et al., 2021). Additionally, consumers exposed to micro-influencers report higher levels of product knowledge compared to those exposed to macro-influencers (Kay et al., 2020). This increased engagement is associated with micro-

influencers' closer, more personal connections with their audience and their ability to deliver more targeted and authentic content. Consequently, follower count does not always correlate with the effectiveness of influencer marketing; rather, the quality of engagement and relevance to the target audience often prove to be more significant factors.

Originally conceived in the context of television and radio, which did not facilitate direct interaction, the concept of parasocial relationship has been widely applied to the relationships between SMIs and followers (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). For instance, research has shown that strong parasocial relationships between SMIs and their followers significantly positively impact purchase intentions and enhance factors such as physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily (Masuda et al., 2022). Additionally, Chen (2016) found that social interactions facilitated by YouTube play a significant role in developing parasocial relationships between amateur YouTubers and their viewers. However, Lou (2022) argues that parasocial relationships do not fully capture the complexities of modern social media interactions and introduces the concept of trans-parasocial relationships.

Trans-parasocial relationships are characterised by reciprocal interactions, both asynchronously and synchronously, and are co-created by influencers and followers (Lou, 2022). These traits distinguish influencer-follower relationships from traditional parasocial relationships. In trans-parasocial relationships, influencers respond to followers' collective requests and curate content accordingly (Lou, 2022). Interactions occur in real-time or with delays, such as through comments or live videos (Lou, 2022). Moreover, followers actively participate in shaping the influencers' content, values, and goals, making the relationship more interactive and collaborative (Lou, 2022). This concept is beginning to be applied in SMI research as a theoretical foundation. For example, recent research has shown that Twitch viewers who believe they have a trans-parasocial relationship with a streamer form a more engaged and reciprocal bond, increasing the efficacy of sponsored promotions (Carter & Hoy, 2024). Understanding the distinction between parasocial and trans-parasocial relationships is crucial for analysing the evolving nature of influencer-follower dynamics in the digital age. While parasocial relationships provide valuable insights into one-sided media interactions, trans-parasocial relationships offer a more nuanced perspective on the reciprocal and interactive nature of modern social media engagements. This expanded framework enhances

comprehension of how influencers and followers engage with each other and underscores the significance of these interactions in shaping marketing strategies and campaign effectiveness.

2.2.2 Source Credibility in Social Media Influencers

A significant body of research has demonstrated that the credibility of SMIs plays a crucial role in shaping consumer decisions. Source credibility encompasses the positive attributes of a communicator that influence how a message is perceived and accepted (Ohanian, 1990). Sources that are seen as credible are recognised for their accuracy and honesty in reporting (Fragale & Heath, 2004). Key characteristics that define source credibility include expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and authenticity (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Labrecque et al., 2011; Ohanian, 1990). The importance of these credibility factors can vary depending on the type of social media platform, industry contexts, and types of influencers (Pradhan et al., 2023). The subsequent sections will delve into each of these dimensions and the relevant research associated with them.

2.2.2.1 Expertise

Expertise is a fundamental aspect of source credibility, which is defined as the degree to which a communicator is regarded as knowledgeable and reliable (Erdogan, 1999). This construct encompasses the skills, experience, and knowledge attributed to the source by the audience (Erdogan, 1999). Notably, the significance lies not in the source's expertise but in the audience's perception of that expertise (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). An expanding body of literature highlights that the perceived expertise of SMIs plays a significant role in establishing their credibility (Hu et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Ren et al., 2023). For example, SMIs who are perceived as experts are particularly influential in shaping consumer perceptions of a product's quality (Erdogan, 1999; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This efficacy is likely attributable to the perception of SMIs as authorities within specific niches, such as travel, food, and beauty, thereby enhancing their persuasive capacity in influencing consumer behaviour (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Moreover, SMIs who adopt an informative role, offering valuable and utilitarian content, tend to foster greater trust and generate higher purchase intentions compared to those who

primarily focus on engagement (Hu et al., 2020; Ren et al., 2023). Further research substantiates that the perceived expertise of SMIs significantly enhances followers' trust, which subsequently positively affects purchase intentions (Kim & Kim, 2021; Masuda et al., 2022). However, the impact of expertise may differ depending on the strength of the relationship; in stronger connections, expertise exerts a more pronounced influence on trust, whereas in weaker relationships, consistent interaction is necessary to cultivate trust (Kim & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, the relevance of expertise can vary based on contextual factors. For example, a study examining SMIs promoting entry-level luxury fashion brands revealed that expertise was not a significant factor, exhibiting only minimal effects on consumer satisfaction and no impact on trust or brand image (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Therefore, these findings underscore the notion that while expertise is a crucial aspect of source credibility, its influence on consumer behaviour is not uniform across all contexts.

2.2.2.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is defined as the honesty, integrity, and credibility attributed to a source, reflecting the audience's perception of the likelihood that the source communicates their claims truthfully (Erdogan, 1999; Munnukka et al., 2016). Influencers perceived as trustworthy are more likely to engender positive consumer attitudes (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Ohanian, 1990). Extensive research consistently highlights the pivotal role of perceived trustworthiness in shaping consumer behavior and outcomes (Jin et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). For example, a study on SMIs promoting entry-level luxury fashion brands found that perceived trustworthiness had a more significant impact on brand image, brand trust, and brand satisfaction than perceived attractiveness and expertise (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Additionally, research comparing Instagram influencers with traditional celebrities demonstrated that consumers perceive Instagram influencers as more trustworthy when exposed to their brand-related posts, likely due to the influencers' higher level of relatability, which enhances trust when associated with the same brand (Jin et al., 2019). Trust also functions as a key mediator between influencer attributes, such as expertise, authenticity, and homophily, and consumer behaviour, influencing endorsement acceptance and purchase intentions (Kim & Kim, 2021). Consequently, trust is a dynamic factor that drives positive consumer responses, fostering brand loyalty and shaping purchasing decisions (Kim & Kim, 2021). However,

trustworthiness does not always result in favourable marketing outcomes in every context. For example, in a study of the aesthetic dermatology industry in Jordan, trustworthiness had minimal impact on consumers' purchase intentions, as many respondents viewed influencer content as paid advertising rather than genuine recommendations (AlFarraj et al., 2021). This finding highlights that while trustworthiness is a vital element of source credibility, its influence is contingent upon contextual factors, such as cultural norms and consumer perceptions. These divergent outcomes emphasise the complexities of consumer interpretations of influencer motives, suggesting that trust alone may not be sufficient to ensure the overall effectiveness of source credibility in all situations.

2.2.2.3 Attractiveness

The dimension of attractiveness is integral to the construct of source credibility and significantly influences how consumers perceive and engage with SMIs. Attractiveness encompasses both physical appeal and the likability of the influencer, factors that have been shown to impact audience receptiveness to marketing messages (McGuire, 1985; cited in Lou & Yuan, 2019, Ohanian, 1990). Empirical studies have consistently illustrated the pivotal role that perceived attractiveness plays in consumer decision-making. For instance, research involving 306 German Instagram users, aged 18 to 34, revealed a positive correlation between source attractiveness and purchase intentions, indicating that consumers are more inclined to make purchases when they find an influencer visually appealing (Weismueller et al., 2020). Moreover, the perceived attractiveness of influencers strengthens parasocial relationships, where followers who view an influencer as physically appealing or likable experience enhanced emotional connections, thereby increasing their interest in the products the influencer endorses (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

However, some research argues that the relationship between perceived attractiveness and purchase behaviour may not always be direct. A study found that physical attractiveness alone does not drive purchase intentions or brand attitudes; rather, it may play an indirect role by augmenting perceptions of an influencer's expertise and trustworthiness, ultimately leading to improved brand attitudes and heightened purchase intentions (Filieri et al., 2023). Furthermore, some studies have found no significant impact of physical attractiveness on relational trust, suggesting that other factors may mediate or moderate this relationship (Kim

& Kim, 2021). This complexity underscores the necessity of examining not only the attractiveness of influencers but also how it interacts with other dimensions of credibility in shaping consumer behaviour. Overall, these findings demonstrate that attractiveness is a crucial element of source credibility, significantly enhancing consumer engagement and influencing decision-making processes.

2.2.2.4 Similarity/Homophily

Similarity refers to the perceived likeness and shared characteristics, such as demographic or ideological factors, between the source and the audience (Schipappa et al., 2007, as cited in Yuan & Lou, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2019). This concept is closely related to homophily, which refers to the extent of alignment between a SMIs' image and a consumer's ideal self-image, resulting in more effective endorsement outcomes (Masuda et al., 2022; Shan et al., 2020). Similarity and homophily are interconnected, based on the idea that interactions occur more frequently between individuals who share similarities than between those who do not (Masuda et al., 2022; McPherson et al., 2001). Research indicates that messages conveyed by sources perceived as similar to the audience tend to encounter reduced psychological resistance and are subjected to less critical evaluation (Brinol & Petty, 2009). Furthermore, SMIs, who do not necessarily need to possess celebrity status or expert qualifications, can attain prominence through their relatable and approachable personas, thereby amassing substantial followings (Kim et al., 2023). This perceived similarity serves to enhance the credibility of influencers, as consumers often identify shared characteristics with these individuals.

Numerous studies support the assertion that perceived similarity significantly affects the credibility of influencers (Jin et al., 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). For instance, research contrasting Instagram influencers with traditional celebrities has demonstrated that influencers are regarded as more relatable, which subsequently increases their perceived similarity to the audience, fostering higher trustworthiness and more favourable attitudes toward endorsed brands (Jin et al., 2019). Additionally, further studies have corroborated these findings, revealing that perceived similarity with an influencer can bolster followers' trust in branded content, reinforce parasocial relationships, and positively influence brand awareness and purchase intentions

(Yuan & Lou, 2020). Additionally, a study comparing celebrity and influencer endorsements indicated that participants felt a stronger sense of similarity and trust toward influencers, which enhanced advertising effectiveness (Schouten et al., 2021).

However, while these studies underscore the importance of source similarity in enhancing the credibility of SMIs and their capacity to influence consumer behaviour, some research presents contrasting results. For example, a study from the United States examining the impact of social status similarity among influencers on marketing outcomes found that higher social status, rather than perceived similarity, was more influential in driving positive marketing results such as brand loyalty, product attitudes, and purchase willingness (Kim et al., 2023). Therefore, although perceived similarity plays a vital role in augmenting the credibility of SMIs, its significance may vary depending on the study's specific context.

2.2.2.5 Authenticity

Authenticity is a critical attribute of source credibility among SMIs, reflecting followers' perceptions of an influencer's genuine commitment to content motivated by intrinsic motives, free from commercial biases (Jun & Yi, 2020; Zniva et al., 2023). With businesses increasingly leverage SMIs for marketing purposes, the perceived authenticity of these influencers has become increasingly important. For example, research demonstrates that an influencer's authenticity enhances follower trust and results in favourable marketing outcomes, including improved product attitudes, increased purchase intentions, and heightened brand loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, a study involving 1,100 participants across two product categories found that endorsements from influencers perceived as intrinsically motivated and in creative control of their content are considered more credible and authentic, significantly enhancing consumers' willingness to purchase the endorsed products (Kapitan et al., 2022). Moreover, additional studies indicate that an influencer's authenticity has a profound effect on followers' emotional attachment, trust, and engagement (Audrezet et al., 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020). A growing body of research underscores the significance of authenticity in influencer-brand partnerships. For example, a qualitative study that employed observations of SMI-brand collaborations and interviews with SMIs identified the critical role of authenticity in these partnerships and proposed two strategies for managing it: through passion and transparency (Audrezet et al., 2020). Therefore, it is evident

that authenticity plays a vital role in enhancing the credibility of SMIS, ultimately influencing their effectiveness in marketing contexts.

In conclusion, the credibility of SMIs is a multifaceted construct that significantly impacts consumer behaviour and decision-making. The dimensions of source credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity, and authenticity, interact in complex ways to shape audience perceptions and engagement. Each dimension plays a vital role in establishing an influencer's overall credibility, influencing how effectively they can sway consumer opinions and actions. However, the effectiveness of these dimensions can vary across different contexts, emphasising the need for marketers to adapt their strategies based on the specific dynamics of influencer marketing.

2.3 Online Harassment and SMIs

With the rise of SMIs, recent studies have explored the impact of online harassment directed at SMIs (Duffy et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Research has found that SMIs experience more frequent and varied online harassment than general internet users (Hassan et al., 2018; Takano et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). For example, (Thomas et al., 2022), who surveyed 135 SMIs, found that while most SMIs viewed audience interaction positively, nearly all could recall at least one incident of receiving hate messages and harassment, with one in three experiencing it regularly. Similarly, Takano et al. (2024) found that SMIs experience higher online harassment than regular social media users and various forms of online abuse, including appearance-related insults, ability abuse, personality attacks, obscene messages, intimidation, and even unwanted sexual requests. In another study, Valenzuela-García et al. (2023) used a mixed method approach, surveying 76 Instagram SMIs and a virtual ethnography of 260 SMIs' Instagram accounts and discovered that SMIs frequently encounter insults, humiliation and repeated derogatory comments, often on a daily or weekly basis. The study also highlighted that SMIs are frequently regarded as “non-ideal victims.” An “ideal victim” is typically characterised as someone vulnerable, passive, engaged in a respectable or worthy activity, clearly not responsible for the harm experienced, and victimised by an unknown or malicious offender, without their victim status conflicting with other societal roles or expectations (Christie, 1986; as cited in Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). In contrast, SMIs

often do not fit this profile as they are commonly perceived as confident, successful, and socially advantaged, and their public visibility, perceived ease of success, and association with fame or material gain contribute to the belief that they lack vulnerability (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). As a result, audiences may view them as less worthy of empathy and these assumptions make it easier for perpetrators to excuse or justify their harassment, framing it as criticism rather than abuse (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Hassan et al. (2018), who examined cyberbullying among SMIs, identified various forms of abuse, including harassment, flaming, outing, masquerading, dissing, trolling, catfishing and slandering, all of which aimed at damaging an SMI's reputation and trustworthiness.

Several studies have identified specific factors that increase the risk of online harassment. These include higher visibility, larger follower counts, content type and dependency on social media influencing income, all heighten the risk of online harassment (Takano et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). For example, Valenzuela-García et al. (2023) found that public exposure was positively correlated with harassment as SMIs with 500,000 to 2.5 million followers reported more harassment and harmful messages, including attention-seeking, threats, insults and untrustworthy accusations. However, SMIs who share more about their personal lives and lifestyles are also more vulnerable to online harassment (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Thomas et al.'s (2022) study also found that live-streaming content significantly increases the frequency and intensity of negative interaction, exposing SMIs to real-time, unfiltered feedback.

This consistent exposure to online harassment has significant psychological and professional consequences on SMIs. Studies have found that SMIs who express online harassment experience increased psychological harm, including increased stress, decreased self-esteem, loss of sleep, and increased anxiety and depression (Hassan et al., 2018; Takano et al., 2024). This is supported by Valenzuela-García et al. (2023) study reporting that SMIs' exposure to online harassment led to psychological impacts, including irritability and anger, melancholy, vigilance, preoccupation, anxiety, stress and depression. Studies also found that many SMIs would choose to suppress their online harassment experience, and victims are hesitant to speak out, especially about sexual harassment, due to stigma and fear of public rejection (Takano et al., 2024; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). On top of the psychological impact, online harassment also has a significant impact on SMIs' professional lives as an SMI. For example, Valenzuela-García et al. (2023) study found that 89.1% of their participants

withdrew from brand collaborations, hesitated to take on new projects due to fear of online harassment, and some victims reported direct economic impact. This compounded reputational harm can result in follower loss and reduce opportunities (Hassan et al., 2018). As a result, many SMIs either self-censor or quit the platform entirely, restricting genuine expression and reducing the range of voices available online (Thomas et al., 2022). This also raises questions regarding how social media platforms are managed, as functions designed to protect users, such as reporting and blocking, are often weaponised to target and silence SMIs. Meisner's (2023) research highlights mass reporting as a contemporary form of harassment where users strategically misuse content reporting tools to silence or harass SMIs, leading to not only a reduction in their visibility but also in temporary or permanent account suspension, amplifying the psychological, financial and professional distress of harassment. For example, TikTok creator Allen Polyakov reported that after gaining popularity, his innocent gaming content, such as Fortnite clips, were repeatedly and falsely flagged for nudity or sexual content, with trolls entering his livestream to boast about having his video removed, resulting in lost engagement, income and opportunities (Contreras, 2021). These actions show how platform governance features meant to keep users safe can be used to make SMIs more vulnerable.

SMIs have a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the ongoing threat of online abuse. The most common response is avoidance, such as ignoring or deleting hateful comments, blocking users, or downplaying the severity of the abuse (Abidin, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Although these strategies could provide temporary relief, they frequently overlook the underlying source of the issue and risk normalising a hostile online community (Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Seeking social support is another common strategy, with SMIs often turning to friends, partners, family members, and fellow SMIs for emotional support (Abidin, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). For example, Thomas et al. (Thomas et al., 2022) found that 70% of SMIs lean on close personal relationships, 44% connected with fellow SMIs who understood their experiences, and 33% sometimes turned to supportive followers. However, some SMIs expressed concerns about trust within the influencer community, mentioning that not all fellow SMIs are reliable sources of support (Thomas et al., 2022).

In addition, some SMIs take more confrontational approaches, such as retaliating against bullies by publicly calling them out or posting direct rebuttals, as a means of reclaiming

power (Abidin, 2019; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). An example is beauty influencer James Charles, who, after facing significant online harassment and reputational damage due to false accusations of betrayal and inappropriate behaviour by another creator, released a 41-minute video titled “No More Lies” to address the allegation and present screenshots as evidence to repair his reputation (McCarthy, 2019). Others, particularly those with a larger following, may consider formal approaches, such as contacting law enforcement (Hassan et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2022). In the long term, some SMIs adopt protective behaviour, such as minimising personal information sharing to safeguard themselves from further harassment (Takano et al., 2024; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). Additionally, some emotionally reframe online harassment as an unavoidable consequence of having an online presence (Thomas et al., 2022). While this form of psychological adjustment may help reduce stress, it also contributes to a broader culture of tolerance around online harassment targeting SMIs.

While existing research has primarily focused on online harassment, a more extreme form of negative interaction, there remains limited exploration into how SMIs experience and respond to criticism. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how criticism manifests in the lives of SMIs in New Zealand and how it affects them personally and professionally. As Barrett (1989) observes, while criticism is often seen negatively in everyday contexts as an expression of disapproval, in scholarly and artistic contexts, it can include positive and negative judgements intended to deepen understanding and appreciation. Constructive criticism may be a valuable tool for SMIs to boost engagement, hone their content, and create more authentic, long-lasting relationships with their audience. However, it can be difficult for SMIs to distinguish between constructive and negative comments because the lines between harassment and criticism are usually blurred. This unclear line challenges how SMIs perceive and handle such interactions, potentially affecting their emotional well-being, social identity, and professional progress. This study intends to investigate how SMIs deal with these dynamics to understand more about their coping mechanisms, the reasons behind the criticism they get, and how cultural differences among followers may influence the type, frequency, and tone of these criticisms.

2.4 Tall Poppy Syndrome and SMIs

We now turn our attention to the potential theoretical foundations that can help explain the criticism of SMIs by followers in New Zealand and Australia. The frameworks examined include Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly the power distance dimension, social comparison theory and cognitive dissonance.

TPS is a deeply rooted socio-cultural phenomenon in New Zealand and Australia (Feather, 1991; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). TPS is defined by the tendency to downplay or undermine successful, high-achieving individuals, and it consists of two key components: the tall poppy and the detractor, also known as the "poppy clipper" (Feather, 1989, 1991; Feather, 1994; Deverson, 1998, as cited in Kirkwood, 2007; Mancl & Penington, 2011; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). The tall poppy refers to an individual who is highly successful and draws jealousy attention or hostility, while the detractor or "poppy clipper" is someone who tries to disparage and downplay tall poppy's accomplishments (Deverson, 1998, as cited in Kirkwood, 2007; Mancl & Penington, 2011; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). According to Mouly and Sankaran (2002), tall poppy can occur at both the individual and organisational levels, and detractors may come from peers or wider society. This results in four types of TPS, where individuals or organisations are criticised by their peers or the broader public (Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). Kirkwood's (2007) study on the effects of TPS on entrepreneurs in New Zealand found that detractors can come from many sources, including clients, friends, previous colleagues, employees, and family members. Research by Peeters (2015) argues that TPS does not target all high achievers, but rather those who openly demonstrate superiority as a results of their success, those who call attention to their performance by self-promotion or boastfulness are criticised. This is consistent with Marques (2023), who applied Fiske et al's (2002) Stereotype Content Model to explain how individuals' attitudes toward tall poppies are influenced by perceptions of warmth and competence, suggesting that tall poppies are viewed more positively when seen as both warm and competent, while those perceived as arrogant, incompetent, or both tend to face opposition. These views are compatible with the larger cultural norms of modesty and humility in egalitarian societies such as New Zealand and Australia (Holmes et al., 2017; Packer, 2014; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003).

TPS is generally inherent in egalitarian culture, such as New Zealand and Australia, which hold that all individuals are equally valued and should have equal chances and rights in life (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) Research suggests that New Zealand's egalitarian society is rooted in its colonial past and geographical isolation, with early immigrants rejecting Britain's class-based system (Packer, 2014; McLeod, 1968; as cited in Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). This history has fostered a culture that values humility, conformity, and avoiding visible display of authority (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002; Pierce et al., 2017). Thus, New Zealanders are often uneasy with explicit power relations. For example, Holmes et al. (2017) observed that New Zealand's egalitarian culture influences workplace behaviour, with leaders downplaying their status, subordinates wanting recognition without appearing arrogant, and informality between leaders and subordinates being most common. This relationship between egalitarianism and TPS is further reinforced by research indicating that TPS is more frequently found in egalitarian societies, where visible success or achievement can trigger a social backlash (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). For example, Holmes et al.'s (2017) research on TPS and New Zealand workplaces discovered that TPS promotes humility and discourages self-promotion, requiring leaders to look humble and avoid direct acknowledgement of successes. This creates a contradiction between individual accomplishment and cultural expectations of humility, highlighting the significance of TPS in such contexts.

TPS is a significant part of New Zealand culture, influencing public individuals and organisations. For example, Israel Adesanya, the mixed martial arts champion and recipient of the 2019 New Zealand Sportsman of the Year award, spoke about his own encounters with TPS during his acceptance speech, highlighting its obstructive effects on individuals striving for outstanding performance (Marques et al., 2022). Furthermore, study on the branding tactics of New Zealand's national rugby team, the 'All Blacks,' demonstrated the influence of TPS on their brand narrative (Motion et al., 2003, as cited in Kirkwood & Warren, 2020). The All Blacks purposefully demonstrate modesty to reflect New Zealand's cultural values of humility, as evidenced by campaigns such as "It Takes a Nation to Build an All Black", which value cooperation and community involvement over individual achievement (Motion et al., 2003, as cited in Kirkwood & Warren, 2020). These examples demonstrate the cultural relevance of TPS in New Zealand.

While New Zealand has an egalitarian society, the cultural landscape is more complicated. Turiel and Perkin (2004) argue that cultures are diverse and constantly changing, making it impossible to characterise them from a single, fixed perspective. Cultures balance one's independence and collective interdependence, and this ongoing process shapes shared understandings of social relationships, morality, and identity. In 2023, New Zealand's population consisted of 67.8% European, 17.8% Māori, 17.3% Asian, 8.9% Pasifika peoples, and 1.9% Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African (Environmental Health Indicators New Zealand, n.d.). While all of these cultural groupings are part of New Zealand's broader egalitarian culture, they represent a variety of cultural orientations. For example, a study by Harrington and Liu (2002) examined Māori and New Zealand European students' individualistic and collectivist orientations. The study indicated that Māori students showcased a greater collectivist orientation, placing a larger importance on group cohesion and collective incentives compared to New Zealand European students. However, all groups had equal degrees of individualistic orientation. This finding suggests that New Zealand's cultural landscape is not entirely shaped by a single cultural orientation but rather by a combination of individualistic and collectivist principles (Harrington & Liu, 2002). Although New Zealand's culture value egalitarianism, cultural views differ between Māori and New Zealand European groups, indicating a complex cultural environment (Harrington & Liu, 2002). As a result, the difference in cultural values is a key aspect to address in the study since various groups may experiences or respond to TPS in different ways.

TPS has been examined in a variety of context, including academia, entrepreneurship, leadership, sports and the workplace (Feather, 1989; Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). Across these domains, research illustrates how high achievers frequently experience societal backlash as a result of their success, prompting them to develop coping mechanisms mitigate the impact of TPS. In academic settings, Feather (1989) discovered that high school and university students experience a sense of pleasure when high achievers faced setbacks. High school students preferred that high achievers fell from their position compared to an average achiever, and they preferred that the high achiever fell to an average rank rather than the bottom (Feather, 1989). Similarly, university students were harsher on a high achiever who cheated on an exam than an average achiever (Feather, 1989). These findings suggest that TPS operates as a form of social regulation, ensuring that success does not become excessive or threaten group cohesion (Feather, 1989).

This early exposure to TPS within educational setting may shape individuals' perceptions of success in later professional and social environments.

Beyond academics, TPS has also been recognised in entrepreneurship. Studies by Kirkwood (2007) and Kirkwood and Warren (2020) found that most entrepreneurs in New Zealand believed TPS existed and had personally experienced it in their careers. To mitigate its effect, many adopted strategies, such as deliberately downplayed their financial success, with some avoiding expensive cars and even disguising their business ownership to prevent unfavourable judgement (Kirkwood, 2007). Additionally, participants in Kirkwood and Warren's (2020) study highlighted various coping mechanisms, including accepting TPS as part of New Zealand's culture, focusing on positive feedback, stopped reading negative comments online, and externalised criticisms by viewing detractors as negative and unhappy individuals, and in some cases, actively confronting detractors online. These findings highlight how entrepreneurs in New Zealand experience and navigate TPS, demonstrating the cultural impact of success perception and the adaptive strategies employed to maintain professional and personal resilience (Kirkwood, 2007; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020).

The presence of TPS extends into sports as well. A study of TPS and 19 elite New Zealand athletes indicated that TPS develops early in their careers and continues after retirement (Pierce et al., 2017). Regardless of how openly they showcase their accomplishment, participants reported suffering TPS from peers, coaches, and the larger sports community, with media amplifying the impacts (Pierce et al., 2017). While some athletes utilise TPS as motivation by channelling criticism into performance improvement, it also acts as a reality check, allowing athletes to avoid arrogance and remain humble (Pierce et al., 2017). However, TPS also posed psychological challenges; participants mentioned using coping strategies, such as blocking out negativity, seeking social support, and regulating their self-confidence to maintain mental resilience (Pierce et al., 2017).

Many studies have indicated that TPS is also present in professional settings and affects individuals' employment possibilities (Holmes et al., 2017; Mancl & Penington, 2011; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). A study investigated how envy affected Tara, a high-achieving lecturer who was refused a double increment despite having an extraordinary academic record at a New Zealand tertiary educational institution (Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). This study discovered that peer jealousy was key role in restricting her professional advancement, with coworkers taking advantage of the peer review system to undermine her accomplishments

(Mouly & Sankaran, 2002). This is consistent with Mancl and Penington's (2011) study, which examines how women in organisational contexts interact with female colleagues they regard as superior, and found that jealousy was expressed through both verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Non-verbal behaviours included passive-aggressiveness, such as stonewalling, procrastination, and withholding support, along with eye-rolling, hostile stares, and avoiding eye contact to show disrespect and time-related behaviours, like arriving late to meetings, used to exert power (Mancl & Penington, 2011). Verbal expressions of envy typically took the form of gossip and reputational damage, aiming to diminish the success of a tall poppy (Mancl & Penington, 2011). These findings suggest that TPS involves not only the high achiever's response but also the active role of detractors in reinforcing social norms that discourage excellence. Furthermore, Holmes et al. (2017) discovered that TPS exists in women leaders in New Zealand workplaces and found that they employ methods such as redirecting to others, using self-deprecating humour, downplaying their achievements, and subtly highlighting their successes. These approaches allow them to maintain modesty while lowering the likelihood of undesirable responses (Holmes et al., 2017). These studies show that TPS applies to a wide range of industries, as top performers typically suffer criticism and societal backlash, necessitating the development of techniques for overcoming these obstacles.

Several gaps have been highlighted in the limited TPS research. Firstly, despite the significance of TPS in New Zealand, little empirical research has been conducted within New Zealand's cultural context (Marques et al., 2022). Scholars emphasise the need for real-world research to improve our understanding of TPS (Feather, 1989; Kirkwood, 2007).

Furthermore, much of the available literature focuses exclusively on the experiences of tall poppies or their detractors, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach that considers both views (Kirkwood & Warren, 2020). Additionally, there is a growing need for qualitative research methodologies to deepen understanding of TPS, particularly in-depth interviews, which allow for uncovering rich, personal insight that may be overlooked in quantitative approaches (Mancl & Penington, 2011; Pierce et al., 2017). Finally, the lack of variety in study samples emphasises the importance of recruiting people from varied cultural backgrounds to capture the nuanced ways TPS occurs (Mancl & Penington, 2011; Pierce et al., 2017). These gaps highlight the need for further exploration, which this research aims to address by adopting a qualitative approach, incorporating diverse perspectives, and examining TPS within New Zealand's cultural context.

2.5 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions: Focus on Power

Distance

One theoretical framework that helps explain the occurrence of TPS in New Zealand and Australia is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, with particular emphasis on the power distance dimension. Culture is defined as the shared mental programming that distinguishes members of one group from those of another (Hofstede, 1980, 2011). Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory provides a framework for understanding cultural differences across countries, which encompasses six key dimensions: power distance, masculinity versus femininity, individualism versus collectivism, long-term versus short-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede, 2011). This review focuses specifically on power distance to analyse the presence of TPS in New Zealand and Australia.

Power distance refers to the extent to which individuals with less power in a society accept and anticipate unequal power distributions (Hofstede, 2011). Societies with high power distance accept hierarchical power structures, where individuals understand and accept their position within the system; on the other hand, societies with low power distance view inequality as undesirable and strive to minimise it, though some hierarchies may still exist (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede's power distance index scores for 76 countries indicate that nations in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia generally have higher power distance scores, whereas Germanic and English-speaking Western countries tend to have lower scores (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). According to the country comparison tool based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which examines cultural values and attitudes across nations, New Zealand has a relatively low score of 22, indicating a societal preference for equality and resistance to hierarchical power structures (The Culture Factor Group, 2023). This classification reflects a low power distance, indicating a cultural preference for equality and a lower acceptance of hierarchical imbalances (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; The Culture Factor Group, 2023).

New Zealand's low power distance reflects a societal preference for equality and a resistance to hierarchical power structures, which aligns with its egalitarian culture (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). The culture places a high value on modesty, conformity, and avoiding overt power displays; thus, New Zealanders are generally uncomfortable with explicit power dynamics (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). Research

suggests that TPS is more prominent in egalitarian societies, where visible success or achievement can provoke a social backlash, leading to attempts to downplay or undermine the accomplishments of individuals who stand out (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007; Pierce et al., 2017). These cultural foundations provide a valuable lens for understanding how TPS manifests in New Zealand society and its broader implications for societal expectations regarding individual success.

2.6 Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory, initially proposed by Festinger (1954), offers a foundational explanation for why individuals may feel compelled to criticise others. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals have an inherent tendency to assess themselves by comparing their opinions, abilities, and characteristics to those of others (Festinger, 1954). People typically make comparisons based on two reference points: real-world examples they observe or individuals they encounter (Festinger, 1954). Without objective standards, individuals rely on social comparison to evaluate their abilities and opinions, seeking validation and clarity (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). Festinger (1954) highlighted the relevance of similarity in social comparisons, arguing that individuals prefer to compare themselves to others who share their values and perspectives. Such comparisons provide more accurate assessments of abilities and opinions, as having discrepancies with those holding very different views reduces the likelihood of comparison, leading to uncertainty about the correctness of one's own opinion (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). While Festinger (1954) initially proposed that social comparison serves primarily as a self-evaluation, later researchers have expanded this idea, suggesting that it also serves other purposes, such as self-enhancement and self-improvement (Solomon et al., 2016; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). Social comparisons can positively or negatively affect self-feelings depending on the goal of social comparison (Solomon et al., 2016). These motivations suggest that individuals use social comparisons to assess their abilities and opinions, boost their self-esteem, or strive for personal growth (Solomon et al., 2016; Suls & Wheeler, 2012).

Researchers argue that social comparison consists of upward and downward comparisons. Upward social comparison occurs when individuals are driven to improve by comparing their abilities to those perceived as slightly better (Collins, 1996; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). This

leads to continuous striving and competition, resulting in more negative self-evaluation and self-esteem (Collins, 1996; Suls & Wheeler, 2012). On the other hand, downward social comparison occurs when individuals experiencing distress or low self-esteem seek comfort by comparing themselves to others who are worse off (Wills, 1981). This comparison can enhance their subjective wellbeing by improving their self-perception and emotional state, aligning with the self-enhancement goal of social comparison (Suls & Wheeler, 2012; Wills, 1981). Many studies have found that individuals with low self-esteem will engage more in downward social comparison to enhance their self-worth and self-esteem (Cramer et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2014; Wills, 1981).

With the rise and growing use of social media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, the tendency to engage in social comparison has grown stronger (Caliskan et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2014). For example, an experimental study that examined how social media-based social comparison affects self-esteem found that participants who were exposed to Facebook profiles that contained upward comparison information, such as healthy habits and a highly active social life, had lower self-esteem compared to those participants who were exposed to downward comparison information (Vogel et al., 2014). However, some research suggests that engaging in downward social comparison can also have negative psychological consequences rather than boosting self-esteem, as it may lead to increased negative emotions such as guilt, pity, or fear of becoming like those being compared to, which can ultimately harm individuals' well-being (Cramer et al., 2016; Weinstein, 2017).

While both forms of comparison are essential for understanding social comparison theory, upward social comparisons are particularly relevant when understanding why people criticise others. Festinger (1954) described this as a unidirectional drive upward, where individuals with a self-improvement motive prefer to compare themselves to those slightly more successful. This preference often leads to continuous striving, competition, and, in many cases, feelings of inadequacy when one falls short (Collins, 1996; Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). For instance, individuals motivated by self-improvement might actively seek feedback that challenges them, even if it triggers uncomfortable emotions, because they view it as beneficial for growth (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009).

However, upward social comparison can also lead to envy and negative self-assessment, especially on social media platforms, where idealised portrayals of others' lives often fuel feelings of inadequacy (Li, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Studies show that frequent upward

comparisons on platforms like Facebook and Instagram can harm self-esteem and well-being, leading to feelings of envy, regret, and defensiveness (Schmuck et al., 2019). Frequent engagement with social comparison could lead to negative feelings, such as envy, regret, defensiveness and regret (White et al., 2006). Despite these risks, Wheeler's (1966) study proposed that upward comparisons can enhance or maintain self-esteem. The paper found that some individuals do not perceive upward comparison as threatening but instead view it as an opportunity for self-enhancement. However, the paper also argues that this strategy comes with risks as the comparer may be unable to dismiss whatever discrepancies exist (Collins, 1996; Wheeler, 1966).

Festinger (1954) also identified competitive behaviour as a natural consequence of social comparison, especially when individuals perceive discrepancies between themselves and those they compare to; as a result, they may behave competitively to minimise, overcome, or preempt the performance gap. While Festinger (1954) established the foundation by explaining that individuals are motivated either to enhance their standing or diminish that of others, subsequent research has expanded this understanding by detailing the more specific behavioural responses involved (Garcia & Tor, 2024; Johnson, 2012; Safdar & Khan, 2023; Tesser & Smith, 1980; White et al., 2006). A number of studies have found a positive correlation between social comparison and competitive behaviour (Garcia & Tor, 2024; Johnson, 2012; Safdar & Khan, 2023). The Social Comparison Model of Competition outlines both individual and situational factors that influence when social comparison leads to competitive behaviour (Garcia et al., 2013). Individual factors include similarity to the self, the closeness of the target, and the personal relevance of the comparison domain, while situational factor refers to contextual elements such as the number of competitors, social group dynamics, and salience of the competitive context (Garcia et al., 2013). When these factors are present, individuals become increasingly concerned with their relative standing, which in turn triggers competitive behaviours, either through efforts to elevate their position or by diminishing the standing of others (Garcia et al., 2013).

Building on this, the behavioural consequences of threatening upward social comparisons have been explored, showing that when individuals perceive a feasible opportunity to restore their self-evaluation, such as through future performance, they tend to respond constructively (Johnson, 2012). However, without such opportunities, individuals are more likely to resort to negative behaviour to reduce the perceived threat (Johnson, 2012). In such cases, behaviours

such as undermining others, creating coalitions against them, displaying rudeness, interfering with their performance, withholding information, or sabotaging their reputations to protect one's positive self-view (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007; Fischer et al., 2009; Johnson, 2012; Tesser & Smith, 1980). Similarly, envy triggered by upward social comparison in a negotiation setting has been found to increase the likelihood of deception by enhancing its psychological benefits and lowering its perceived moral costs (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008). This mechanism explains why individuals may resort to deceptive or critical behaviours when threatened by others' success. Moreover, social comparison threats can also lead to horizontal hostility, especially among similar and more socially accepted groups, where hostility is often expressed through criticism or unfavourable attitude towards those groups (White et al., 2006). These findings reinforce that perceived threat or competition due to comparison can result in evaluative behaviour, particularly when self-esteem or social status is compromised.

Therefore, social comparison theory helps explain why individuals criticise others. While upward social comparison can sometimes be motivating, it often evokes negative emotions such as envy, insecurity, and threat (Schmuck et al., 2019; White et al., 2006). When constructive self-enhancement seems unattainable, criticism becomes a defensive strategy to undermine the target and restore self-worth (Johnson, 2012). In this way, criticism serves as a social expression of dissatisfaction and a psychological mechanism to manage the discomfort caused by unfavourable comparisons. Thus, social comparison produces internal dissatisfaction and frequently manifests externally through behaviours such as criticism.

In the context of TPS, upward social comparison is particularly relevant. In egalitarian cultures like New Zealand and Australia, where standing out is culturally discouraged, upward social comparisons can provoke TPS behaviours (Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood, 2007). Observing others' achievements can trigger envy or inadequacy, motivating individuals to criticise or cut down successful others to restore perceived equality (Li, 2019; Schmuck et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; White et al., 2006). This can lead to TPS behaviours, where individuals criticise or cut down those perceived as more successful, attempting to equalise status by diminishing others' accomplishments (Feather, 1989). Through this lens, social comparison theory, particularly upward comparison, helps explain TPS as a response to the emotional challenges of perceived inferiority and competition within egalitarian contexts. TPS can be seen as a social coping mechanism to mitigate the discomfort and perceived inequalities arising from upward comparisons. By undermining

others' success, individuals may find temporary relief from feelings of inadequacy. Thus, social comparison theory provides insight into the motivations behind self-improvement and elucidates the emergence of TPS behaviours, where social backlash is used to restore a sense of equality, even at the cost of fairness or encouragement.

2.7 Cognitive Dissonance

The concept of cognitive dissonance also provides a theoretical lens for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying TPS behaviour. Festinger (1962) proposed cognitive dissonance theory, which states that individuals experience psychological discomfort when simultaneously holding two or more contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a). Individuals naturally strive for consistency among their thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, values, and beliefs (Festinger, 1962; Miller et al., 2015). However, when cognitions are inconsistent, they create an unpleasant state that motivates individuals to modify one or more cognitions to achieve consistency (Festinger, 1962; Miller et al., 2015).

Building on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, this psychological discomfort becomes particularly relevant in the context of TPS. When individuals observe high achievers who disrupt social norms of equality and modesty, especially in cultures like New Zealand and Australia that value egalitarianism, cognitive dissonance can arise, as these societies face the tension between valuing both success and modesty (McLeod, 1968; as cited in Trevor-Roberts et al., 2003). These societies emphasise fairness and discourage individuals from standing out excessively, yet success is also generally admired, creating a psychological tension between the appreciation of achievement and the expectation of modesty; thus, this discrepancy leads to conflicting attitudes toward high achievers. To alleviate this discomfort, individuals may adopt TPS behaviours, such as criticising or resenting high achievers, to downplay their status and reestablish social balance (Feather, 1989). By diminishing the achievements of others, people can resolve their internal conflict between valuing success and maintaining societal expectations of equality (Festinger, 1962; Miller et al., 2015).

Festinger (1962) proposed several strategies for reducing cognitive dissonance. The strategies include removing dissonant cognitions, which involves changing or removing beliefs that conflict with behaviour; adding consonant cognitions by introducing new beliefs that justify

the behaviour; reducing the perceived importance of dissonant cognitions, thereby downplaying conflicting beliefs; or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions, which emphasises the value of beliefs that align with the behaviour (Cooper, 2012; Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a). These strategies are relevant to TPS, where detractors may downplay the achievements of others to maintain their internal balance (Feather, 1989; Feather, 1994).

The cultural context plays a significant role in how cognitive dissonance is experienced and managed. Heine and Lehman (1997) conducted a study demonstrating that dissonance reduction varies across cultures. Their study found that recent immigrants from Japan and China did not exhibit significant spreading of alternatives, whereas individuals from Canada did, suggesting that people from different cultural backgrounds manage cognitive dissonance differently (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a; Heine & Lehman, 1997). The study found that collectivistic cultures, such as those in East Asia, foster an interdependent self-construal, meaning that individuals are more influenced by social roles, relationships, and group expectations rather than personal attitudes (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a; Heine & Lehman, 1997). In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in the West, promote an independent self-construal, where personal beliefs and achievements play a more central role in identity (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a; Heine & Lehman, 1997). As a result, individuals from collectivistic cultures, where success is often viewed as a collective achievement, may experience less cognitive dissonance when encountering high achievers, as success is seen as a group effort rather than individual superiority. Using a country comparison tool derived from Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which explores cultural values and attitudes across different nations, it is evident that New Zealand, with an individualism score of 69, and Australia, with a score of 73, are classified as individualistic cultures (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; The Culture Factor Group, 2023). In societies like New Zealand and Australia, which are both egalitarian and individualistic, the tension between the desire for equality and the emphasis on individual achievement heightens the likelihood of cognitive dissonance, thereby increasing the emergence of TPS behaviour.

2.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, three key theoretical frameworks have the potential to explain the criticism of SMIs by followers in New Zealand and Australia. First, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, particularly the power distance dimension, emphasises the low power distance in these societies, which fosters egalitarianism and challenges hierarchical structures. This preference for equality may lead to TPS, where visible success prompts social backlash as individuals seek to maintain social balance. Second, social comparison theory sheds light on the psychological mechanisms underlying TPS. In egalitarian cultures like New Zealand and Australia, individuals tend to engage in upward social comparison, comparing themselves to those they view as more successful. This can result in feelings of inadequacy, envy, and resentment, prompting individuals to downplay or criticise high achievers to restore perceived equality. Finally, cognitive dissonance theory explains the internal conflict individuals may face when societal values of success and modesty clash. To alleviate this discomfort, individuals may engage in TPS behaviours, such as criticising successful individuals, to align their beliefs with the societal expectation of modesty. Together, these frameworks offer a holistic understanding of TPS, illustrating how cultural values, social comparisons, and psychological processes interact to fuel this phenomenon in New Zealand and Australia.

In the New Zealand context, these theories translate into observable behaviours among SMI followers. Hofstede's low power distance is reflected in the cultural preference for egalitarianism, meaning that visible success can attract criticism as others seek to maintain social balance through TPS. Social comparison theory applies as New Zealanders may engage in upward comparisons with successful SMIs, triggering feelings of envy or inadequacy that motivate them to downplay or criticise these achievements. Cognitive dissonance theory is also relevant, as followers may admire SMI success while feeling that standing out conflicts with societal values of modesty; to resolve this tension, they may criticise or undermine SMIs, aligning their attitudes with cultural expectations. Together, these insights demonstrate how cultural values, social comparisons, and psychological processes interact to shape responses to highly visible success in New Zealand.

Chapter 3 Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design used to explore how SMIs in New Zealand perceive their role and how their followers perceive the roles of SMIs. The study adopts a qualitative approach to gain rich, in-depth insights into the dynamic between SMIs and their audiences in New Zealand. Qualitative research methods are suitable for exploring experience, meaning, and perspective from the participant's standpoint and typically involve data that cannot be measured or counted, such as text analysis, small group discussions, and semi-structured and in-depth interviews (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This chapter details the ethical procedures followed, the recruitment of participants and profile of participants, the data collection method utilised, and the thematic analysis process used to analyse the data.

Alternative qualitative approaches, such as ethnography and content analysis, were considered but deemed less suitable for the present study. Ethnography, requiring extended observation of participants' online behaviours, would be time-intensive and impractical within the study's time frames. Content analysis is typically hypothesis-driven and deductive in nature, whereas thematic analysis offers an inductive, open-ended approach that allows for the exploration of participants' perspectives without preconceived assumptions. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were selected for their methodological efficiency and their ability to generate rich, detailed insights within a shorter period.

3.2 Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) on 8 November 2024, approval number 24/304 (see Appendix 1 for the approval letter). Ethics approval required providing participants with Information Sheets (see Appendix 2 and 3) and asking them to sign Consent Forms (see Appendix 2 and 5).

3.3 Social Media Influencers

In Phase 1 of the study, six SMIs were recruited to participate in an individual, semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Depending on participant availability,

interviews were conducted in person or via Microsoft Teams. Recruitment was conducted through the researcher's contacts, private messaging SMIs on social media, and direct email invitations. To be eligible for inclusion, SMIs were required to meet the following criteria: (1) belong to one of the following cultural groups in New Zealand: Māori/Pasifika, Pakeha, and Asian; (2) have a least 10,000 followers on one or more social media platforms; (3) demonstrate consistent engagement with their audience by posting at least twice per week. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants had both a meaningful online presence and relevance within the cultural context of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were guided by a pre-prepared interview guide (see Appendix 6). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and were subsequently transcribed using Otter.ai (Otter.ai, n.d.). The researcher verified the accuracy of each transcript by comparing it against the original audio recording. A summary table (Table 1) outlining anonymised participant profiles is presented below.

Table 1*An anonymised participant profile of each SMIs*

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Platform used for Influencing	Follower Count (as recorded on 6 May 2025)	Content type	Follower demographic
Helen	Female	Pakeha	TikTok and Instagram	TikTok: 173.9K Instagram: 38.5K	Lifestyle, family and budgeting content	People similar to Helen age, New Zealand base.
Jean	Female	Māori/Pasifika	Instagram and TikTok	Instagram: 48.3K TikTok: 42.8K	Singing, Lifestyle, faith-based, cultural and family content	Christian, young females, Māori and Pasifika.
Jade	Female	Asian	TikTok	16.4K	Interracial relationship, wedding content, food and experiences recommendation in Auckland	Majority New Zealand-based female followers, aged 18-30.
Dean	Male	Māori/Pasifika	Instagram and TikTok	Instagram: 756K TikTok: 558.2K	Cooking content	80% female, 20% male, mainly from the US, Australia, and the UK aged 25 to 45.
Paul	Male	Pakeha/Pasifika	TikTok	15.2K	Fitness, faith-based, tattoo, and haircutting content	Majority Polynesian followers, aged 18 to 30,
Shane	Male	Asian	TikTok and YouTube	TikTok: 21.9K YouTube: 1.05K	Lifestyle, fitness, recommendation in Auckland and education content such as finance, budgeting and side hustle	New Zealand-based followers, aged 20 to 30.

3.4 Followers

In Phase 2 of the study, 15 social media followers were recruited to participate in three focus groups, each comprising five participants. The sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Recruitment was conducted through an advertisement posted on the researcher's Instagram account.

To be eligible for participation, individuals were required to meet the following criteria (1) aged 18 or older (2) have fewer than 10,000 followers on social media platforms (3) active social media users, engaging for at least 30 minutes daily. Moreover, they must be (4) from one of the three cultural groups in New Zealand: Māori/Pasifika, Pakeha, and Asian. Furthermore, (5) they must have lived in New Zealand for the last 10 years. Lastly, (6) they must follow at least one SMIs. These criteria were designed to ensure participants had a relevant and engaged relationship with social media and SMIs while representing various cultural perspectives.

Focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 7). The sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and Otter.ai transcripts were prepared for subsequent thematic analysis (Otter.ai, n.d.). The researcher verified the accuracy of each transcript by comparing it against the original audio recording. Tables 2, 3 and 4 provide an anonymised demographic profile for each participant across the three focus groups, which is presented below.

Table 2*An anonymised participant profile of each follower in focus group 1*

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Rico	Male	18-20	Pakeha
Wade	Male	25-30	Māori/Pasifika
Sage	Female	20-25	Asian
Taylor	Female	20-25	Pakeha/Asian
Summer	Female	25-30	Asian

Table 3*An anonymised participant profile of each follower in focus group 2*

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Lily	Female	20-25	Pakeha
Kevin	Male	25-30	Pakeha/Pasifika
Wyatt	Male	20-25	Asian
Noah	Male	25-30	Asian
Dani	Female	20-25	Asian

Table 4*An anonymised participant profile of each follower in focus group 3*

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Emma	Female	20-25	Pakeha
Lara	Female	20-25	Asian
Chase	Male	20-25	Pasifika
Tom	Male	20-25	Pasifika
Sam	Male	30-35	Māori/Pakeha/Pasifika

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen for its versatile and adaptable nature, which supports the generation of detailed, meaningful insights across a range of research settings, without being restricted by existing theoretical constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The first step began with familiarisation with the transcripts, during which each interview transcript was read at least twice to ensure a deep understanding of the data. At this stage, initial thoughts and potential patterns were documented through notetaking to inform subsequent stages of analysis. The second phase involved manually coding the printed transcripts using an open coding approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; as cited in White & Cooper, 2022). Data segments relevant to the research aims were systematically identified and assigned descriptive labels (Boyatzis, 1998). Different colours of highlighter were used to distinguish emerging codes, with short labels identifying relevant sentences within the transcripts. This process was repeated throughout each transcript, with adjustments and new codes introduced when necessary.

In the third step, after manual coding was completed, NVivo 15 software was used to record and organise the open codes from the interview transcripts to facilitate efficient data management (Lumivvero, n.d.). Each code was assigned a name and a brief description to clarify the idea it represented. In the fourth phase, themes were manually identified by exporting and printing the codebook and then cutting the open codes into individual slips of paper. These slips were physically arranged and grouped on a tabletop to explore relationships between the codes. Preliminary themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the broader dataset, and sub-themes were identified where appropriate. Throughout this process, codes and themes were discussed and agreed with the research supervisor. In the final phase, themes and sub-themes were clearly defined and labelled. These were presented in table formats following the approach outlined by Gioia et al. (2013), distinguishing first-order concepts as the participants' quotes, second-order themes as the researchers' interpretations of the coded data, and aggregate dimensions as broader conceptual themes (Table 6). Presenting the findings in this format enhanced the thematic analysis's clarity, transparency and analytical depth. Coding and theme development were

conducted separately for the SMIs and followers' datasets. Following this, a comparative analysis was undertaken to identify commonalities and differences in how each group perceived the role of SMIs in the New Zealand context.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach adopted in this study to investigate the perception of SMIs and their followers within the New Zealand context. By employing a qualitative research design, the study aims to gain rich insights through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, supported by ethical integrity and culturally inclusive participant recruitment. Thematic analysis was conducted systematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by NVivo 15 software and manual coding techniques. The Gioia et al. (2013) methodological approach further improved the presentation of findings by categorising themes into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. This method improved the data analysis's transparency, clarity and analytical depth. The following chapter presents the findings from this process and highlights the differences and similar perspectives between SMIs and their followers.

Chapter 4 Findings

This section presents the key findings from the thematic analysis of the data collected through semi-structured individual interviews with SMIs and three focus groups with followers. The central aim of this study is to answer the following two research questions:

Research question 1:

What motivates New Zealand consumers to criticise social media influencers?

Research question 2:

What forms does such criticism take?

Research question 3:

In what ways might cultural differences amongst New Zealand followers affect the intensity and nature of criticism directed at social media influencers?

Research question 4:

What are the potential impacts (social, emotional, psychological and professional) of criticism on New Zealand social media influencers?

Research question 5:

What strategies, if any, do New Zealand's social media influencers employ to cope with the effects of criticism?

4.1 Finding from SMIs

Section 4.1 covers data collected from the SMI interviews. Four main themes were identified: driving criticisms, community support, coping with criticisms, and the personal impacts of being an SMI (Table 5).

Table 5

Themes generated from SMIs' interviews

Themes	Name
Theme 1	Driving Criticisms
Theme 2	Community Support
Theme 3	Personal Impacts of Being an SMI
Theme 4	Coping with Criticisms

4.1.1 Theme 1: Driving Criticisms

Table 6

Codes contributing to the theme driving criticisms

Name	Description
Comments Typically Received	SMIs in New Zealand receive a mix of feedback, with many followers expressing appreciation and asking for more information. However, they face criticism, including disagreements, factual corrections, repetitive content, and occasional personal attacks. Negative comments, particularly when content gains more visibility, can escalate into hate or bullying. One SMIs mentioned not engaging much with his community, resulting in fewer negative comments.
Content Type Influences the Level of Criticism Received	SMIs express the value of sharing personal aspects, such as finances, to foster authenticity; however, this transparency often attracts more criticism. Other SMIs emphasise their skills over appearance in their content, avoiding judgments based on physical standards and expressing discomfort with appearance-based content. Another SMI also mentioned that gym-related posts attract more criticism. Overall, SMIs believe the type of content they produce impacts the number of criticisms they get.
The Challenge in Gaining Local Support	New Zealand SMIs face limited local engagement, with many finding greater support from international audiences, especially in the US. The small market and cultural norms restrict content creation, as success in New Zealand often requires producing general, non-controversial content. Thus, many influencers pursue international growth. Unlike in larger countries, full-time influencing in New Zealand is rare, with most treating it as a side job rather than a primary career.
TPS and Personal Experiences with TPS	Some participants linked the lack of strong local support for SMIs to TPS, attributing it to societal tendencies to suppress success out of jealousy or insecurity. Others dismissed TPS as an excuse for general negativity. Participants noted that envy often arises when success appears unearned. SMIs described feeling judged, criticised, or isolated due to their achievements, with negativity coming from both close contacts and strangers. In response, some distanced themselves from those exhibiting TPS behaviour. Despite this, many SMIs rejected TPS as a justification for failure, instead focusing on improving their content and staying authentic.
What Drives Criticisms towards SMIs	Factors, including anonymity enabling bullying, misconception of SMIs work, unmet expectations and followers forgetting that SMIs are real people all drive criticisms towards SMIs. Criticism often stems from jealousy, envy, insecurity, lack of empathy, and misunderstandings of an SMI's work. Criticisms are also driven by SMIs appearance, character, opportunities and possessions. The normalisation of cyberbullying, jealousy among SMIs, and false assumptions further fuel criticisms.

Table 6 shows criticism is a significant challenge for New Zealand SMIs, who frequently face a variety of negative feedback from their audiences. This theme explores the types of comments directed at New Zealand SMIs and how the nature of the content they produce impacts the level of criticism. It also addresses the difficulties these influencers face in gaining support from local audiences. Furthermore, this theme also examines the impact of TPS on SMIs' experiences, including their encounter with TPS and their perspective on the factors driving criticism towards New Zealand SMIs.

4.1.1.1 Comments Typically Received

Table 6 shows the key codes identified under the theme of Driving Criticisms, highlighting the complex nature of critical responses towards SMIs. SMIs were reported to receive a mixture of both positive and negative feedback. Positive comments typically include appreciation for helpful content or requests for more information. For example, Jade received inquiries from followers about the summer flower field video she posted. However, as their content gained more visibility, many influencers noted increased negative feedback. Jade mentioned that a more significant following increases the likelihood of positive and negative attention. These negative comments often stemmed from complaints about repetitive content, disagreement regarding the factual accuracy of posts and personal attacks. Helen describes how people frequently made false assumptions about her personal life and attacked her character, stating:

"People comment all the time. Oh, Helen's parents are really wealthy, and they lied on the application so Helen could get student allowance. False. My parents are literally earning below the amount that the government deems you as being parents that can help."

This highlights how some criticisms can be intrusive, where followers presume to know intimate details about the influencers' lives without fully understanding the context, attacking their character.

4.1.1.2 Content Type Influences the Level of Criticism Received

The type of content SMIs share significantly impacts the level of criticism they receive. For example, one SMI, Helen, emphasised her value of being transparent about her life, finances, and business ventures on her social media. She stated:

"I'm very, very transparent. I love sharing my life because I want people to see the reality of life and their business owner and being 25 and being in New Zealand, and I just I want more authentic creators out there. And I think I want to be one of those people."

However, she also acknowledged that this transparency often results in increased criticism, "But I think just because I'm so transparent and put myself out there, more than what other people do, I seem to attract it a lot more."

Similarly, another SMI, Paul, observed that his gym-related content often attracts criticism, with some followers accusing him of taking steroids to achieve his physique. In contrast, Jade shared that her content, which does not focus on her appearance, tends to generate less criticism. She explained, "I think if I were to do fashion or things that show a lot of my face, then maybe I feel like I'm not pretty enough or like, I feel I'm like, yeah, like, not tall enough or whatever." Thus, Jade prefers creating content that focuses on her videography skills, or the product she promotes, as it reduces the likelihood of receiving negative feedback. This suggests that content focusing on an influencer's appearance or sharing much of their personal life may lead to greater judgement, making them more vulnerable to criticism.

4.1.1.3 The Challenge in Gaining Local Support

In addition to facing direct criticism, many SMIs reported difficulties building a supportive local following. They often attributed this challenge to New Zealand's small population size and cultural norms. For example, Dean shared his struggle to connect with the local audience, stating:

"I guess my content, I doesn't really resonate with Kiwis in general. Like, it's a lot of it's a it's quite out there. In my comment section, I get a lot of positive stuff, and most of it is from, you know, the US or South America or Australia, like different

countries. So I never get positive or, like, encouraging comments from from, like, a large group of Kiwis."

Dean further elaborated on the issue, mentioning that he appreciated having an international following as he finds New Zealand's small market limiting in professional growth. He also found that creating content targeting New Zealand audiences is very restrictive and limits his creativity and expressiveness. He explained that to grow as an SMI in New Zealand, the content would need to be more general and less daring, which would pose creative challenges. This insight illustrates the difficulty SMIs face in adapting their content to the preferences of New Zealand audiences, feeling that doing so may limit their creativity and authenticity. The challenge of receiving local support contributes to SMI's difficulties in New Zealand's small and culturally unique market.

4.1.1.4 Tall Poppy Syndrome and Personal Experiences with TPS

Many SMIs discussed TPS as a significant driver of criticism throughout their careers as influencers. Several participants highlighted how societal tendencies to suppress success, often rooted in insecurity and jealousy, have shaped their experiences. For example, Dean reflected on the challenge of not having a large New Zealand following, suggesting that TPS might contribute to this:

"I think I know it's hard for me to tell them, because I don't have any a big New Zealand following, but, you know, it could, it could be the fact that I don't have a New Zealand, a big New Zealand following is due to tall poppy syndrome, potentially."

Similarly, Helen expressed concerns about the toxic attitude toward success in New Zealand, describing how some people aim to undermine others' achievements:

"They literally want to squash you. They don't want anyone to be celebrating their hard work and the efforts. They don't want to see people doing well. And I think it comes from a deep insecurity as well, and deep, like it is jealousy".

She further elaborated, mentioning the difficulty of succeeding publicly in New Zealand and highlighting a general dislike for individuals celebrating their accomplishments. Some SMI

also shared personal experiences with TPS, where they felt judged, criticised or isolated due to their success. They reported encountering negativity from both close relationships and strangers. For example, Shane reflected on how people he knew personally displayed signs of TPS, stating, "But weirdly, a lot of like the tall poppy syndrome that I've received has been people who I know in person who says, like, ah, like, you know, you know, content creator, oh, don't do that. don't do this." This led him to distance himself from those who discouraged his success. Despite this, Shane emphasised that he avoids using TPS as an excuse for his content's performance and instead focuses on improving his work.

However, Paul was sceptical about the existence of TPS, dismissing it as an excuse and viewing hate as a natural byproduct of any public-facing role. He argued that negativity is a universal response to success, not unique to New Zealand; he noted that while TPS might be more visible in a smaller country such as New Zealand, the presence of haters exists everywhere, regardless of the type of influence one holds, stating:

"There's no tall poppy syndrome no matter where you go, no matter what type of influence you do, whether you're just singing, acting, content creating is always going to be someone that's hating. Yeah, it just get broadcasted more on New Zealand, because we're a small country."

Despite the different opinions on TPS, many SMIs still feel the impact of criticism linked to societal attitudes towards success. While some believe TPS intensifies their experiences, others view it as part of the broader phenomenon of online hate that exists globally.

4.1.1.5 What Drives Criticisms Towards SMIs

SMIs identified several factors driving the criticisms directed towards them. A significant contributor is the anonymity provided by social media platforms, enabling individuals to post harsh, bullying comments without fearing repercussions. Helen mentioned that the ability to hide behind a fake account allows individuals to leave negative comments without fear of direct consequences. Jade also resonated with this, stating that this anonymity enables irresponsible behaviours, with people feeling free to leave destructive comments without consequences of their words.

Another key factor driving criticisms is the misconception that social media influences an effortless career. SMIs argue that audiences often fail to understand the time and effort required to create content. For example, Shane explained that some of his videos take several hours to produce, but the audience perceived it as simple due to the conciseness of the final product:

"Some videos that I've put out have taken like, four hours...A lot of people only see the short ones and believe like, oh, it's nice and easy, but they don't understand all the editing process that goes behind the bigger videos."

This misunderstanding is often fuelled by assumptions that SMIs receive free products or experiences without acknowledging the hard work involved. Jade also discussed how audiences overlook the repetitive and demanding nature of filming and editing, assuming that SMIs enjoy the advantages without the hard work. Additionally, Helen expressed frustration with the lack of recognition for the challenges they face; as she explained in the description, the opportunities, such as brand trips, may appear glamorous; the reality is that influencers often work without financial compensation, contributing to the criticism they face. She explained:

"I think people don't realise how hard it is and what you have to do, like, well, it's great that I get to go on a brand trip to Sydney last week, the hurt of all the pain and what people have say to me, and it is a lot of hard work, because, remember, New Zealand, we don't get paid for visit for videos, so it's a lot of working for free. You are doing your job for free, and you're only getting, it's like a real estate agent really. You're getting, you're getting paid when you finally get a sale, you finally get a brand video."

This statement emphasises the physical and emotional labour behind content creation and reveals how the public's lack of understanding about influencer work contributes to the criticisms they face. Followers may assume that SMIs are simply enjoying the benefits of being an SMI, not recognising the challenges, such as working for free and dealing with negative feedback, which further fuels the negative perceptions.

Moreover, SMIs often face heightened scrutiny because of the elevated expectations placed on them by their audiences. For example, Jade pointed out that SMIs are expected to produce fresh and engaging content consistently, and failing to meet these expectations can result in criticism. She further explained that when SMIs behave in ways that contradict the image they portray, such as promoting a healthy lifestyle but being seen smoking, adverse reactions can follow. Jean also highlighted that being an SMI requires putting oneself in the public eye, which has led her to feel pressured to maintain a certain standard. She said, "If you step outside of that line, because that's where you are portrayed yourself to be, easily, you can be just, yeah, judged and nitpicked for every little thing that you do." She expressed that this expectation has left her feeling judged. These examples highlight that the higher the expectations placed on SMIs, the greater the likelihood they will face criticism when unmet.

Furthermore, SMIs highlighted that a critical driver of criticisms towards SMIs is the tendency of the audience to forget that influencers are individuals with genuine feelings. Many SMIs expressed the desire for audiences to recognise that they are individuals with real emotions and vulnerable to hurt. For example, Helen stated:

"So I think I just wish people will realise that we're all human. We all hurt. It all hurts. It's just the people that are putting themselves out there. Yeah, are the ones that soon be getting the hate, you know, because the ones that are literally, you know, all the stuff that they do for people writing all this free content, and yet they're being absolutely crucified for it."

This suggests that the lack of empathy and understanding regarding SMIs' emotions, with the public often overlooking the personal impact of harsh criticism, is a major contributor to the criticisms they face.

Moreover, many SMIs highlighted that audiences' insecurity, envy, and jealousy are key drivers of criticism. They observed that followers often compare their lives to those of influencers, which can lead to resentment and negative feedback. For example, some SMIs stated that even neutral content, such as daily vlogs, cooking videos, or lifestyle posts, can attract negative comments. They suggested that these criticisms frequently stem from an individual's insecurities, as those who feel confident are less likely to engage in such behaviour. Furthermore, some SMIs suggested that criticisms often come from those who

perceive themselves as less successful, emphasising jealousy plays a significant role in online negativity. Paul stated, “normally hate comes from, like, a jealousy perspective, or someone from below you, you never get someone hating on you that's actually from above you.” This comparison between SMIs and followers can increase insecurity, leading to a cycle of unwarranted criticisms.

Additionally, SMIs' lifestyles, opportunities and possessions are often perceived as triggers for criticism. Many SMIs reported that their achievements, such as property ownership or brand collaborations, often attract negativity, with detractors focusing on material aspects of their success rather than acknowledging the hard work involved in achieving those successes. Some SMIs pointed out that detractors may compare their demanding, labour-intensive nine-to-five jobs to the seemingly effortless work of SMIs who create content and earn significant income, increasing feelings of jealousy and envy, leading to negative perceptions of SMIs and their success. Jean shared her experience of receiving backlash after sharing exciting opportunities, such as brand deals or event invitations, revealing that sharing these moments often attracts criticism. She also observed that no matter what she posts, whether it be about her appearance, personal milestones, or professional opportunities, there is always a degree of negativity aimed at undermining their success. As Jean explained:

"I think, like for influencers, we get amazing opportunities. I know for myself, I definitely have, and you get really excited to share that stuff, because you're like, Whoa. Like, this is crazy. And then, yeah, 100% people will just come in, and there's always negativity, like, it's either commenting about the way you look, the way you've done this, or that things are said, yeah? Like, anything, anything like negative, just try and, like, I guess, take away from the amazing opportunity that you feel like you're getting."

Jean's experience illustrates how followers, driven by jealousy over SMI's opportunities, often respond with criticisms that seek to diminish SMI's excitement and achievements.

SMIs also highlighted that jealousy is not limited to their audience but can also arise within the influencer community. Some SMIs admit to comparing themselves to peers with more opportunities, such as frequent brand trips, modelling jobs, or collaborations. For example, Helen admitted to occasionally feeling envious of another influencer's seemingly perfect

lifestyles and career opportunities. This demonstrates that even those within the industry are not subject to feelings of comparison and inadequacy.

The last driver of criticism is the false assumption that audiences make based on the limited content they see online. Jean reflected on her participants in a New Zealand national television programme and how the editing could distort her personality, causing viewers to perceive her in a way that did not reflect who she indeed was. Viewers critique her personality based on a selective sense. She said:

"I think they can cut it, cut certain scenes, and so people might perceive you in a way that's like, Oh, that wasn't too nice, or that wasn't too you know, like, like, I can kind of really just start critiquing your personality that they see on TV, and it's not all of who you are."

Similarly, Jade shared how viewers criticised her after she posted content about her engagement announcement, making superficial assumptions about her partner's appearance or financial status; she said, "There were comments regarding my partner being a bit overweight, and regarding him doesn't seem like that we don't look like a good match, that I that's saying, Oh, he probably just has money." These examples highlight how viewers judge based on limited content, resulting in misunderstandings and unfair criticisms about SMI's character and personal life.

In conclusion, the criticisms directed at SMIs stem from a combination of factors, including online anonymity, misconceptions about their profession, unmet expectations, and forgetting that SMIs are real people with genuine feelings. These findings reveal that such criticisms often reflect broader societal attitudes and emotional responses, such as insecurity, jealousy, and a lack of empathy for SMIs' lifestyles, opportunities, and possessions, rather than the actual behaviour of SMIs. Additionally, the curated nature of social media content often leads audiences to make inaccurate assumptions, resulting in unfair judgment and criticism.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Community Support

Table 7

Codes contributing to the theme community support

Name	Description
Cultural Influence	For Māori and Pasifika, public recognition conflicts with cultural values of humility. SMIs must balance humility with their online presence. However, SMIs find Māori and Pasifika followers engage strongly due to cultural connections, while Asian cultures tend to be more reserved due to norms around public recognition. SMIs' cultural backgrounds also affect content relatability and credibility in an area.
Motivation from Community Support	Motivated by the encouragement and validation from their followers. Positive interactions and community support help them overcome challenges and imposter syndrome and boost confidence while providing a sense of social ease. SMIs also recognise and appreciate their true supporters, strengthening their commitment and emotional connection to their work. This emphasises the importance of audience feedback in maintaining their ongoing dedication and sense of purpose.

Table 7 illustrates how community support plays a significant role in the success and longevity of SMIs. Community support sustains the emotional wellbeing of SMIs, motivates continued engagement and helps overcome negative criticisms. However, cultural values significantly shape how audiences engage with, support, and criticise SMIs, especially in communities with deeply rooted values and expectations. This theme explores the role of culture in shaping both the support and criticisms SMIs receive, as well as the critical impact of community support on SMI's emotional wellbeing and continued success.

4.1.2.1 Cultural Influence

For many Māori and Pasifika SMIs, the cultural value of humility often conflicts with the visibility of being an SMI. In Pacific Island and Māori cultures, humility is highly valued, which can conflict with the public recognition and self-promotion of being an SMI. This cultural expectation to remain modest can influence how communities support or withhold support for these SMIs. Dean, who was raised in Samoa before moving to New Zealand, described how the cultural value of humility made public recognition difficult for him; he said, "Culturally, we're taught that that the value of humility, and, you know, being humble and then public recognition kind of clashes of that. So I think Pacific Islanders in general

might struggle with public recognition.” Despite these ingrained cultural values and the potential for criticism, he explained that he has actively worked to become more expressive and comfortable with public recognition as an SMI, a process he continues to navigate.

Similarly, Jean, a Māori and Pacific Island SMI, explained that success within her cultural community is often kept private, which limits open display of support. She mentioned that the cultural emphasis on humility can discourage people from publicly acknowledging their achievements for fear of being perceived as arrogant. Reflected on her own experience, she admitted that this cultural expectation made her hesitant to take opportunities that would increase her exposure; she explained:

“I don't try and rock the boat so that that means that, like, I'll stay humble about my stuff, and I don't necessarily like being in the spotlight, even though I'm a social media influencer, like, there are times that I've definitely been I've like not taken up opportunities to have myself organized publicly because of a certain thing, or say I did Treasure Island, which meant that that was quite big in terms of being on TV, it's quite national kind of thing, and then being in the magazines, I found that terrifying, because just yeah, I fear like the backlash that I get.”

These cultural values significantly influence how SMIs present themselves and how their communities interact with them. While audience support is critical for an SMI's success, cultural expectations of humility may lead to more reserved expressions of encouragement. Additionally, the fear of being perceived as overly self-promotional can cause SMIs to limit their visibility, potentially affecting their growth and opportunities.

Despite the challenges, Māori and Pasifika SMIs often experience strong community support due to their cultural connections. For example, Paul attributed his popularity to his Polynesian identity and observed that his use of a Polynesian catchphrase in his videos resonated with the Pacific Island community, resulting in many followers due to the cultural connection he shared with his Pasifika audience. This resonates with Dean, who explained that Pacific Island communities tend to support content creators who share their heritage and values highly; he stated, “Islanders are pretty supportive people. I think you know, if they find a content creator influencer, that is that they can relate to culturally. They're going to support that creator for sure.”

However, this cultural connection is not exclusive to Māori and Pacific Island SMIs. Jade, an Asian SMI, shared that she tends to attract more Asian audiences and is perceived as more credible when commenting on Asian food due to her cultural background; she explained:

“Me having Asian food, how I commented might be different feedback in someone who is not Asian commenting Asian food, because they have the perception that, oh, you don't know how to comment in any way, like you don't know what the authentic food tastes like. So, who are you to give any comment, I guess. But, yeah, I do think that I will definitely attract more sort of Asian audience.”

However, not all Māori and Pacific Island SMI receive universal community support. Jean mentioned that while some followers strongly encourage and uplift Māori and Pasifika influencers, others can be critical. She explained:

“I'd say 50 50, I think there are people that absolutely understand, or like Māori Pasifikas, is they understand about tall poppy syndrome themselves, and they are the biggest encouragers in the world, because they have that understanding that that's a real thing here, and then that. And then sometimes it really be your own people that are hating on you because they don't want you to win.”

The difference in community support suggests that while cultural connections can foster strong encouragement, they can also create tension when individuals are perceived as standing out too much. This complex dynamic is not unique to Māori and Pacific Island communities but also extends to other cultural groups. Shane, an Indian raised in Japan before moving to New Zealand, observed differences in support between cultural groups. He explained that Māori and Pasifika audiences often express their appreciation directly, whereas in Asian cultures, such expressions are less common:

“Actually, weirdly, I would find like Māori, Pasifika and Polynesian people way more supportive. I guess. I think the main thing is that they're more open to talking to me and saying, like, Hey, I've seen you. Hey, I like what you're doing, whereas possibly the other groups also think that. But like, for example, Asian culture, it's a little bit like, I'm Asian myself, and it's a bit socially well, like in Asian culture, it's not as normal to talk to a stranger, if that makes sense. Like, especially, I was from raised in

Japan. So coming from Japan, it's a bit like, you know, you don't talk to a random stranger on the train or bus where it's here, it's pretty normal so I think that's where it comes from.”

These insights illustrate how cultural norms shape public interaction and support for SMIs. While cultural connections can enhance engagement, support is not guaranteed, as social expectations around humility and public expression influence how communities respond. Followers are more likely to support SMIs they perceive as authentically connected to their culture, yet this connection does not shield influencers from criticism. Cultural value plays a key role in shaping audience support, engagement, and criticism.

4.1.2.2 Motivation from Community Support

For many SMIs, the encouragement and validation they receive from their followers are important to sustaining their dedication and long-term commitment to their roles. Positive feedback helps SMIs overcome challenges, such as imposter syndrome, boosts their confidence, and provides social ease. Jean explained how positive comments help mitigate feelings of self-doubt:

“I think you have sometimes you can have, like, imposter syndrome, like, who am I to be doing this and getting these cool opportunities? And so the positive comments helped me in the way that I'm like, oh, there's some really awesome people out there who really enjoy what I'm doing.”

She further emphasised the motivating effect of such feedback: “Positive comments I am just always grateful for, like, I think, yeah, it's honestly motivator for me to keep going.” These supportive interactions are important in maintaining the excitement and commitment to content creation.

Additionally, receiving community feedback enables SMIs to recognise and appreciate their consistent support; Jean mentioned that the validation from her audiences and her close circles gives her a clear understanding of who genuinely supports her:

“I think, yeah, like, the positive comments and stuff. Mine is that my family, um, I love my audience, but my family, my friends, a lot are gonna actually stand out for me so and makes me go, Oh, yeah. Like, my people love this and then there are also people that obviously have taken an interest in my stuff. So, yeah, like, I guess affecting my relationship with my family and stuff. I guess I just noticed who's supporting me, and I love that.”

This recognition of genuine support motivates her to continue her work as an SMI. Moreover, community support provides crucial emotional relief, especially while navigating the pressures of being in an SMI. Helen shared a moment when a follower expressed appreciation for her work, providing a moment of emotional validation:

“As soon as I was leaving, they came up to me, and they grabbed me and they said, Oh my gosh, I love your TikToks. I love them so, so much. And just want to say hi. That was really nice, because so often there have been the people that have laughed and pointed and, you know, whispered and haven't seen anything, and it's like, oh, like, I'm still a real person. I'm still someone with a lot of feelings, so it was, I guess, nice to just have that validation.”

This interaction reinforced her motivation, especially when faced with criticism or negativity. Ultimately, the support from their communities helps SMI feel valued and appreciated, strengthening their emotional connection to their work. Many SMIs have considered giving up due to criticism, but their love for their communities motivates them. Helen said, “I do still love it, like I love the community of supporters that are out there, and even though people have told me, Oh, is it worth just leaving, I don't think I ever will leave, because I do truly love it.” Similarly, Jean, despite challenges, expressed that the positive feedback she receives and her passion for what she does sustain her determination:

“I'd say it's probably crossed my mind, but at the same time, I'm quite determined, and I love what I get to do. So no, I think this is like my dream, my dream job, and if anything, even though things can be quite hard and people can be horrible, sometimes I love what I get to do yeah.”

This illustrates that the important role of community support lies in the ongoing motivation and resilience of SMIs, ensuring their continued engagement with their audience and content creation.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Personal Impacts of Being an SMI

Table 8

Codes contributing to the theme personal impacts of being an SMI

Name	Description
The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Criticism	Criticism deeply affects SMIs, leading to emotional struggles such as self-doubt, low self-esteem, and questioning self-worth and identity. No money can heal the hurt, and some fear for their safety. Excessive criticism causes numbness, sensitivity, and career uncertainty. Negative feedback overshadows positive support, making it hard not to internalise. SMIs feel judged in public and exposed by followers. They fear the ongoing emotional toll and regret over their career choice.
The Professional Impact of Being an SMI	While being an SMI creates many professional opportunities, such as financial gain and brand partnerships, it also creates many challenges. Cancel culture and backlash threaten their reputation, careers, and brand deals. Personal branding complicates maintaining a professional identity, leading some to step back from their businesses. Fear of criticism and pressure to uphold a perfect image affect decision-making on opportunities. However, despite these challenges, many SMIs continue building their social media careers due to financial incentives and growth opportunities.
Social Impacts of Being an SMI	SMI create opportunities for SMIs to invite friends to unique experiences, such as special events like movie premieres, allowing them to share these moments and build stronger relationships. However, becoming an SMIs can also affect existing friendships. People who were once genuine friends may begin to treat the relationship opportunistically, maintaining the friendship primarily for the social or material benefits it provides. The influencer industry fosters competitive, superficial interactions driven by jealousy. Criticism and public exposure impact SMIs and their families, with some advised to quit platforms like TikTok. Dating is challenging, and friends may be frustrated by public recognition. While some SMIs report limited industry interactions, others form stable relationships unaffected by their status and gain meaningful friendships with fellow SMIs.

Table 8 illustrates the theme of the personal impact of being an SMI. This section explores how being an SMI affects individuals personally. First, it examines the emotional and psychological impact of criticism. Second, the professional consequences of being an SMI will be discussed, looking at how their online presence created challenges and opportunities for their career. Finally, it covers the social impact of being an SMI, particularly concerning interpersonal relationships and interactions.

4.1.3.1 The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Criticisms

The data revealed that criticisms have a significant emotional and psychological effect on SMIs, with many participants reporting significant emotional distress as a result of negative feedback. For example, Helen described the emotional toll of criticisms: “Impacts me a lot. It is never been easy, and it's never, I don't know if it is going to get any easier.” She further reflected on how public scrutiny has left her feeling wounded, explaining, “I've become a lot more hurt and a lot more sad just from the hate and from just being publicly exposed.” These statements illustrate the severity of the emotional distress experienced by SMIs due to continued online criticism.

Similarly, Shane shared that while he has encountered various forms of criticism, personal attacks targeting his character have been the most difficult to handle. He expressed, “The comments specifically targeting me would affect me a little bit more, because I would feel like, well, that's just me, if that makes sense. Like, regardless of what I posted, they'd hate on me.” This highlights how direct personal criticisms can significantly impact SMI's self-perception and emotional wellbeing.

One of the most significant consequences of such criticism is a decline in self-esteem. Helen shared an experience in which a TikTok video she posted received overwhelming negativity, with 195 out of 197 comments expressing hatred toward her. She recalled,

“I read all of them. I read every single one. I was numb, like I actually read them. And it just was, I just sat there like I didn't cry. I just was like, a hollow shell. And honestly, like I was like, I like, what's the point of life? Like, it got so bad that I was like, I got so low.”

She elaborated on how this experience affected her confidence, leading to insecurities about aspects of herself she had previously not questioned. She mentioned, “Huge, huge, hugely hit to my self-esteem, people pick up on things. Oh I really realized that, but now you point it out, and I'm like, oh, okay, now I'm insecure.”

Other participants shared similar experiences where criticisms led to self-doubt and hesitancy in their content. Shane admitted that negative comments often made him question whether to delete a video or refrain from posting the next day. This resonates with Jean, stating, “it's more just like you can doubt yourself a lot.” This illustrates how persistent criticism creates self-doubt among SMIs, affecting their confidence in their content and personal identity.

Beyond decreasing SMI's self-esteem, criticisms often trigger a crisis of identity, such as questioning their self-worth and identity. For example, Helen reflected on the impact it has taken on her sense of self:

“It was like, This is no point, people hate me so much. What's the point of me being around like, it's scary to look back and think of the thoughts that I was having because of people's words. And I've never got to that point before in my life where I was like, This is so bad, so so, so bad. So that sucks.”

She further highlighted the challenge of maintaining a stable sense of identity under such scrutiny, explaining:

“It's definitely, it's definitely hard, like, you know, having knowing who you are, like, what, who am I like? What do I want people to know me as identity part is really hard, but it's yeah, the criticism is so hard.”

These reflections reveal how sustained exposure to negativity can affect an SMI's self-concept and emotional resilience. Furthermore, for some SMIs, the genuine concern for personal safety intensifies their emotional distress. For example, Jade shared her experience receiving severe backlash after commenting on a university study space designated for Māori and Pasifika students using her social media influencing account. The criticism escalated into direct threats, leaving her fearful for her security. She described her anxiety:

“The thing that got me really a little bit scared as well, because I was a little bit worried that if people gonna know, if people gonna go that far to message my partner, okay, when are they gonna know where I live? Where are they gonna know where I work?”

She reflected on how an SMI’s online presence makes personal details easily accessible, increasing vulnerability to real-life confrontation. She stated, “What if they know this? What if they know that? And what if someone actually stalked me and wanted to punch me or whatever, whatever revenge they want to do.” Jade’ experience highlights the blurred line between online and offline repercussions, demonstrating how virtual criticism can lead to physical safety concerns, further amplifying emotional distress.

Many SMIs acknowledged that, over time, consistent criticism has reshaped them, making them both more sensitive and emotionally numb. For example, Helen reflected on how years of online scrutiny have changed her personality. While she still perceives herself as the same person she was a decade ago, her friends and family have noted a shift. She explained,

“I can't personally see it. I still feel like I'm the same Helen 10 years ago, friends and family have said that I'm very different, not in the way of I'm better than all of you. I don't believe that at all. I still, I still hope, that I'm very grounded and humble, but in the way of becoming a lot more sensitive. And so my family picked that up and said, You've you're a lot more sensitive.”

She added that she has become more sensitive, stating, “you look at my life now and I go, Gosh, I'm a lot more like I really hurt and wounded from all this. I wonder what I would have been like if I didn't have that exposure.” Helen expressed that she reached a point where she became so numb to criticism that it was like she had become very desensitised to criticism. Similarly, Jean also mentioned that ongoing criticism has influenced her self-perception, and she misses aspects of her past self and is now more conscious of how others perceive her. These reflections suggest that long-term exposure to criticism can reshape influencers' emotional resilience and self-identity.

Many SMIs acknowledged that they struggle to deal with criticisms, especially at the start of their journey as a SMI. Several participants shared that while negative comments affected

them deeply, causing anxiety, self-doubt, and reluctance to post, they have since learned to navigate these challenges. For example, Dean reflected that receiving criticisms about the repetitiveness of his content affected his self-esteem early in his career. However, as he gained experience, he became less impacted. Similarly, Jean, who began her SMI journey at a young age, found it difficult to handle criticism during her teenage years. She reflected,

“Getting negative comments can definitely, like, just, I guess, play repeat in your mind, make you feel like you're less than and it's definitely that thing of like, you might get 1000 encouragements and one negative comment, and that one negative comment can still be the one that's, you know, overriding everything else.”

This illustrates how younger SMIs, in particular, struggled with criticism, as negative comments overshadow positive feedback, leading to self-doubt. Furthermore, Shane faced additional challenges at the beginning of his journey due to his content niche. He shared that when he first started on social media, he received much judgement for his content; he stated, “When I first started out, yeah, it was very like, the niche I was in was very like small, like, I didn't know anyone else was talking about finances and side hustles in New Zealand a couple years ago.” He felt isolated in his content style, as TikTok was a platform primary for entertainment-based content, while he was producing more serious, educational content. The lack of a similar creator made him feel judged and question whether he belonged in the space; he expressed:

“And at that point, I felt a little bit like, damn, like no one's doing the same as me, you know. And I did feel a little bit like, should I even be doing this? Like, is this even right for me? So I did have a lot of those thoughts at the beginning.”

All of these show that SMI struggle with criticism, especially at the beginning of their career as an SMI. Despite building resilience towards criticism, some SMIs still fear the long-term emotional consequences of their work. Helen expressed that no amount of monetary reward can fix or heal the hurt that she has experienced, and she stated, “I don't know if it's been good, yeah, I don't know if it's gonna be bad if I look back and I'll regret it, but we just take it shape day by day.” This suggests the significant emotional and psychological impact of criticism on SMIs wellbeing.

Overall, the finding highlights the significant emotional and psychological impact of criticisms on SMIs, especially during the early stages of their careers. From declining self-esteem and identity crises to safety concerns and emotional numbness, the long-term effects are significantly personal and severe. While some SMIs ultimately develop resistance, the damage left by constant negativity often remains, highlighting the need for greater empathy and awareness around the impact of online criticisms.

4.1.3.2 The Professional Impact of Being an SMI

Many participants highlighted the professional benefits they gained through their SMI presence. One of the most significant advantages mentioned was the financial opportunities, with several SMI reporting that their online presence created new income streams, with some even transitioning away from traditional employment to pursue influencing full-time. For example, Dean shared that his success on social media enabled a complete career shift. Initially balancing a gym business and working at an agency alongside content creation, he eventually reached a point where his influencer career generated sufficient financial stability to sell the gym and resign from his agency role. Similarly, Jean described being a full time SMI, emphasising how collaborating with multiple brands and creating sponsored content has offered her extensive financial opportunities. This financial stability has allowed her to dedicate herself entirely to content creation.

Conversely, several SMIs mentioned that social media is not their only source of income but a critical financial supplement to their other professional jobs. For example, Shane operates both a cleaning business and a music studio alongside doing social media, and the majority of his income comes from his cleaning business and social media. He desired to eventually rely solely on his social media work, with plans to sell the business.

Helen shared a similar perspective as she operates two businesses; she emphasised the financial necessity of maintaining her online presence:

“Wouldn’t necessarily say it’s a career path with TikTok, but it’s definitely a big part of my income. I can’t do the things that I’m doing if I was to leave TikTok, because I work for for my charity, and it doesn’t pay me enough to live, so I do have to hold on to it, and I won’t be able to let it go.”

Beyond financial gain, several SMIs also discussed the professional opportunities given by brand partnerships. For example, Jean described herself as “blessed” to be an SMI, highlighting the unique experiences she has been offered through collaborations that would not have been available otherwise. She stated:

“Honestly, I have to say, though, it is a very blessed field to be in. I mean, you're getting things for free. You probably, if you, if you're on a big scale, you're traveling places. So, you know, yeah, with the TV show, I got to go to Fiji, with the L'Oreal and Sony, I got to go to Sydney. And those are all paid for expenses.”

However, while such opportunities are significant, participants acknowledged the emotional trade-off. Helen reflected on the internal conflicts between enjoying these benefits and managing public criticism. Although she recognised the ease and appeal of being an SMI, such as brand partnerships and paid content creation, she highlighted the need for “thick skin” to manage the criticisms. She said that SMIs must “withstand that to get the benefits of brand partnerships and being paid,” indicating that emotional durability is a necessary trade-off in sustaining a career in this field.

Despite the professional opportunities created by being an SMI, significant challenges are associated with public criticism. One of the challenges mentioned by SMIs is the impact of criticisms on SMI decisions to take up professional opportunities. For example, Jean mentioned that she nearly did not go on the Treasure Island television show solely because of people's words. She stated, “I was just scared because of criticism I've received in the past and criticism that I might get from being on a TV show and being so vulnerable on that show.” This shows SMI's challenge, where criticism can affect their professional opportunities.

Furthermore, participants also mentioned the challenges of the impact of criticisms on their influencer career and other professional roles. Jade shared an experience where she received negative feedback for commenting on an issue relayed to the university campus's Māori and Pasifika study spaces. She feared that such criticisms could have a lasting effect on her brand partnerships. Reflecting on this, Jade said:

“I think there's a word that people like to say on internet is to cancel someone. And cancel obviously means a lot of different things, but the majority would have said, cancel this person, basically telling the brands to not work with her, or whatever. Bad mouthing someone. Yeah, it can really destroy you”

The criticisms were highly negative, leading her to stop posting on her TikTok account for months as she did not want it to affect her future opportunities to partner with brand. This impact also extended beyond her online persona. She expressed concerns that the negative attention could potentially harm her full-time job. She received threats from individuals who had found her LinkedIn profile and suggested contacting her employer. This situation caused her considerable anxiety, as she feared losing her job due to the online controversy. She explained:

“There was actually people who found my LinkedIn and said, Oh, Jade works at this and this, apparently. And then there was another person who actually said, Oh, I will send an email to them or whatever, actually got me quite anxious because of that because, again, such a shame if I just lost my job because of this.”

This example highlights the broader professional impact SMI faces, where criticism affects their relationship with brands and can threaten their standing in their job outside of social media. This issue is not confined to SMIs who hold full-time jobs outside their social media presence but also extends to those who run their businesses. Many SMIs shared that their personal branding complicates maintaining their professional identity, sometimes leading them to step back from certain businesses. For example, Helen shared the difficulty of balancing her personal identity with her professional work. She shared that she owns a luxury wedding content creation business, which contradicts her own social media identity as the “budgeting girl”, she stated,

“Because I'm known as the budgeting girl, it's really hard because I own a luxury wedding content creation service, your personal brand is heavily linked with all these brands, so it's really hard to distinguish yourself and have that balance.”

To mitigate these challenges, Helen distanced herself from her businesses to protect their reputations. She emphasised that with DearBride, her focus shifted to showcasing her skills,

while with DearCommunity, she took a step back to avoid any potential negative associations. She explained:

“I used to be heavily like the face of DearCommunity, and I pulled back from that. I don't really want many people associating DearCommunity to me, just in case people don't like me, because I know there's a lot of people that don't like me, and I would hate for them to not come to DearCommunity because they don't like me.”

Similarly, Paul, considering being a personal trainer, reflected on how his online persona, specifically his content involving gym jokes, could affect his professional goals. He acknowledged that potential clients might perceive him as unprofessional, hindering his credibility as a personal trainer. He noted that he “wouldn't be taken seriously.” Shane also expressed similar concerns about the potential impact of his online presence on his professional reputation. While he has not yet encountered significant issues, he remains conscious of the possibility that his content might affect his career prospects; he explained:

“Every now and then, anytime I do think about applying for a job, I do think like, oh, they're probably going to possibly, you know, research some of my older videos, and possibly, I guess, be it, you know, that might affect them.”

Shane further elaborated that he often worries that clients from his cleaning business search for him will come across his content rather than his business. Although he acknowledged that this concern has not yet impacted his business, it remains a constant consideration. These examples show the complexities of maintaining a professional identity as an SMI. While social media offers opportunities for career growth and business development, it also introduces significant challenges in managing personal branding and mitigating the potential adverse effect of public exposure.

Despite all of these challenges, SMIs often persist due to the financial incentives and growth opportunities that social media offers. Helen mentioned, “because I work for for my charity, and it doesn't pay me enough to live, so I do have to hold on to it, and I won't be able to let it go.” Similarly, Jean expressed her determination to continue her work as an SMI, driven by her passion for what she does. She stated, “and if I were to stop, I feel like, yeah, there would be some people that would be like, oh, like, kind of disappointed if you did stop.” Therefore,

these reflections indicate that despite the significant pressures and complexities SMIs face in balancing their online persona with professional identities, the potential reward and personal satisfaction often outweigh the challenges, reinforcing their continued engagement in the influencer space.

In conclusion, the professional impact of being an SMI is complex. While participants highlighted the financial benefits, brand collaboration and opportunities for career shifts enabled by their online presence, SMIs face challenges such as balancing their personal brand with other professional roles. Despite the challenges, many remain committed to their roles and due to the financial dependence, fulfilment, and sense of responsibility they have for their audiences.

4.1.3.3 Social Impacts of Being an SMI

Being an SMI has created many challenges for SMIs in terms of a social aspect, impacting their relationship with others. Several SMIs shared that becoming an SMI has created challenges in finding genuine friendships. For example, Helen stated that since becoming an SMI, “It's really hard to find genuine people, because you don't know if what they're if they're just being nice to you because you're someone. And I hate that.” She expressed her frustration about the challenges of forming genuine friendships since becoming an SMI. She explained that it has become difficult to recognise whether people are sincere or simply friendly because of her social media status. She shared a story explaining that she was never popular in school, stating, “No one gave me the time of day. I was always last and being like picked, didn't have many friends.” However, since she became an SMI, the same people who ignored me at school are now reaching out, wanting to reconnect because of her growing following; she believes that friends “only want to catch up with me because they know that I've got a following. There is nothing, but there's, it's so fake.”

Helen recounted an experience that reinforced her scepticism about forming new friendships. She recalled a woman who reached out to her, expressing admiration and requesting to meet for coffee. During their conversation, she noticed an imbalance in the interaction, as the woman failed to reciprocate questions about Helen's life. At one point, Helen mentioned having travelled to London, to which the woman responded, “No, Helen, I know everything about you.” This moment made Helen realise the extent to which people could already

perceive a relationship with her through her online presence, making authentic connection increasingly difficult.

Similarly, Jean also resonated, stating, “when you're a social media influencer, I think you can definitely have like, kind of sketch out about who's trying to be a friend for the wrong reasons, and who has who are real friends.” She mentioned that she has a fair share of friends who used her to come along to specific events; this has led her to need to be more careful when it comes to friendship; she explained, “So I think it's yeah, just I've started to tread more mindfully about the people that I let in.”

These challenges extend beyond friendships and into dating as well. Helen noted that being an SMI significantly complicates romantic relationships, stating, “Dating, as well it's a really big part, they won't ask questions. They already know. They know they they know your life.” The potential partner's pre-existing knowledge about her through social media often eliminates the natural process of getting to know one another, making it difficult to form connections organically.

The difficulty in creating authentic relationships is not limited to personal friendship and dating; it also extends to interactions with fellow SMIs. Helen reflected on the competitive nature of the influencer space, stating, “Potentially other creators can feel threatened,” mainly because SMI are often competing for the same partnerships and opportunities. This sense of rivalry may discourage mutual support, especially about branded content. She describes, “They won't be replying and commenting and sharing each other's branded stuff, because it's like, well, I want to, I want to get that.” Despite having acquaintances in the industry, she shared a lack of genuine support, stating, “I don't have many people that support my staff, even though they're my friends.”

This resonated with Jean as she mentioned that she does not have many deep friendships in the influencer industry because she feels like the competitive nature of SMIs; she stated:

“Because of the I feel like it's always someone looking over your shoulder, seeing what you're doing. How can you how can they do it better? And how can they kind of level up for themselves based on what you do?”

This has left her relationships with other SMI extremely shallow, and she tried not to go too deep with them. Helen further emphasised the challenges of building meaningful connections within the influencer community. She described how many SMIs are unresponsive or unapproachable, leaving her feeling insignificant and isolated. She put it as, “you can't talk to them regular. You can't message them. They won't reply back. You feel so insignificant. You feel like they're just unattainable to reach out to.” She further noted that relationships with other SMIs can feel “very fake,” adding that people often appear friendly only because of the perceived power or status an SMI holds. She shared a story in which she was warned that a fellow SMI who seemed nice was, in fact, only treating her kindly due to her following. This realisation left her questioning the authenticity of many of her industry connections.

SMIs also noted that the impact of criticism extends beyond themselves, affecting those close to them as well. Continuous exposure to negative comments has led to noticeable emotional distress, which the families have observed. For example, Helen shared that her family has witnessed changes in her behaviour, describing how public criticism has deeply hurt her. She explained that the emotional distress has not only affected her personally but has also strained her family relationship, stating, “Yeah, so I think it's hurt the family a little bit.” The distress caused by these criticisms has even led her family to advise her to leave TikTok, highlighting the broader repercussions of online negativity.

Jean echoed a similar experience, emphasising that the negative comments do not solely impact her mental well-being but also extend to those closest to her. She mentioned that her loved ones experience the emotional burden of these criticisms, stating, “Those closest to me are probably feeling that as well.”

Beyond indirect emotional distress, some SMIs reported that criticisms is also directed at their close relationships. Jade, for example, revealed that her partner had been the target of personal attacks, receiving negative comments and direct messages questioning their relationship. She explained, “So obviously these things are not towards me, but it's towards someone that I care a lot. It's obviously not nice for whoever they're describing to see those comments” Additionally, her partner has received random messages on social media, such as, “why are you dating this person? Do you know she said certain things?” This illustrates how public scrutiny of SMIs can extend beyond the influencers themselves, affecting their relationships and the well-being of their loved ones.

Despite these challenges, some SMIs reported that their online presence has not significantly affected their relationships. For example, Dean mentioned that he has not noticed a change in his friendships, stating that he still maintains the same group of friends who continue to treat him as they did before his social media success. Additionally, she stated that he has made numerous friends within the influencer community. Similarly, Shane expressed that meeting fellow SMIs in person has strengthened his connections with them, making him more inclined to support them.

Moreover, some SMIs perceive their role as an SMI as an opportunity to enhance their relationships. For example, Jade explains that while their social media presence has changed their social interactions, it has also created new experiences and opportunities for connection. She stated, “I would say it there are more opportunities or ideas when, when it comes to hanging out, because then I might have something to actually film.” She elaborated that these experiences allow them to create memories with friends and family while balancing content creation and personal time. Jean also shared their enjoyment in using their platform to provide unique experiences for others. She stated, “I love sharing those opportunities with my friends, or just like, even people that I just, like, genuinely know don't get to experience cool things.” She highlighted taking friends to movie premieres as an example, explaining that it allows them to share amazing moments with those who may not have access to such events.

Nevertheless, some SMIs acknowledged that their public presence can sometimes cause frustration among friends, particularly when social interactions are interrupted by fans. Paul shared that while his friend initially found public recognition exciting, it has become disruptive in certain situations, such as during a workout at the gym. He explained, “It's not because they're they're annoyed that the people coming it's not that, we are not doing what we're supposed to be doing.” Therefore, fans' recognition can cause disruption when SMIs hang out with their friends.

Overall, the social implications of being an SMI are complicated, influencing friendships, relationships with family, romantic relationships, and industry dynamics. While some SMI experience difficulties forming genuine relationships due to scepticism about others' intentions, others view their role as an opportunity to foster unique experiences and

strengthen connections. These experiences of SMIs illustrated the complexities of navigating social relationships while being an SMI.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Coping with Criticisms

Table 9

Codes contributing to the theme coping with criticisms

Name	Description
Hard to Balance Success and Bragging	The challenges SMIs face when sharing personal achievements, especially within the context of New Zealand’s TPS. SMIs are cautious about appearing boastful and carefully consider how they present successes, e.g. financial milestones or career progress. They often balance showcasing hard work with humility by emphasising effort or keeping specific accomplishments private. This tension shapes their content strategies, aiming to engage their audience without alienating or seeming arrogant.
Change in Content Due to Criticisms	SMIs adjust their content in response to negative feedback. To avoid criticism, SMIs like Helen become selective in sharing sensitive topics, such as property or success. Initially carefree in posting, Jess began overthinking her content as feedback increased and stopped sharing certain types, like singing, due to negative reception. Similarly, Shane adjusted his content to avoid criticism, opting for a more cautious approach.
The Intention of Being an SMI Can Affect How They View Criticisms	An SMI’s intention affects its content creation and response to criticism. SMIs prioritising internal validation over external approval find it easier to handle criticism, fostering resilience and long-term enjoyment. They express concerns that turning influencing into a career could add pressure, reduce the fun aspect and make it feel like a job. Many SMIs view social media influencing as a hobby, enjoying the creative process without career-related goals.
Coping Methods Towards Criticisms	SMIs use avoidance, cognitive reframing, self-reflection, and non-confrontational ways to respond, reinterpret or minimise negative feedback. Employ self-validation, emotional detachment, and deflection to regulate their responses and maintain confidence. Good support systems, physical exercise, faith and journaling also provide emotional resilience. While some, especially sensitive individuals, struggle, most have developed coping mechanisms to handle criticism.

This theme explores how SMIs navigate and cope with criticisms in their journey as SMIs, as shown in Table 9. It begins by examining the tension between sharing success and avoiding

perceptions of bragging, particularly within New Zealand's cultural context, where TPS can influence public reception. It then looks at SMIs' adjustments to their content in response to negative feedback, often becoming more cautious or selective in what they share. This section also looks into how an SMI's intention behind being an SMI shapes their response to criticism, with those driven by intrinsic motivation tending to experience less pressure and greater emotional detachment than those seeking external validation of professional success. Lastly, it covers the coping strategies SMIs employ to manage criticism, highlighting the challenges and resilience involved.

4.1.4.1 Hard to Balance Success and Bragging

Many SMIs highlighted the ongoing tension between celebrating personal achievements and avoiding the perception of arrogance, particularly within the context of New Zealand's TPS. Helen discussed this struggle extensively, expressing a desire to inspire others by demonstrating that financial goals, such as purchasing a house, are achievable. However, she also expressed concerns about being perceived as bragging:

“I want to be able to show people that they can achieve their goals. They can achieve financial things, they could they can buy a house if they want to, but you're balancing that with I don't want to show off.”

To manage this, Helen explained that she intentionally tries to “show the realities that it's really hard,” in contrast to other SMIs who focus solely on outcomes. Her approach aims to portray the effort behind success. However, she acknowledged the ongoing internal conflict, describing it as “It's a constant battle of what to push out and what to not,” especially when it comes to milestones such as purchasing a second home or owning a nice car. Despite receiving advice from her agent advising her to subtly include luxury items in her content to avoid being perceived as “cheap and stingy, because I come across as the budgeting girl,” Helen remains cautious, explaining:

“Because again, it comes back down to tall poppy syndrome. Do I don't want to be showing people my car all the time, and I don't want to be telling people about my second house all the time?”

Other participants experienced this sense of restraint. Jade mentioned that she often avoids sharing positive achievements for fear of appearing arrogant, stating “Even if it's positive, I don't really want to overly share, because I don't want to come across as, like, bragging.” Similarly, Jean admitted she continues struggling with this balance, noting, “Not all my own success stories have been shared because of that, where I think that I don't want to make a certain person feel this way, so I'm not going to share it.”

These reflections highlight the challenges SMIs face in presenting personal achievements authentically while managing audience perceptions. Navigating this balance between motivation and modesty influences their content strategies, often leading them to withhold or downplay success to avoid potential judgment.

4.1.4.2 Change in Content Due to Criticisms

Several SMIs reported that consistent criticisms have significantly reshaped the change of their content. For example, Helen reflected on the intense backlash she experienced in April after sharing her property ownership online. She attributed this backlash to the presence of TPS in New Zealand, which led her to reassess the type of content she shared. She explained she felt compelled to remove and refrained from posting topics that might evoke jealousy, explaining:

“I've literally had to take a step back from posting things that people would get jealous about. So I no longer talk about my property. I no longer talk about things that people will get jealous about, because I purely can handle the hate that I get from it. For simply just being a hard worker.”

Although the experience was emotionally challenging, Helen viewed it as “a good reality check,” prompting her to reconsider how her content might be interpreted. She acknowledged that without this experience, she would not have “Pivoted the way that I pivoted.” Previously, she took a more direct approach in her content, using attention-grabbing hooks that sometimes came across as arrogance. Consequently, she became more cautious and strategic about sharing, including withholding personal achievements, such as saving for a second property. She explained:

“I actually haven't told anyone that I'm saving towards my second house, and I'm but yeah, it's just working. I think there's a lot of thoughts that goes in behind each video and how you portray yourself that not many people realize.”

Similarly, Jean shared that receiving criticism significantly altered her content creation approach. Initially, she described herself as carefree and spontaneous, posting freely without concern for others' opinions. However, as judgement and negative feedback increased, she became increasingly self-conscious, overanalysing each post. This shift had a significant emotional and creative impact, especially on her singing, the activity that initially brought her recognition on social media. She shared:

“Actually, I stopped singing for, like, even now I don't sing as much and there are my kind of like my OG fans who have been like, where have you gone with your singing? Why aren't you posting that anymore? And honestly, I just got sick of posting and feeling like it like if one, one part of it wasn't so perfect for people that that, yeah, it just wasn't good enough. So I genuinely to stop singing, and I it's hard for me to get it back now.”

Jean's experience illustrates how criticism can significantly undermine SMIs such as confidence and restrict their creative expression, particularly in areas they are passionate about. Furthermore, as a Christian influencer, Jean felt hesitant to share faith-based content due to concerns about being criticised for misrepresentation or overwhelming her followers. This internal conflict led her to withhold content, as she mentioned, “I think sometimes I do get scared to post about my faith, but again, it's just another journey that I'm trying to get better at.” Jean also reflected on how this shift affected her identity as an SMI. She felt nostalgia for her earlier self, who was more confident and less concerned with others' opinions. She explained:

“I miss the Jess I used to be, someone who was confident, didn't care too much about how how I was going to be perceived, and so I just like posting anything and everything. To be honest, I don't think too much about anything that I was doing. These days it's all about I think that it can be all about how you look, things you get, how you how you talk, how you how you perceive yourself, like what aesthetic you might have, and how pleasing it is to everybody else.”

These reflections highlight how ongoing criticism can influence SMIs' self-perception and authenticity, often leading to substantial changes in how they present themselves and the content they create.

4.1.4.3 The Intention of Being an SMI Can Affect How They View Criticisms

The motivations behind an individual's engagement with social media influence appear to significantly shape their perception of and response to criticism. Several SMIs in the study expressed that when content creation is pursued as a hobby, motivated by enjoyment, self-expression, or entertainment, rather than as a primary source of income or validation, they are better equipped to manage negative feedback and the pressures associated with the role.

For example, Dean explained that his content creation approach is based on gaining intrinsic joy rather than pursuing external validation. This intrinsic motivation allows him to maintain emotional resilience. He stated, "I experience joy out of it, so I have more, I guess, control over my feelings and emotions, because it's, it's based on what I enjoy and, you know, what I want to do, rather than external validation." Dean expressed that he did not enter the social media space seeking recognition but rather to share content that brought him joy. As a result, he never felt compelled to quit due to criticism, highlighting that intrinsic motivation is essential for long-term sustainability in the SMI space.

Similarly, Jade reflected that because she does not rely on social media for financial stability, she can maintain a more balanced and emotionally healthy relationship with her role as an SMI. The absence of financial dependence allows her to dismiss negative feedback more easily:

"I'm grateful that I don't have that mentality to always chase numbers. And again, that might be because I don't do that for a living. If people like it, amazing, if people don't like it, then I move on and do something else."

For Jade, creating content is a form of self-expression and a hobby, not a means of chasing validation or success. This detachment from external expectations contributes to her remaining unaffected by criticism. She elaborated:

“If it's purely for, like me, for a hobby, or, you know, a way where you can express your creativity, then don't always, yeah, don't see those negative criticisms as the biggest part of your life, because it's not going to help you get anywhere, and it's just going to make you not want to produce more content.”

Some SMIs also expressed fear about the idea of treating content creation as a full-time profession. They associated such a shift with heightened pressure, which they believe could increase vulnerability to criticism. For example, Paul shared his fear that approaching social media influencing as a job could undermine his enjoyment:

“I think the only reason why I'd stopped doing content creation is if I took it seriously. So if I did content creation and I took it seriously as a job, then that would be the only reason why I'd stop it, because I get too stuck into it. But now, since I do it, it's just like a hobby. It's just fun. So I don't think I'd ever stop if I'm being honest. Yeah, yeah. If it's just a hobby, I just post fun videos.”

He also acknowledged that, while the idea of turning content creation into a full-time job might be appealing, the associated pressure feels overwhelming, stating, “The pressure behind it a little bit much as well.” This suggests that the seriousness with which one approaches content creation can make it harder to disengage from criticism, potentially causing a more detrimental effect on the SMI's mental wellbeing. The examples show that SMI's perspective on the intention behind creating content is crucial in shaping how they receive and cope with criticisms. SMIs who view social media influence as a hobby or passion reported greater resilience to negative feedback. However, when social media influencing is seen as a job, the emotional distress of criticism can be more significant, as participants may feel more invested in the outcome and validation from their audiences.

4.1.4.4 Coping Methods Towards Criticisms

One of the major themes identified in this study is that SMIs frequently encounter criticism throughout their journeys, prompting the development of various coping mechanisms to navigate and minimise the impact of negative feedback. While all SMIs face criticism and must learn to manage it, those with more sensitive personalities appear to experience more significant challenges in coping with these responses. Helen described herself as “Very sensitive”, explaining that she tends to take negative comments to heart more than others. She emphasised how personality plays a role in how people deal with criticism:

“I'm really big on the enneagrams, and enneagram type eight, for example, is a personality that's just like, don't care, don't care what people think. Whereas I'm an Enneagram type three super sensitive, like, I'll listen to what people say and I'll take it on board.”

Jesica reflected on this idea, attributing her sensitivity to her empathic nature. She said, “Um, it impacts me quite a lot, because I'm an I would say I'm an empath, so I care a lot about what people think, and it's hard to be that whilst being an influencer.” These examples highlight how personality traits influence how SMIs process and respond to criticisms.

Many SMIs reported using a range of strategies, such as avoidance, cognitive reframing, self-reflection, and non-confrontational responses, to interpret, respond to, and minimise the emotional distress of negative feedback. A common strategy expressed was avoidance, mainly when it came to family. Shane and Jade shared that they initially hid their roles as SMIs from their parents to avoid disapproval. Shane created content behind his mother's back due to her disapproval, while Jade kept her content private, knowing her mother would not be supportive. These examples reflect how some SMIs manage criticism preemptively by limiting exposure to disapproving family members.

Another key coping mechanism was cognitive reframing, which involves replacing negative thoughts with more hopeful or constructive ones to gain perspective on a situation (Beck, 1979). For example, Dean and Helen shared how they shifted their focus away from the criticisms and focused on positive feedback and the benefits of being an SMI. Dean explained that while early criticisms impacted his self-esteem, he now views them as helpful tools for

improving content quality and engagement. Similarly, Helen reported reminding herself of supportive messages and weighing the emotional distress of criticism against the financial rewards and opportunities her role provides.

Shane and Paul also adopted this mindset, reframing hate comments as beneficial in helping boost engagement and algorithmic growth. Paul recalled an incident in which a follower persistently posted negative critiques. He reflected, “It was just more so annoying than anything. But, yeah, it was just adding to that analytics at the end of the day.” Similarly, Shane indicated that he is no longer emotionally affected by such negativity, as he now perceives it as beneficial to his content’s performance. He explained:

“I actually don't mind hate comments anymore. In the past that affected me a bit, and now it's like builds more engagement and pushes the video even further. Generally, if someone leaves a negative comment, someone else replies to that comment. It just builds more engagement.”

This intentional shift in perception enables SMIs to protect their mental wellbeing while engaging effectively with their audience and fulfilling their roles as SMIs.

Furthermore, self-reflection also emerged as a key strategy adopted by SMIs to navigate the emotional challenges associated with criticism. Self-reflection is a purposeful and intentional process that requires critically reviewing one's ideas or perceived knowledge, evaluating one's rationale, and reflecting on one's possible consequences (Dewey, 2022). For SMIs, this reflective approach distinguishes between constructive and personal criticism, allowing them to respond thoughtfully rather than internalising all feedback. For example, Dean shared that he assesses the credibility and intent behind feedback by considering whether it is honest, constructive, and informed by experience within the same content domain. He reflects on whether the feedback has the potential to improve his content, using this process to determine its relevance. Similarly, Helen described how she copes with emotionally charged criticism by stepping back and questioning whether the comment originates from someone who genuinely knows her. She reflected on a situation where she believes that the negative feedback was coming from followers' insecurities and jealousy rather than any fault on her part, stating,

“A week ago, she messaged me and said, Hey, I really didn't like you like I really, really did not like you. And then I realized it came from a place of deep jealousy, and I realized that you did nothing wrong. You just simply were doing things that I never got to do.”

Jade also demonstrated a reflective mindset by critically evaluating whether a critique was constructive or personal. She mentioned that when comments were unhelpful or focused on aspects she could not change, such as her appearance, she chose not to dwell on them. This filtering approach allowed her to maintain emotional resilience. Likewise, Shane employed a similar approach, explaining that he differentiates criticism to enhance his content while disregarding harmful or irrelevant feedback. These examples illustrate how SMIs engage in self-reflection to safeguard their mental wellbeing and selectively grow from meaningful feedback, minimising their chances of becoming emotionally overwhelmed by public scrutiny.

Moreover, SMIs reported employing non-confrontational strategies to manage and reduce the impact of criticisms. Several participants highlighted that although they engage with negative feedback, they prefer to do so calmly and non-aggressively. For example, Dean explained that his typical response to criticism involves a simple act of kindness, “I always just respond with a love heart emoji and then leave it at that.” He elaborated that this approach helps de-escalate tension and enables him to concentrate on personal growth, using his achievements to deflect negativity. Similarly, Shane described responding to negative comments in "a general way, just to build a conversational better," reflecting a strategic effort to defuse negativity and maintain constructive interaction. These responses suggest that while some SMIs avoid confrontation, others consciously engage criticism respectfully and calmly to prevent further backlash and maintain a positive image.

In addition to strategies aimed at reinterpreting and responding to criticism, many SMIs also adopted approaches to regulate their emotions and maintain their confidence. This method included self-validation, emotional detachments and emotional deflections.

Firstly, several participants described using self-validation to cope with public feedback. Rather than allowing negative feedback to undermine their self-concept, they emphasised the importance of recognising their worth and remaining authentic. For example, Helen

highlighted the value of acknowledging and processing negative emotions rather than suppressing them. She stated:

“I honestly would say it's okay to be sad, like, it's okay to read it and feel sad, because so often people like, it's, you know, don't read it and but like, it's actually okay, like, to be sad about just sit at it and go, You know what? Like, man, it sucks. It does. Don't try to ignore it, because I did that for so long. I you know, oh, it's fine, it's fine, it's fine. And then it's not fine, like, it's actually not fine.”

Her response illustrates a self-validation strategy for managing emotion from criticisms, as she acknowledges the negative emotion as a valid response while maintaining a strong self-identity. Helen also stressed the importance of having a strong identity when facing public criticism. After being accused of attention-seeking for posing a vulnerable video, she responded, “So no, like, I know myself, so it's really making sure that you have a strong identity. And like, I know who I am. You don't know me at all.” Through this statement, she reaffirms her authenticity and rejects the external narratives imposed upon her.

Similarly, Dean explained that criticism does not influence his self-perception; he stated, “I still identify. I still have my values that have kept the same. And, you know, I still, yeah, it hasn't, I don't think it's affected the type of person I am.” This highlights a resilient and stable sense of identity despite external judgements. Furthermore, Jade and Jean also acknowledged the unavoidable nature of criticism, expressing that it is unrealistic to expect universal approval. Shane echoed this, explaining that he has learned to no longer worry about others' opinions:

“Now I just don't really care, so I just post whatever, and then I think that, you know, if people don't like my content, they don't like my content, I accepted that, and I think that's been the best part.”

Rather than striving for universal acceptance, he focuses on self-validation. These responses demonstrate how SMIs rely on self-validation to navigate external judgement, demonstrating confidence in their identity, trusting their intentions, and accepting negative feedback, an unavoidable aspect of being an SMI.

Furthermore, many SMIs adopt strategies to detach from negative criticisms to protect their wellbeing emotionally. This approach enables them to build resilience, allowing them to continue creating content without being significantly affected by online negativity. For example, Dean described having developed coping mechanisms over time, stating, “Over the years, I've just developed, I guess, tools and ways of dealing with it, and, you know, regulating my emotions and moving on from it, and not trying, not hooking on to to that stuff.” This illustrates an intentional disengagement from the harmful comments, highlighting the importance of not internalising such feedback. Similarly, Paul expressed a comparable approach to emotional distancing, expressing that regardless of criticisms, “the day is gonna pass, no matter what anyways.” This reflects a mindset in which criticisms are viewed as temporary, enabling them to move forward without allowing them to disrupt his role as an SMI.

Other SMIs, such as Jade, practice emotional detachment by disregarding negative comments about their appearance or content. For example, Jade explains, “I'm not here to entertain them and ask them for permission, whether I should be, I don't know, carrying on my relationship because of someone else's appearance or your feedback towards my partner's appearance.” This indicates a strong sense of emotional separation, as she refuses to let external opinions affect personal decisions or content creation. She added that she cannot control how she looks and guarantee everyone will approve of her appearance; she does not find it worthwhile to invest the time and energy “to go crazy just because of something that I probably can't improve on.” Through this strategy, Jade consciously distances herself from criticism she cannot change, reinforcing that others' opinions should not dictate her content or sense of self-worth. Similarly, Shane aligns with this perspective, acknowledging that while criticism is unavoidable, he chooses not to let it affect him personally. Jean also reflected on her personal growth, stating that she has become more resilient over time, stating, “I can kind of brush it off easier these days.” Thus, these examples demonstrate that emotional detachment serves as an important coping strategy for SMI, helping them to overcome negative feedback while maintaining their mental wellbeing.

Another significant strategy SMIs use to handle negative feedback is deflecting it by viewing the criticism as stemming from the critic's issue rather than an attack on themselves. For example, Dean describes a key strategy he uses to cope, which involves recognising that

negative feedback often reflects the struggles of the person providing it rather than being a reflection of the SMI themselves. He shared,

“Another tool I use is understanding that, you know, it's, it's not really an attack on me, it's something that that person is going through, or has gone through, and you know, they're probably just, I guess, you know, expressing their difficulties onto creators themselves.”

This perspective allows SMIs to emotionally distance themselves from the feedback, focusing instead on the emotional state of the critic. Similarly, Helen shared an experience where she received an extremely hurtful comment and responded by reaching out to the person to ask if they were okay. She said, “Because for you to spew this much hatred on someone, I really hope that you're okay, because it was some of the worst things ever read.” This shows how SMIs redirect criticism back to the critics, questioning their wellbeing. Helen further mentioned that sometimes such comments come from “a loser that's just typing stuff,” indicating that these critics often know nothing about SMI.

Likewise, Shane explained that when he encounters negative comments, he interprets them as stemming from jealousy or insecurity, stating:

“If they're commenting something negative, right? It's like, okay, well, they either envious or jealous or they're not at the stage, like, I don't know whatever it is, so if someone comes up to me and says it, now, I'm definitely a lot less likely to, I guess, be friend them.”

By viewing criticism through this lens, SMIs can detach from the emotional impact, recognising that the negativity is more about the critic's insecurities than a reflection of themselves.

A strong support system is crucial for SMIs dealing with criticism. Many SMIs emphasise the importance of having a reliable network of friends, family, industry peers and mentors who offer emotional support and guidance. For example, Dean relies on a close group of friends and his therapist to help him navigate the challenges of being an SMI. Furthermore, Helen values the reassurance of her parents and friends, who remind her of her true identity.

However, she also highlighted the benefit of having fellow SMI friends, mentioning that while family and friends may offer advice, they may not fully understand the experience of being an SMI. She shared that having SMI friends who have encountered criticism themselves has been particularly beneficial, as they offer advice grounded in shared experiences. Jade finds comfort in her partner, who helps her analyse and navigate negative comments. Jean highlights the importance of her “village” of supportive family and friends, saying:

“I'd say what I'm thankful for is that I have a pretty good village around me in real life, and so that's always been something that's important to me as a social media influencer, so that I don't feel that sense of isolation.”

Similarly, Shane values his close friends, who offer encouragement and a safe space to express his emotions, have been helping him cope with criticisms. These support systems offer reassurance, help SMIs maintain their sense of identity, and provide practical advice, all of which are crucial in managing the emotional challenges of social media.

In response to the criticism and the negative stigma often associated with the influencer label, many SMIs have chosen to identify themselves as “content creators” instead. For example, Shane shared that he intentionally calls himself a content creator to avoid being perceived as “attention seeking” and “stuck up,” believing the term “content creator” carries a more neutral meaning. This resonates with Helen, who expressed her dislike for the influencer title, describing it as “cringe,” and prefers to refer to herself as a content creator. This shift in terminology serves as a coping mechanism, enabling SMIs to distance themselves from public judgement and influence how their work is perceived.

Additionally, several SMIs have developed practical coping strategies to protect and maintain their wellbeing. One of these strategies is taking breaks from social media, which many have found beneficial. For example, Helen explained that a particular comment triggered her to step away from social media; however, she mentioned that it was not just that comment but the accumulation of negative comments over the past four years that led to her emotional breakdown. She described the 48 hours she spent offline as “It was the best 48 hours of my life,” highlighting the relief from disconnecting from social media, which has helped SMIs emotionally reset. Similarly, Jade took a several-month break to manage the overwhelming

negativity, while Jean emphasised the importance of fasting from social media for her wellbeing. She explained,

“You can get caught up in this world of that's your real world. That's your village. No, it's not like as much as I have a respect for my audience at the same time, like the best way that I can give to them is probably keeping myself great, like good mentally as well.”

Moreover, Shane reflected that his decision to take an extended break in 2023 was likely prompted by the hate comments he received, which unconsciously demotivated him from content creation. Thus, the break allowed him to refresh, regain focus, and return to content creation. Thus, taking breaks from social media is a key strategy SMIs utilise to cope with criticisms.

Another effective coping strategy expressed by SMIs is the intentional setting of boundaries. By doing so, SMIs actively manage their exposure to negative content and feedback, which helps maintain their emotional wellbeing. For example, Jade shared that she is very intentional in limiting her time on TikTok to avoid the emotional strain, stating,

“I don't want to always scroll on TikTok, either to look at other people's content or check how many views I got or check how many comments I got. I've always put a boundaries towards myself, because I know it's quite toxic if I wanted to be like it.”

Jade's approach of setting boundaries around using TikTok helps her maintain her wellbeing and minimise the risk of developing unhealthy habits, such as excessive scrolling and obsessing over content performance. Similarly, Paul developed a habit of posting a video and then refraining from checking the feedback until the following morning. This strategy of avoiding immediate feedback allows him to manage his emotional responses better and maintain a healthier relationship with social media. These examples demonstrate how setting intentional boundaries enables SMIs to control their social media habits and handle criticisms more effectively.

Additionally, several SMIs cope with criticisms by ignoring or blocking negative feedback. For example, Jean shared that she actively removes individuals and ignores comments,

stating, “Honestly, I probably just, I block people same way actually, I block comments. I just don't even entertain it because I know that my my thought process, I can just end up discouraging me.” This strategy is also resonated with Dean, who expressed that he tends to ignore and not dwell on negative feedback. By using this coping method, SMIs are protecting themselves from the emotional toll of negative comments, thus maintaining their wellbeing.

A few SMIs also shared personal strategies to cope with criticisms. For example, Paul mentioned staying active by going to the gym to manage the stress associated with criticism. Furthermore, Helen found journaling an effective coping method, explaining, “My journaling every single day. So I think that's a big method.” Some SMIs also draw strength from their faith, such as Jean share that her faith serves as her foundation, stating:

“With social media, I think, like you could just easily be be taken out and by people's criticism. But for me, I'm lucky enough to know Jesus and know what he has to say about me, and it's enough to it's more than enough, actually, for me to go, no, no, I'm good.”

She explained that reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping helps her maintain a strong self-worth and not let others' words define her. Despite the variety of coping strategies SMIs have developed, many acknowledge that it is an ongoing learning process. As Helen shared, she is still learning to cope with criticisms and hopes to implement more strategies in the future.

In conclusion, this theme illustrates that SMIs use a variety of coping strategies, such as avoidance, cognitive reframing, self-reflection, and non-confrontation, to respond to, interpret, and minimise negative feedback. Furthermore, they rely on self-validation, emotional detachment, and deflection to regulate their confidence as SMIs. They have also established strong support systems, including friends, family, mentors and fellow SMIs, to help manage the pressure of negative comments. Additionally, many SMIs prefer identifying as content creators rather than influencers to avoid the stigma and negativity associated with the influencer label. Practical actions, such as setting boundaries, taking breaks from social media, ignoring and blocking negative comments, engaging in physical exercise, journaling, and practising their faith, further help SMIs cope with criticism. These strategies highlight criticism's significant impact on SMIs and their resilience over time.

4.2 Findings from Followers

These themes are based on the data collected from the three focus group interviews with non-SMIs. Six main themes were identified: reasons to follow SMIs in New Zealand, do not follow many New Zealand SMIs, methods of expressing support towards SMIs, methods of expressing criticisms towards SMIs, TPS and how SMIs handle criticisms (Table 10).

Table 10

Themes generated from the three focus groups

Themes	Name
Theme 1	Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand
Theme 2	Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs
Theme 3	Methods of Expressing Support
Theme 4	Methods of Expressing Criticisms
Theme 5	What Drives Criticisms Towards SMIs
Theme 6	How SMIs Handle Criticisms

4.2.1 Theme 1: Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand

Table 11

Codes contributing to the theme reasons to follow SMIs in New Zealand

Name	Description
Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand	Reasons for following SMIs in New Zealand include lifestyle content, comedy, niche interests, personal content, inspirational and educational content, and professional purposes. Many follow relatable SMIs for daily experiences like budgeting or university life, entertainment, niche interests like fitness or cooking, or influencers they recognise from school or their community. Many also like following to see SMIs grow and feel a sense of pride when they succeed.
Supportive to SMIs in the Same Cultural Group	Tendency to support SMIs from their cultural background, especially with Polynesian and Māori participants. Their cultural relatability and shared values, such as humour, community and pride, influence the decision to follow and support SMIs. Participants feel a sense of pride in their success and are naturally inclined to support them. This cultural connection also encourages more significant engagement with SMIs from the same background.
New Zealand People Are Only Supportive Towards SMIs When New Zealand Is Recognised	National pride and external recognition influence New Zealander's support for New Zealand SMIs. Initial scepticism exists as SMIs gain traction; however, local support grows once they gain recognition, especially internationally. The support is stronger when SMIs are seen as positively representing New Zealand or contributing to the greater good. The support is conditional on SMIs' success and content value.

Table 11 shows the theme that explores the underlying motivation behind individuals following SMIs in New Zealand. It will first cover the factors that drive participants to follow an SMI, including content type and personal connection. Furthermore, it will examine how participants support SMIs from their cultural backgrounds, particularly focusing on shared values and cultural relatability. Finally, this theme will address why New Zealanders generally only support SMIs when these influencers contribute to New Zealand's recognition, reflecting a sense of national pride and collective interest.

4.2.1.1 Reasons to Follow SMIs in New Zealand

Participants shared various reasons for following SMIs in New Zealand, with content type playing a key role in shaping their preferences. Many participants expressed a strong interest in lifestyle content. For example, Lily shared that she enjoys following SMIs because she “like seeing someone just live their day to day life, I always find intriguing”. Similarly, Taylor mentioned following local SMIs, such as Lucas Brown and Lucy Brown, who post relatable content such as university vlogs and “get ready with me” videos. This type of content was appealing due to its authenticity and reflection of everyday routines.

In addition, several male participants mentioned that they follow local SMIs primarily for entertainment, especially comedy content. SMIs like UCE Gang, Jimmy Jackson, and Busky were frequently mentioned for their skits and humorous videos. Participants noted the appeal of meme-style content, playful banter, and culturally relatable humour. Kevin described it as, “UCE Gang, or like Toree Tafa I don’t like like just a whole bunch of island boys. They just make comedy skits and all that sort of stuff.” Others express similar thoughts, highlighting the appeal of New Zealand humour and the creativity behind the comedic content.

Furthermore, participants followed SMIs based on niche interests, such as hiking, fitness, cooking, or mukbang videos. These SMIs were often perceived as more authentic and less commercialised, focusing on sharing personal passions rather than promotional content. Summer reflected on this by saying,

“I tend to follow a lot of like hiking influencers, because that’s like what I like doing the most. And with that, I find that it’s not usually typical, like content like social influence, like social media influencer content where they’re getting paid to promote stuff. It’s usually they’ve got a big following, but they just promote, like, walks and hikes they do and stuff.”

Similarly, others mentioned following cooking SMIs, such as Andy Herndon, who create entertaining food-related content that caters to more specific interests. These examples highlight how niche content is another key motivator for engaging with SMIs in New Zealand.

Beyond the previously mentioned reasons, participants also expressed other motivations, such as personal content, inspirational and educational content, and professional purposes. For example, Noah shared that he follows SMIs primarily for work, stating, “The main reason actually because of work like, I hire quite a few, or we use them quite a bit for our for advertising.” Some participants preferred to follow SMIs, who shares personal content, such as updated family or intimate life moments. Noah mentioned following Louis Davis, who shares family-oriented content, including posts about his partner and children. This shows that personal content is another motivator for following SMIs in New Zealand.

Others expressed their interest in following SMIs for inspiration and educational values. Emma mentioned following Jazz Thornton, an SMI who advocates for mental health, describing her as “a real inspiration.” Sage shared that she followed SMIs for hijab-style inspiration, saying, “Around two, three years ago, I wanted to start wearing my hijab. So I would like be looking at how people style them, or like for sports, especially how they wore it.” Taylor also mentioned that she follows SMIs to share educational content, such as budgeting tips.

Moreover, several participants shared that witnessing the growth and success of smaller SMIs motivated them to follow them. For example, Tom explained, “Having to just see success without the hard work behind it doesn’t really have the same effect as seeing the hard work going into the road to success like he did.” This statement reflects followers’ pride and emotional connection when they see SMIs work hard to succeed. Emma and Sam also shared similar feelings, and following a small SMI from the beginning and watching them grow creates a sense of personal connection and excitement. This growth journey enhances the followers’ engagement and strengthens their perception of the SMI’s authenticity.

In summary, the reasons for following SMIs in New Zealand vary widely, with content types and witnessing an SMI’s growth and success playing key roles. This demonstrates the diverse nature of SMI content and its appeal across various interests.

4.2.1.2 Supportive to SMIs in the Same Cultural Group

Participants expressed strong support and engagement with SMIs who shared their cultural background, particularly within the Māori and Polynesian communities in New Zealand. This support appears to stem from shared cultural values, such as humour, upbringing, reliability, and a collective sense of pride in the success of individuals from their own communities.

Several participants mentioned that they were naturally drawn towards Polynesian SMIs, such as UCE Gang, Jimmy Jackson, and Toree Tafa, whose humour and content resonated with their experiences. For example, Chase and Tom explained that they follow many Polynesian SMIs because the humour aligns closely with their own. Chase shared that he follows a lot of Polynesian SMIs “because I feel like their humour aligns with, like, my humour.”

Cultural upbringing also played a significant role in shaping participants’ preferences and behaviours online. Kevin reflected on the community-oriented nature of his upbringing, saying, “Growing up like everyone's like, very community based. So, like, I don't know, we just sort of show love for each other.” This instilled value of community support influenced his decision to follow and engage with SMIs from similar backgrounds, “Like anyone from the islands, I’m like, oh, it’s sick that they’re doing like, great stuff.”

Reliability and alignment in moral values further influenced participants’ engagement. For example, Wade shared that he tends to follow SMIs from his cultural group because they are more relatable and often express views that align with his beliefs. He shared, “because they’re more relatable, and especially when they’re like, say stuff that morally aligns with me and things that like I’m really educated about, so in that sense, I tend to agree with them and support them.”

Moreover, a sense of sharing experiences and mutual understanding fostered stronger emotional connections with culturally similar SMIs. Chase expressed that this shared background made their success feel more personal and meaningful, stating, “I tend to, like, understand, like, where, like, you know, what sort of background they have, and, like, where they come from.” This familiarity contributed to a deep sense of pride, as he continued, “Just like seeing my people being able to climb that, you know, ladder of, like fame, and you

know, being able to reach such a large crowd.” He felt a sense of pride in seeing members of his community succeed and rise to fame, mentioning, “It’s actually really good to see, like, how like people in my culture is, like, actually doing well.”

In summary, cultural alignment enhances participants’ perceptions of reliability and trust in these SMIs and fosters a deeper sense of engagement, emotional connection, and pride. This suggests that participants were more inclined to support and remain loyal to SMIs who shared their cultural background.

4.2.1.3 New Zealand People Are Only Supportive Towards SMIs When New Zealand Is Recognised

Participants expressed that support for SMIs in New Zealand is often conditional, with more significant support shown when the SMI’s success brings recognition or benefits to the country. This reflects a sense of national pride, where individuals’ success is celebrated when it is viewed as a collective achievement. For example, Dani shared, “I personally feel like when someone gets famous here, like New Zealand, tries to hype them up a bit because the country gets recognition.” Lily also shared a similar feeling, stating, “If New Zealand’s getting recognized, then in the right direction.” Lara also expressed a sense of pride, mentioning that as a small country, New Zealand influencers gain international recognition, bringing visibility to the nation.

However, several participants observed that support for SMIs in New Zealand is not consistently present during the early stages of their careers. Instead, support tends to emerge only after the SMI has achieved significant success and gained international recognition. Noah explained that public backing often depends on global attention, stating, “I feel like if, if a New Zealand creator gets hyped from the world, or, like, outside of New Zealand, then I see that people start, like, backing them up.” However, he pointed out that this support is typically absent at the beginning of an SMI’s journey, with many emerging SMIs facing criticism. He shared, “When they like up and coming, I do feel like there’s, there’s a lot of like adversity around like, oh, that’s just a rip off of this person’s content, like another bigger creator, you know, there’s a lot of like, there’s like, copycat kind of comments and stuff like that.”

Noah believed that New Zealand people tend to show support only after SMIs have already proven themselves on a global stage, mentioning, “I do agree that once a kiwi kind of makes it all of New Zealand gets behind them, and they’re like, real proud of you. That’s New Zealander versus like sometimes, to get to that point, it just feels like a bit of a slog.” This aligns with Chase, who shared his delayed support for local SMI, stating:

“At the time, they didn’t have much followers, but I did enjoy their content, but like, it wasn’t enough for me to follow them. But like, I guess after some time I was like, oh, like, these guys are actually, like, making themselves, like, I’m gonna be, I want to contribute. Like I want to like follow them and like just see how far they can grow.”

Similarly, Kevin described his experience witnessing the journey of a high school friend who became an SMI. He recalled that in the early stages of his friend’s career, people often mocked the content as “cringe” and questioned his involvement, stating, “So they’re just like, oh, like, why would you do that? we are country boys. Like, how can you do that?” However, once his friend gained a significant following, other’s attitudes shifted; he noted, “Everyone’s like, oh, that’s sick. Like, yeah, I’m so glad, I knew him.” These reflections illustrate how public validation tends to emerge only after SMIs have become successful and bring recognition to New Zealand.

Other participants also highlighted that national support is conditional on how well the SMI represents New Zealand and aligns with the national values. Noah articulated this point, expressing, “When they do something good that everyone’s like, yeah, they’re a kiwi versus when they do something bad, then don’t piss on our country. Like, you know, you don’t represent us, kind of thing like you get called out.” This suggests that public support is not only based on recognition but also on the SMI’s perceived alignment with the cultural values and image of the nation.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs

Table 12

Codes contributing to the theme do not follow many New Zealand SMIs

Name	Description
Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs	Reasons for not following New Zealand SMIs include a lack of relevant SMIs in their interests, such as engineering or electronic topics, and a preference for international influencers due to more engaging and diverse content, such as lifestyle and settings. Some were unaware of local influencers, while others noted New Zealand influencers' challenges in gaining visibility due to limited media exposure and a smaller audience.
New Zealand SMIs Do Not Have Many New Zealand Followers	Many successful New Zealand SMIs have mainly international audiences, especially in the United State (US). Participants stated that New Zealand's small population and unique culture make it more appealing to overseas audiences who seek insight into Kiwi life. Also, some influencers tailor their content to resonate more with American viewers by adopting an American accent or creating content around US pop culture. The larger US population also contributes to the broader reach.

Table 12 illustrates the theme that explores the reasons why participants follow a few New Zealand-based SMIs. The key factors include a lack of content aligned with personal interests, the perceived predictability of local SMIs' content, and a lack of awareness of local SMIs due to the dominance of international media, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. Additionally, it addresses why participants believe successful New Zealand SMIs often have more international followers than local ones. This trend is attributed to both the small local population and the way SMIs tailor their content to global audiences, suggesting that the limited local following is influenced by audience preferences and the SMIs' content strategies.

4.2.2.1 Do Not Follow Many New Zealand SMIs

Several participants indicated they follow a limited amount of New Zealand-based SMIs for several reasons. First, there is a lack of local content that aligns with their interests. For example, Rico explained that he does not follow many New Zealand SMIs due to the absence of SMIs creating content in areas such as engineering and electronics, which are his main interests. He stated there are not “many in my space.”

Additionally, some participants mentioned that the predictability of local SMIs content contributes to their preference for international SMIs. For example, Summer described New Zealand SMI content as “boring” and “quite predictable.” She explained, saying:

“I’m not as intrigued by the New Zealand ones as maybe I am by the overseas ones, because I find it’s, like, quite predictable. Or like, quite like, oh, like, this is it’s just like, it’s kind of boring for me personally. But whereas like a US, like a US, influencer day in my life is quite I find more interesting because it’s very different lifestyle, very different like, I guess setting yeah.”

As a result, Summer, like others, tends to follow international SMIs over local ones. In addition, some participants admitted to being unaware of many New Zealand SMIs. For example, Dani stated, “I’m just not aware of any, to be honest.” Emma shared similar thoughts, explaining:

“A lot of New Zealand influencers, they probably find it a lot harder to get their like name out there, because there isn't as a lot of media that we consume is very American and very or from the UK or like, very international. So a lot of the influencers in New Zealand like they don't have as big audience that is able to spread their name out there, that sort of thing.”

This dominance of international content, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, may explain the limited awareness of New Zealand SMIs, contributing to the lower following of local SMIs compared to their overseas SMIs. Overall, the limited appeal of New Zealand SMIs, driven by niche content scarcity, predictable local content, and low visibility compared to international SMIs, appears to significantly influence follower’s preferences for overseas SMIs over local ones.

4.2.2.2 New Zealand SMIs Do Not Have Many New Zealand Followers

Participants highlighted that even the most successful New Zealand SMIs often have predominantly international audiences, with relatively few followers based locally. This reflects a broader trend in which New Zealand-based SMIs resonate more with overseas audiences, particularly those in the United States.

Noah discussed the temporary TikTok ban in the United States and how it prompted many successful New Zealand SMIs to reflect on their audience demographics publicly. He noted,

“A lot of our like, New Zealand creators, like, came out public and said, like Theo shakes, for example, 86% of his audience are American. Jess Thornton, like one of the biggest New Zealand influencers, like 91% of her followers on one of her channels are American.”

This highlights how even locally based SMIs primarily engage international viewers. Noah further suggests that New Zealand’s cultural uniqueness might make local content more appealing to international audiences. He shared, “It’s quite cool, I think, for people that aren’t Kiwis to get, like, dumps of culture and how we do things.” In this sense, the novelty of New Zealand culture may be particularly appealing to international audiences. He also noted that some SMIs tailor their content to suit non-local viewers. He shared an example of a creator who adopts an American accent and skits about American pop culture, thus making their content more relatable to United States-based followers.

Noah further emphasises the influence of population size, noting, “Even if all of us were following, and like, only a quarter of them were following, they’d still outweigh do you know what I mean.” This speaks to the scalability of influencer reach and how global platforms can disproportionately amplify audiences from larger countries.

This insight contributes to a deeper understanding of participants’ limited engagement with local SMIs. It suggests that the issue is not solely related to follower preference but is also shaped by SMIs’ content strategies and the dynamics of global platform visibility. The tendency for New Zealand SMIs to cater to larger international audiences may inadvertently reduce their visibility and relatability within the local context.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Methods of Expressing Support

Table 13

Codes contributing to the theme methods of expressing support

Name	Description
Ways of Showing Support to New Zealand SMIs	The various ways participants express support for New Zealand SMIs include liking and commenting on posts, following SMIs on multiple platforms, and sharing content with friends. Participants also mention engaging with SMIs they know personally by leaving encouraging comments. Some celebrate achievements, such as commenting on milestones or congratulating influencers for their success.

This theme examines the various ways in which followers demonstrate support for SMIs in New Zealand, as shown in Table 13. Participants identified several common strategies, including liking content, following SMIs across multiple platforms, and sharing posts with peers. While some participants reported engaging in more active forms of support, such as commenting, these occurrences were significantly less frequent.

4.2.3.1 Ways of Showing Support to New Zealand SMIs

Participants employed various approaches to express their support for SMIs, with the most frequently mentioned method being the “like” function. Many indicated that liking a post was the most common way of showing approval while following an SMI typically indicated a deeper level of engagement. For example, Lily explained, “If I really like something, I would like it, and if I really like enjoy the content, I will follow them.” Tom similarly shares that he would “like and subscribe” to the content that captured his interest. Chase further elaborated on this pattern of engagement, stating, “If I really like like the content that you do, I’ll probably like follow them on different platforms, like YouTube page or follow up on YouTube page, Facebook, Instagram to TikTok.”

In addition to liking and following, some participants described sharing content as a form of support. For example, Wade shared, “Probably also sending it to friends if it’s like really funny.” At the same time, Rico and Emma expressed similar behaviours, sharing SMIs’ content in personal group chat to express their support towards SMIs.

Despite these various engagement methods, many participants reported a reluctance to comment on SMIs' content and preferred more passive forms of support. Noah reflected this trend, stating, "Just watch, follow like. I don't usually comment, but yeah, yeah, just engaging like in some way." Similarly, Emma's engagement was primarily limited to liking posts or occasionally sharing them with others, as she expressed, "I'm not a big commenter, but sometimes I'll comment on things, but like, once a blue moon." These responses suggest that while participants are willing to engage with content, they often choose forms of support that do not require direct interaction.

However, a few participants indicated that they do comment under certain circumstances, such as when they know the SMIs or when the SMIs achieve a significant milestone. For example, Taylor stated that while she typically refrains from commenting, she actively supports her friend Luke, an SMI, by commenting on his posts to encourage engagement, stating she "purposefully comment on his video, hyping him up, because I just yeah, you want him to succeed." She mentioned that when Luke secured a brand partnership, she commented, "the main man with like, the preach emoji to like, get him more engagement on that post."

Other participants recalled similar experiences, with Tom mentioning on a post by a Samoan Sefa, who had recently won a Men's Physique New Zealand competition:

"I've been following his journey, preparing for that competition, and so when he won, I just commented and praising everything that he's done and congratulating him for the hard work that he's been doing on his channel and influencing people like me who starting to go gym and like, yeah, focus on my health and wellbeing."

Chase resonated with this thought, stating that he also commented on Samoan Sefa's posts to express his admiration and support. Participants predominantly supported SMIs by liking, following, and sharing content, with commenting reserved for specific contexts or personal connections. This indicates a preference for indirect forms of engagement, highlighting a more passive yet consistent way of supporting SMIs within the New Zealand social media landscape.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Methods of Expressing Criticisms

Table 14

Codes contributing to the theme methods of expressing criticisms

Name	Description
Liking Critical Comments	Preferences for liking critical or negative comments rather than adding their written responses. Participants often like comments that critique SMI's actions or statements, especially when they find it morally wrong or misguided. However, they feel uncomfortable directly commenting, viewing it as inappropriate or unnecessary, and instead support existing critiques by liking them as a less confrontational way of expressing their feelings.
Reasons for Avoiding Commenting Criticisms	Avoid commenting on criticisms due to concerns about their digital footprint, cultural norms, and the perceived insignificance of their input. Many are cautious about the long-term impact on their online identity, particularly for job prospects. Cultural upbringing discourages open criticism of strangers, while the numerous existing comments make adding one feel redundant. Some even mentioned that the fear of being perceived negatively or mean influences their reluctance to comment.
Other Methods of Criticising SMIs (Word-of-mouth, Unfollowing, Blocking and Hiding content)	Alternative ways they engage with content or express criticism towards SMIs rather than directly commenting on posts, such as private messaging SMIs, discussing content with friends, unfollowing or blocking, reporting or hiding content or marking it as "not interested" to limit exposure to influencers they disagree with. These methods reflect a preference for avoiding confrontation or negative online interactions.
Moral Misalignment as a Trigger for Actions	Take action such as liking comments, word-of-mouth discussions, or unfollowing SMIs when they see their content or behaviour as morally wrong. Participants often avoid direct criticism but express discomfort by disengaging with the influencer or supporting others who voice objections. The decision to take action is influenced by a sense of moral alignment, with many participants feeling upset or disappointed when influencers act in ways that contradict their values or cultural upbringing.

Table 14 shows how participants express disapproval or criticism towards SMIs in New Zealand. Rather than directly confronting SMIs through commenting on their responses, participants often prefer indirect or passive critique methods. This theme will first cover the trend of preferring the method of liking critical or negative comments made by others rather than one's written responses. Second, it will cover the reasons participants avoid direct

commenting criticisms. Followed by explaining the other methods used to express criticisms towards SMIs, including liking word-of-mouth (WOM) criticism, hiding, unfollowing and blocking SMIs. Lastly, it will cover how moral boundaries influence participants' actions.

4.2.4.1 Liking Critical Comments

A common method participants used to express disagreement with SMIs was liking critical or negative comments made by others. Rather than writing their comments, participants often supported critiques they resonated with by liking them. This form of engagement allowed participants to express their stances subtly and socially accepted. For example, Dani stated, "I like the critique comments." This preference for liking existing comments allowed participants to criticise and express dissatisfaction towards SMIs without placing themselves at the centre of attention. Moreover, Summer shared similar thoughts, stating:

"I usually like, like, the hate comment. I feel like it's such a, like, harsh term to, like, call it, but like, usually it's when someone is, like, criticising the person that's made the video, or the video itself. And I again, it's like, oh, like, I read it, and I like, like facts, so I like it. yeah."

This reflects that participants are drawn towards supporting comments and critique comments that are posted by others to express their feelings and thoughts about the SMIs. This behaviour of showing criticism was common among the participants, as they were more likely to like critique comments posted by others. They relate to their thoughts and feelings and capture what they and others are thinking. Summer further shared that if a comment already had many likes, it is seen as more valid, making her more inclined to add likes to it to amplify its message rather than commenting themselves. This aligns with Noah's experience; he mentioned that with so many comments already posted, it felt "cringe" to repeat what had already been said, so instead, he preferred to show support by liking comments he agreed with as a way to contribute and share his criticism towards SMI.

In conclusion, participants prefer the indirect method of liking critical comments to express criticism towards SMIs. This allows them to share their view subtly and avoid confrontation. The volume of comments and social discomfort also influence this preference, highlighting how followers receive negative criticism in a socially acceptable and less confrontational manner.

4.2.4.2 Reasons for Avoiding Commenting Criticisms

Many participants express their preference for liking critical comments over posting their own. A recurring reason behind this reluctance was the concern over their digital footprint. Participants shared that commenting publicly exposed them, as their criticisms would be tied to their identities and visible to others, including the SMIs. For example, Taylor explained, “Because everyone can see it, yeah, the person can see it too.” Online actions’ visibility and traceability led participants to avoid direct engagement with critical content. Rather than commenting, liking a critique allows them to agree without drawing attention to themselves. As Taylor explained,

“If you comment on it, that’s your digital footprint. And everyone can see that you’ve commented on it. But if you like it, no one can see that you’ve liked it, unless you’re the author and it says, like by author.”

Rico resonated to this, stating, “No one can see that you like the hate comment.” Thus, participants could quietly show agreement with critical opinions without directly associating themselves with the negativity, minimising digital traceability.

Others also expressed increased awareness of the potential consequences of their digital footprint. For example, Dani shared that they only comment on TikTok due to the perceived anonymity, avoiding other platforms where their identity might be more easily traced:

“I comment on Tik Tok because your comment doesn’t get noticed or you can’t be identified that often. But like other apps, I tend not to comment. I think I have a thing about digital footprint. I’m just so conscious of it now.”

She explained that, as a marketing student, she is particularly mindful of how online comments might affect her future career. Dani described seeing inline examples where individuals who left negative comments were tracked down and publicly shamed, including having their comments sent to family members. This fear of potential repercussions has led her to avoid commenting critically altogether.

Overall, participants were highly conscious of how their online behaviour could follow them into the future. The fear of leaving a visible and lasting digital footprint discouraged them from posting critical comments. Instead, liking existing critiques offered a subtle, less traceable form of engagement that allowed them to express agreement without directly associating themselves with the criticism.

Another reason participants refrained from posting critical comments was due to their upbringing and cultural norms, which influenced their understanding of when and how criticism should be expressed. For some participants, criticism was seen as appropriate only within close relationships or specific interpersonal contexts rather than something to be openly directed at strangers online. Summer explained how her cultural background shaped the belief, stating, “In my culture, like, you’re not super vocal about, like, criticising just anyone.” She said this upbringing made her reluctant to criticise SMIs, saying, “Giving out criticism isn’t just like for me to do to anyone, like, that’s what I’ve been taught.” She further elaborates, “I can’t imagine myself going on there and commenting on messaging like criticising them for something that they would like they’re freely able to do on social media. And I think that’s because of the cultural upbringing.”

Similarly, Taylor attributed her hesitance to post criticism to her mother, who is cautious about the lasting implications of one’s digital footprint. She recalled being told by her mother that “having a digital footprint can, like, bite you in the bum, and so you need to be really careful about what you put online, or about yourself, or how you present yourself online.” Moreover, growing up in a small island community where personal actions were obvious contributed to her carefulness online. She explained, “People will bring up screenshots and all this stuff, and it’s just not necessary to have a negative digital footprint so I wouldn’t.” This combination of family guidance and community environment reinforced her decision to avoid posting criticism online.

Participants from collectivist cultures also shared these perspectives, particularly those that emphasise respect and community harmony. For example, Tom reflected on how his upbringing in Samoa shaped his online engagement, explaining that he was taught to communicate respectfully and avoid rudeness online, which made him less inclined to criticise SMIs publicly. Chase similarly explained that in Samoan culture, “learning what to say and not to say is really big in our culture and how to act. It’s like a reflection of your like

your family, how you were brought up.” This strong cultural focus on respectful communication and the importance of family reputation played a key role in shaping participants’ decisions not to post criticism online. Thus, these insights highlight how cultural values and upbringing shaped participants’ reluctance to engage in online criticism.

Furthermore, many participants chose not to post critical comments themselves. Instead, they preferred to like existing critiques made by others due to the perceived insignificance of their contribution in the face of a considerable amount of online feedback. The overwhelming number of comments on SMI’s posts led some to feel that their voices would simply get lost. For example, Lily explained, “If there’s already so many comments, I’m like, what’s one more gonna do?” She elaborated further, stating, “There’s already, like, 30 something or so many that I’m like, Okay, I comment one thing, like, doesn’t get noticed.”

Similarly, Wyatt shared a comparable feeling, stating he avoids writing comments because “even if I comment, the influencer won’t notice it. I just don’t bothered.” This perceived lack of acknowledgement from SMIs, combined with the saturation of comments, reduces their motivation to express critical thoughts actively.

Noah explained the experience of commenting to being “just a drop in the ocean,” reflecting a greater sense of redundancy. He mentioned that with “1000s and 1000s of comments,” his input would blend into the background. Instead, he preferred to support comments that had already gained visibility through likes, “There was like, a few that had like, a lot of support, like a lot of likes behind them. And I was like, sweet. I can just add that number and make it a little big.” This approach allowed him to agree without contributing additional comments that might go unnoticed.

Other participants also felt that posting their critique was repetitive or unnecessary, especially when their views were already well-represented. For example, Summer explained that she often checks the comments sections and sees that “most people feel the same way,” which reassures her that her opinions are shared and do not need to be restated. Lara also shared similar ideas, stating,

“I just feel like it’s insignificant. Like, just my one comment, like, like, what Sam just said? Like, it’s not gonna like, your one little comment won’t even change the world.

Like, yeah, even if you comment that, people will just like it and just see it and it's like, it won't really have any effect whatsoever."

Thus, insights reflect how online comments' perceived invisibility and repetitiveness contributed to participants' reluctance to post critical comments themselves. Participants' reluctance to post critical comments stemmed from concerns about their digital footprint, cultural and family values discouraging public criticism, and a sense of insignificance due to the excessive volume of online feedback. Instead, many prefer to engage passively by liking existing critiques, allowing them to express agreement without drawing attention to themselves or repeating what had already been mentioned.

4.2.4.3 Other Methods of Criticising SMIs (Word-of-Mouth, Unfollowing, Blocking and Hiding content)

While participants expressed reluctance to comment their criticism directly towards SMIs, they shared alternative ways that they used to express disagreement and disapproval towards SMIs. Some participants choose a more private channel, such as direct messaging, to communicate their concerns or offer feedback to SMIs. This approach allowed them to voice disagreement in a less confrontational and more personal manner. For example, Rico shared that although he initially commented on a post to address an error in a circuit board design made by the SMIs, the conversation eventually moved into private messages, allowing a more constructive dialogue, as the SMI acknowledged the mistakes, shared an updated version, and received further advice. The participant mentioned, "Then I gave him a bit of advice on that, and then it was hunky dory." This example highlights how participants may choose to private message SMIs to express their disagreements over public disapproval, as it provides a more effective and comfortable space for critical engagement.

Moreover, another popular method of expressing criticism towards SMIs among participants was through WOM communication. Nearly all participants preferred discussing their disapproval in casual conversations with friends and family rather than directly engaging with SMIs. This approach allows individuals to voice their opinions while avoiding public confrontation. For example, Taylor reflected this by stating,

“Yeah, just talking with my friends, rather than, rather than commenting or not, or, like, something like that, I just or messaging them. I just, if I, like, feel the need to, I just yeah, talk to my friends about it.”

Similarly, Wade mentioned, “I’ve had a few conversations with my friends, and just see what they thought and aligns with, like, what other people are commenting on the post, saying, like, oh. Like they’re completely wrong and stuff.” These conversations were often informal, occurring spontaneously in person or via group chats. Kevin said, “Me and the boys might talk about it or something. I think like we just would chat about it, but never really goes anywhere after that.” This passive nature of WOM criticism is echoed by Lily, who shared, “I’d send it to a friend and be like, What the heck is this? And then just leave it as that.” Rather than aiming to prompt a change in SMIs’ behaviour, such interactions often served as a form of emotional release or shared reflection. Lara explained, “Yeah, verbally, for sure, sometimes sharing it to my friends, or like, oh, I don’t really like the way, like, this person’s like, you know, why is he saying that?” This reliance on WOM highlights participants’ preference for an indirect form of critique, allowing them to process their reactions in a socially safe and familiar environment. It also suggests that such discourse may serve a regulatory function, helping participants manage their emotional responses and make sense of online content through conversation with others.

In addition to verbal and interpersonal expressions of criticism, participants reported engaging in passive digital strategies to manage their exposure to content they found disagreeable. These strategies included hiding content, selecting “not interested” options, unfollowing and blocking SMIs, and sometimes reporting the content to the platform. Such actions reflect a preference for avoiding confrontation while maintaining control over their media environment. For example, Summer explained, “I’ll usually just click the option where it hides it from my story, and I it reduces like it coming up again, or like stuff from that influencer.” Similarly, Libby expressed,

“If there’s anything that doesn’t align with me, I would say that Instagram, or anything like that, or even on TikTok, I’d unfollow or just say, not interested. I think that’s my only way I just get off my own feed.”

These views echo Kevin, who stated, “If I don’t want to see the content, I’ll just unfollow them too,” Chase added that unfollowing was a way to protect his wellbeing. Some participants took stronger measures, including blocking or reporting the SMIs. Tom explained that he would go as far as unfollowing SMIs and blocking them, while Wau mentioned, “If I get really, like, heated, I’ll report the video and stuff for like, hate speech and bullying.” These actions illustrate participants’ tendency to disengage quietly while reinforcing their autonomy over the digital content they consume.

Overall, participants preferred indirect and non-confrontational methods of expressing criticism towards SMIs. Whether through private messaging, WOM conversations with family and friends, or passive digital actions such as hiding, unfollowing, or reporting content, these strategies allowed participants to voice disapproval while maintaining personal comfort and emotional safety.

4.2.4.4 Moral Misalignment as a Trigger for Actions

Participants consistently expressed that they are likely to take actions, such as unfollowing, liking critical comments, or engaging in private discussions, when an SMI posts content they perceive as morally inappropriate. Perceived moral violations often served as a clear trigger for disengagement or indirect criticism. For example, Noah explained,

“It was just so wrong, and, like, hate spreading, or, like, cruel I just remember being, I don’t think I commented or anything. I remember like, spamming likes the where all like, don’t ever post this again, like, that kind of stuff.”

Similarly, Wade Sern shared that he unfollowed several Malaysian Influencers involved in a cheating scandal, as their actions conflicted with his moral values. Moreover, Emma also said that she had disengaged from several New Zealand-based SMIs after discovering they had broken the COVID-19 restrictions, such as attending and hosting parties during lockdown. These examples suggest that participants often avoid confrontation but intentionally disengage, driven by a strong moral alignment.

Some SMIs attributed their moral standards to cultural upbringings, which shaped their responses to SMIs’ behaviour. As Noah reflected, “I do believe, like, my culture, what my

parents played a part in my morals, like, so yeah, that's probably the way that it would that would influence how I criticise."

However, not all participants chose to act, and some preferred to disengage passively by ignoring morally questionable content. Lily shared, "If they want to be morally wrong and what they're doing or they want to say something that doesn't sit well with me, then I'd rather just put it out of sight, out of mind."

Overall, moral misalignment emerged as a significant determinant of participants' engagement with SMIs. While the majority choose to disengage, actively or passively, when confronted with content that violated their ethical standards, their responses were shaped by deeply rooted personal values.

4.2.5 Theme 5: What Drives Criticisms Towards SMIs

Table 15

Codes contributing to the theme what drives criticisms towards SMIs

Name	Description
New Zealand's Culture of Humility Is Leading to SMIs Getting Criticised	New Zealand's cultural value of humility influences the criticism of SMIs. Participants said that in New Zealand, there is an expectation to "stay humble" and avoid flaunting wealth or success. SMIs who display luxury items or achievements risk being seen as "too flashy" and face backlash. This reflects the cultural emphasis on modesty, where excessive displays of success are often criticised, especially when perceived as out of sync with New Zealand's egalitarian values.
Criticisms Driven by Envy	Negative comments toward SMIs often stem from jealousy or insecurity. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds criticise SMIs out of envy over their success, lifestyle, or material possessions, such as buying property or receiving free products. Many participants noted that this envy leads to criticism, with individuals projecting their frustrations and inadequacies onto the influencer.
Negative Perceptions of New Zealand SMIs	Being an SMI is "easy money," with influencers earning less than their overseas counterparts. Anyone can become an influencer and do not consider SMIs a "real job." Their rapid fame on social media is seen as underserved compared to traditional careers. There is also doubt about the effectiveness of New Zealand SMIs in marketing, with their influence perceived as limited to New Zealand and not extending internationally.
Criticisms as an Inherent Aspect of SMIs' Role	Criticism is a part of being a SMI, with negative feedback often amplified by the public and anonymous nature of online platforms. Despite being unfair, they view it as an inherent aspect of the role, similar to other jobs where positive and negative feedback must be managed.
SMIs in New Zealand Who Do Too Many Ads Will Feel Disingenuous	Negative perceptions of New Zealand SMIs who over-commercialise their content. They express discomfort or disappointment when influencers prioritise brand deals and advertisements, which can make their content seem inauthentic or overly sales-driven. This shift towards frequent promotions leads some followers to feel that the influencer is being disingenuous, undermining their original appeal.
Other Reasons That Drive Criticisms Toward SMIs in New Zealand	Other significant factors contributing to a backlash against SMIs include attention-seeking behaviour, where individuals criticise SMIs for amusement or to attract attention, and the desire for social validation, where negativity serves to bond with others. Additionally, when SMIs express opinions on sensitive or complex issues without sufficient understanding, they are often seen as irresponsible, leading to heightened criticism.
Positive Perception of New Zealand SMI	Several positive perceptions of New Zealand SMIs were noted, including their relatability and humility. Participants highlighted that New Zealand SMIs are often seen as more down-to-earth than international influencers and regularly express gratitude toward their followers. These qualities contribute to helping New Zealand SMIs mitigate potential criticism.

This theme covers the factors contributing to public criticism of SMIs in New Zealand, as shown in Table 15. A key motivator identified by participants is the cultural value of humility, which shapes public criticism of SMIs, particularly when they display success or wealth. Envy also plays a significant role, as when individuals compare themselves with SMIs, they may experience feelings of inadequacy and resentment. Furthermore, participants highlighted negative perceptions, such as the belief that influencing is not a legitimate career, further fueling criticism of SMIs. Another driver of criticism is the widespread belief that receiving criticism is inherent to the SMI's role, normalising it, which in turn increases criticisms. Moreover, this theme addresses how over-commercialisation can affect the perceived authenticity of SMIs and fuel further scrutiny. Additionally, it addresses how audiences' attention-seeking behaviour, desire for social validation, and SMIs expressing opinions on sensitive topics all contribute to the likelihood of them receiving criticism. Lastly, some participants acknowledged positive perceptions of SMIs, such as their relatability and humility compared to SMIs overseas, which can help mitigate some of the criticisms directed towards them.

4.2.5.1 New Zealand's Culture of Humility Is Leading to SMIs Getting Criticised

Across the focus groups, participants consistently pointed out that New Zealand's cultural emphasis on humility significantly drives criticism towards SMIs. Individuals who overly display success or material wealth often attract backlash, especially when SMIs are perceived as "showing off" or engaging in self-promotion. This response appears rooted in a broader societal expectation that people remain grounded and modest, even when they achieve significant achievements.

For example, Kevin stated, "It's pretty bigger here being, like, being humble. I guess if you're shining a bit too much that like, it's the dim a bit." His comment reflects that humility is highly valued in New Zealand, and people are often expected to downplay their accomplishments to avoid paying too much attention to themselves.

Similarly, Summer echoed these thoughts, saying people are encouraged to "just downplay it. Like, don't make a big deal about it." She added that even when achievements are acknowledged, they are often quickly dismissed, "Instead of just congratulating them, it's

like, oh, cool, let's move on." These responses reflect a deep-rooted discomfort with self-promotion, where recognition is subtly dismissed rather than celebrated.

This cultural discomfort becomes especially significant when SMIs share posts about personal success or material possessions. Wade described how such content could come off as overly flashy, stating, "Feel like just got a new wip. Check this out. I'm like ayyy shut up." Kevin agreed, saying, "If you're like, diamonds and stuff all over your body, or you're showing off, like, new Lamborghini or like big as house, you'd be like, yo chill out. Like, it's not that serious." While the occasional display of success might be tolerated, repeated or excessive self-promotion tends to generate frustration. Kevin agreed, saying, "If you're like, diamonds and stuff all over your body, or you're showing off, like, new Lamborghini or like big as house, you'd be like, Yo chill out. Like, it's not that serious." While the occasional display of success might be tolerated, repeated or excessive self-promotion generates frustration. As Kevin mentioned, "It cool for one time, but if you do it, like, 10 times in a row, it's like, Yo, Like, chill out."

This expectation of modesty was seen as even more pronounced within Māori and Pasifika communities. Wade observed,

"Within like Islander and Māori culture, especially if you see like someone again who's the same as you, they like have this be humble attitude. Like, why you guys like showing off your flash cars and stuff, just keep it on the low and be humble, I guess."

He acknowledged that while success deserves recognition, there is often pressure to stay discreet about it. However, several participants felt the criticism SMIs receive could be excessive or unfair, particularly when celebrating milestones or showing pride in their work. Sam recalled backlash directed at well-known SMI Jimmy Jackson after he called himself "One of the biggest social media influencers in New Zealand." He said, "The comment section was, like, fuck off, like, like, like, literally, like, shitting all over him." Despite Jimmy's established status, his self-identification triggered hostility, highlighting New Zealand's cultural discomfort with self-promotion.

Several participants also mentioned that expressions of gratitude could help mitigate criticism. Lily said, "Are they saying, like, yeah, thanks so much. Like, are they, like,

appreciating their followers, their fans?” Demonstrating appreciation and humility was seen as a way for SMIs to stay relatable and reduce backlash when sharing success.

These findings reveal that New Zealand’s strong cultural value of humility can lead to intense and harsh criticism towards SMI. In trying to celebrate their achievements, SMIs risk being “cut down” for simply sharing their successes. Thus, humility shapes how success is communicated and drives much of the criticism SMIs face in New Zealand.

4.2.5.2 Criticisms Driven by Envy

Envy was another major issue that led to criticism of SMIs. Across the focus group, participants frequently reflected on how seeing SMIs, particularly those who shared similar demographics, such as age, background, or cultural identity, achieve visible success often triggered feelings of self-comparison, inadequacy, and resentment. This emotional response was deeply intertwined with perceptions of fairness and the accessibility of success.

For example, Lily revealed that following SMIs close to her age often evoked a sense of falling behind. She admitted, “Looking at what they’re doing with their lives and being like, I should be there. I should be doing that.” Similarly, Wade highlighted how individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may experience discomfort when witnessing people from similar communities achieve success. He described the inner conflict as, “Oh, he didn’t deserve to get up there,” followed by a personal sense of disappointment, “I should have been up there.” These reflections suggest that when followers see people who feel “just like them” succeed, it intensifies social comparison and heightens feelings of envy.

Participants also pointed out that one’s stage of life can influence how envy manifests. Lily elaborated:

“There’s always going to be a little bit of jealousy, depending where your position in life is, and so if you’re lower on the food chain of developing your life, and someone else, as an influencer is 20, just bought their own apartment, doing this thing, and I’m here, just like, throwing my money away at uni.”

Her reflection reveals how SMIs’ achievements can prompt followers to question their life progressions, speaking envy and frustration. Wyatt echoed this, stating, “It’s jealousy, people

will be thinking, Oh, why? Why is it not me that gonna make some money?” Rico added that such thoughts often evolve into a defensive reaction, “I should have done that,” followed by a desire to “Take them down.” These insights illustrate the psychological process of upward social comparison, where people compare themselves to those they perceive as doing better, which can lead to a tendency to criticise or diminish those individuals.

Beyond personal success, participants also highlighted envy stemming from the material and lifestyle advantages of being an SMI. Receiving free products, owning property, or enjoying a flexible lifestyle, privileges not commonly accessible to the average follower, amplified feelings of envy. For example, Taylor referenced an SMI, Helen Koumakis, who faced backlash after sharing that she had purchased a house; she said,

“They don’t want her to succeed. And she recently, like, posted a video about her buying a house, like she’s a homeowner now. And the comments on that were like, Oh, you’re like, all your saving, all your conversations about budgeting and stuff, how are you now buying a house, like, all the stuff. Instead of being like, Oh, congratulations.”

This illustrates how visible success can provoke questions and criticism, particularly when audiences perceive a mismatch between SMI’s prior narratives and their current achievements.

Lily also reflected on the envy triggered by SMIs receiving free products; she shared, “I know a lot of influencers that get all this, like free makeup products, and I’m sitting there, like trying to work, trying to get that myself, and they’re just getting given it.” Similarly, Dani mentioned how SMIs’ freedom to dictate their schedules contrasted with the strict nine-to-five routine many people navigate, which she believes contributed to feelings of envy.

These reflections suggest that envy is a significant emotional driver of criticism. When audiences perceive SMIs as living easier, more rewarding lives, especially when these SMIs appear relatable or “just like them,” it can evoke strong feelings of jealousy. This envy often fuels critical responses through dismissive comments, harsh judgements, or outright hostility.

4.2.5.3 Negative Perceptions of New Zealand SMIs

A major factor that fuels criticism toward SMIs in New Zealand is the dominance of negative perceptions surrounding their profession. These perceptions, which often reflect broader societal values, shape how SMIs are evaluated and treated. A recurring theme among participants was the belief that influencing is not a “real job” and is often seen as requiring minimal skill and effort.

For example, Noah thinks that the idea of SMIs is still very new in New Zealand, which he thinks contributes to this perspective that SMIs are not recognised as serious work. He also openly admitted that he initially did not consider influencing hard work, stating, “Honestly, I didn’t think like it was hard work to begin with. I was like, it’s like very like, they kind of cracked it, you know, I got very lucky.” He critiqued the nature of SMI content as superficial and unworthy of professional recognition, questioning the legitimacy of their income and expressing disbelief that people could achieve financial success through content, such as venting online.

Other participants echoed similar thoughts. For example, Sam distinguished SMIs from traditional celebrities, explaining,

“Celebrities are usually like TV personalities or actors or musicians, and so it’s like they’re entertaining you because you like what they deliver on and because that’s a broad scale, but like an influencer could be someone talking shit in their basement.”

He went on to question whether such individuals should be rewarded with fame or income, “Is that talented, like, should you get recognition for talking shit online?” Sam also voiced frustration about the perceived ease of content creation, comparing it to more traditional entertainment careers that demand training and live performance. He stated:

“Most influencers are like, I can’t believe I get paid to make videos. Like, making a video on your phone or doing edits on your phone is not the same as having to spend like, six months on a photo shoot, I mean, on a on a movie, and acting like, and then, or if you’re a singer, like, go and go and sing on stages in front of 1000s or hundreds of 1000s of people.”

From his perspective, the ability to self-edit and create content without formal technical skills undermines the value of SMI work. Lara added that SMIs who rise through causal, unfiltered content often give off the impression that what they do is easy. While she acknowledges that many SMIs put in considerable effort, she believes this labour is often invisible or unacknowledged by audiences.

Noah also reflected on the cultural lens through which he views influencing, described himself as a “hater” and attributed his stance to his upbringing. He explained that he was raised in an environment that emphasised traditional pathways to success, such as pursuing higher education and gradual career progression through effort and perseverance. This cultural lens shaped his scepticism towards SMIs, especially younger ones who achieve rapid fame and success online. He reflected:

“When you see like creators, like super young ones, especially, like, just crack it, and then they’re like, meeting, like artists or sports personalities that you follow, it’s just very much like, what the hell like me, I’ve worked so hard to get to a point where I feel like these guys are, like, young as living my best life, you know, like, and this, and you can’t help them feel that like, oh, like, it’s unfair.”

Other participants shared this sense of unfairness and resentment. For example, Kevin referred to influencing as “easy money” and expressed frustration at the speed with which some SMIs achieve success. He mentioned, “If you see someone get money that fast, that easy, it’s just like, Well, yeah, I kind of want that too. If they can get there that fast, why can’t I?”

Similarly, Summer mentioned that social media had created a much faster pathway to fame, which can amplify negative perceptions of the profession. While she recognised that many SMIs work hard behind the scenes, the speed of their fame often creates the illusion that little effort is involved.

Another recurring critique centred on the perceived lack of influence and reach among New Zealand-based SMIs, particularly compared to their international peers. Kevin stated that local SMIs are “not as impactful,” suggesting that even those with a more significant

following do not seem to command the same level of respect or financial success as overseas SMIs. Taylor shared similar thoughts, saying:

“Even if they have a huge amount of following like, because they’re from New Zealand, they’re just not as big like, because the States is like the States and the New Zealand is like New Zealand even it just doesn’t like compare.”

Wyatt also doubts local SMIs’ ability to influence beyond the country’s borders, reinforcing that their visibility is limited to the New Zealand market. This was further emphasised Summer, who observed that encountering a local SMI in real life does not carry the same weight as this suggests that New Zealand SMIs may not have the same global recognition as those from larger markets.

Summer also pointed out how SMIs are perceived in real life, contrasting local SMIs with international ones. She reflected,

“If you do see them in person, it’s not like they’re celeb or like they don’t have the same kind of effect that maybe an influencer in the America was and like, people aren’t going to go up to them.”

These negative perceptions also shaped participants’ attitudes toward using SMIs in marketing. Noah, who works in marketing, confessed that he was initially sceptical about the value of influencer marketing in New Zealand. He explained:

“I took me, like, a long time to kind of get my head around them. I just generally didn’t think that they were as impactful as they are, like overseas, I think in New Zealand, especially, like the way they kind of use now they want, the way they make money is by having a following and then often, like partnering with brands. However, just in New Zealand, like live shopping and like influencer marketing isn’t as big as it is overseas.”

Overall, these responses highlight how negative perceptions of SMIs regarding the legitimacy of their work, the perceived ease of their success, and their limited market impact fuel criticism towards SMIs in New Zealand. These perceptions influence how SMIs are viewed

by the public and shape professional attitudes, creating further barriers to recognition and acceptance within the country.

4.2.5.4 Criticisms as an Inherent Aspect of SMIs' Role

Another factor driving criticism towards SMIs in New Zealand is the widespread perception that criticism is an inherent part of the SMIs' role. Participants frequently expressed the belief that criticism is not just likely but expected, particularly as SMI gain visibility and success. This normalisation of backlash contributes to a broader acceptance of public negativity, reinforcing that SMIs are fair targets for criticism.

For example, Noah acknowledged that negativity is “just part of it,” explaining that SMIs often cope by weighting their positive and negative feedback. As long as the support outweighs the hate, they tend to manage. This perspective reflects how criticism is not viewed as an exception but rather as an expected component of the SMI experience.

Similarly, Lily echoed this thought, stating that criticisms “comes a bit with the role.” While she acknowledges that the volume of negativity can be unfair, mainly due to the anonymity social media provides, she believes it is one of the trade-offs of the job; she stated:

“It’s like looking at the pros and cons of a job. Like the pros are you get to be in front of a spot, or you get to do all this fun stuff, go brand deals, this at the other but there is always going to be that downfall of, you’re at risk of getting hate. You’re at risk of people not liking who you are.”

This perspective reflects the normalised consequence of public exposure. However, participants also pointed out that the digital environments amplify this criticism. Lily stated that social media allows for anonymous and unfiltered comments that people may not express in person, unlike traditional customer-facing jobs, such as retail. Moreover, Noah also mentioned that while envy or resentment of someone’s achievement exists in other professions, it is often kept private and subtle. In contrast, SMIs are subjected to anonymous criticism and public feedback that can escalate quickly, as he explained, “Versus a creator, for example, like when the comment could be anonymous or whatever, and that could just snowball, and it’s it’s way more the adversities to success are way more public.”

These insights reveal how criticism is expected and intensified for SMIs as an unvalidatable part of the role. This normalisation reinforces the belief that criticism is inherent to what SMIs do, making it a key factor driving criticism towards them.

4.2.5.5 SMIs in New Zealand Who Do Too Many Ads Will Feel Disingenuous

Another factor driving criticism towards SMIs in New Zealand is the perception that they become disingenuous when they engage in excessive advertising. Participants consistently highlighted how shifting from authentic, engaging content to frequent brand promotions can negatively affect how SMIs are perceived. While followers may initially be drawn to an SMI for their relatable or entertaining content, this connection often weakens when content becomes overly commercialised.

For example, Noah shared that he initially followed certain SMIs for their high-quality content but later felt “a bit cringe” as their pages increasingly focused on selling products. He described the shift as giving off “sleazy kind of vibes.” Thus, their presence felt disingenuous and left him uncertain about continuing to support them. Similarly, Taylor recalled how she and her peer criticised an SMI who promoted a Samsung phone despite using an iPhone in previous posts. This inconsistency led them to question the influencer’s honesty, with Taylor stating it felt like she was “lying to the audience.” This perception of dishonesty reinforced the belief that the endorsement was financially motivated rather than based on genuine interest.

These examples highlight how perceived inauthenticity, particularly when linked to over-commercialisation, can erode trust and increase criticism. When followers feel that SMIs are no longer transparent or relatable, their credibility suffers, ultimately fuelling public scepticism and backlash.

4.2.5.6 Other Reasons That Drive Criticisms Toward SMIs in New Zealand

In addition to the reasons previously discussed, participants identified other factors contributing to the criticism of SMIs in New Zealand. One key theme that emerged is that the criticism is often less about the SMIs themselves and more about the behaviours and motivations of their audiences. Specifically, participants mentioned that many individuals

criticise SMIs for fun, attention, or social validation. Social media platforms often amplify these behaviours, providing a space where negative opinions are shared and, in some cases, perceived as entertaining or social bonding. For example, Rico pointed out that some individuals “Trash on someone just because funny or fun, and send it to your friends, and then they join in, and then it gets into big kerfuffle.” This statement reveals how criticism can spiral into a larger scale, creating a cycle of negativity that targets SMIs not for their actions but as subjects for online entertainment.

Furthermore, Chase elaborated on this idea, suggesting that attention-seeking behaviour is a key motivator for criticism. He explains that when an SMI posts an achievement and receives much positive feedback, there is often one individual who seeks to disrupt this harmony, stating:

“If everyone is doing it, like one person just, like, kind of wants to be different. So, like, they just want that, all that attention, so that people can, like, you know, like, response back, you know, like, like, create that negativity and that tension, because they get up, like, you know, thirst for that like, attention, like, of, like, people, like, replying back, negativity.”

This implies that some individuals criticise SMIs not out of genuine disagreement or concern but to disrupt the exchange of attention and social engagement. This tendency to seek out negativity for attention illustrates how social media interactions often prioritise the amplification of opposite opinions over constructive conversation. Tom agrees, adding that many criticisms directed at SMIs are driven by attention-seeking behaviour, even when the critic lacks a genuine understanding of the SMI’s content. He explained, “It’s all a lot of the time I see that people seeking attention even though they don’t disagree or have any knowledge about what the influencer is talking about.” This observation suggests that criticism is not always rooted in informed judgment or disagreement but rather in a desire to generate visibility and provoke engagement through controversy.

Some participants also offered an additional perspective, suggesting that criticism can also serve as a means of forming social connections. She explained, “Along with the attention seeking, finding something that connects them to other people, using that, like that sort of complaining or negativity, finds, finds them a connection with other people that may feel that

way.” This viewpoint highlights the role of social media as a platform for establishing community, and some people use negative comments to find connections with others. Thus, these findings suggest that the audience’s attention-seeking behaviour can drive criticism of SMIs in New Zealand and the desire for social validation and connection.

Another common reason SMIs face backlash in New Zealand is when they express opinions they are seen as unqualified to make or culturally insensitive. Several participants pointed out that while SMIs are entitled to their opinions, the public often questions their credibility when they speak on complex or sensitive topics. For example, Wade explained, “They’re allowed to have a political opinion, but people think they’re unqualified to have like that sort of opinion, especially since they make videos.” This comment reflects a broader societal expectation that individuals who speak publicly, particularly on political or controversial issues, should possess a certain level of expertise. Since SMIs are often perceived as entertainers, audiences may struggle to take their political or critical comments seriously, resulting in scepticism and criticism.

Taylor shared similar views, expanding beyond politics: “Even a controversial opinion, not even like could be like anything that just goes against the like norm.” These suggest that when SMIs challenge widely accepted social norms without demonstrating sufficient knowledge or understanding, they may prompt audiences to criticise them.

Moreover, participants observed that criticism tends to intensify when SMIs comment on issues they appear to lack cultural awareness or understanding of. Wade noted, “Seen a few videos where people, like, just completely uneducated about a certain topic, especially like when it comes to like cultural things, or like traditions and there.” Taylor reinforced this by sharing that if an SMI makes an uninformed statement about culture, she would feel justified in criticising them. These examples suggest that when SMIs speak on sensitive cultural or political matters without adequate understanding, they risk being seen as irresponsible, prompting intense backlash from audiences.

These findings suggest that audience motivations, including attention-seeking behaviour, the desire for social validation and connections with others through negativity, drive criticism of SMIs in New Zealand. Additionally, when SMIs express opinions on sensitive or complex

issues without adequate understanding, they risk being seen as irresponsible, causing more substantial backlash from their audience.

4.2.5.7 Positive Perception of New Zealand SMI

While many factors drive criticism towards SMIs, participants also mentioned positive perceptions of New Zealand SMIs that help mitigate such criticism and foster stronger connections with their audiences. Unlike some SMIs who may come across as distant or superior, participants express that New Zealand SMIs are often more relatable and down-to-earth. Participants feel they are engaging with SMIs who are accessible rather than someone above them. Summer explained, “It’s very next door neighbor kind of vibe, except you see them on your screen,” highlighting the approachable nature of New Zealand SMIs. This resonated with Rico, who shared that he actually loves seeing New Zealand people make content as he shared, “I just find it. I feel like their style is, like, more relatable and more like I feel like they do have a humbleness about them usually. Yeah, quite down to earth.” Moreover, Wade mentioned that New Zealand SMIs frequently express gratitude towards their followers when they are achieving success. He explained, “When I typically see, like, New Zealand influencers like showing like, what they’ve earned and stuff they’re like, also blessed to have, like, thankful to my followers.” This humility contrasts with some overseas SMIs, particularly those from the United States, who may not always express such appreciation. These behaviours reflect a cultural tendency in New Zealand to remain humble and relatable, which helps prevent the criticism often associated with perceived arrogance in the SMI culture.

In conclusion, while SMIs often face criticism for various reasons, the positive perception surrounding them demonstrates how certain behaviours can help minimise backlash and foster stronger, more authentic connections with followers. Remaining relatable, humble and openly grateful for their audiences’ support can help New Zealand SMIs mitigate potential criticism.

4.2.6 Theme 6: How SMIs Handle Criticisms

Table 16

Codes contributing to the theme how SMIs handle criticisms

Name	Description
How Does Criticism Impact SMIs	There is a varied view on how criticism impacts SMIs. While some expressed disregard, especially when the participants have no personal connection with SMIs, others recognised the significant distress it can take on an SMI's mental health, self-esteem, and content decisions. Criticism, especially from strangers or close contacts, can significantly affect SMIs, leading to self-doubt and imposter syndrome, as negative feedback from friends or family feels more personal and harder to handle. Emerging SMIs were seen as more vulnerable to the emotional impact of criticism, with participants expressing greater empathy for them. Criticism could also influence SMIs' behaviour, such as changes in their content strategy. Indirect consequences were also identified, such as criticism could spread through social networks, amplifying its effect on an SMI's reputation and authenticity.
How New Zealand SMIs Handle Criticisms	SMIs handle criticism by viewing hate as engagement, adjusting their content, engaging in rage baiting, showing vulnerability, using humour to address negative comments, or choosing to ignore, delete, or turn off comments. Some influencers discuss criticism on podcasts, while some SMIs find validation in financial success. Others confront negativity directly or allow their follower to defend them, and some take social media breaks.

Table 16 illustrates the theme that explores followers' perceptions of how SMIs respond to criticism and negative feedback. Participants reflected on the emotional impact criticism may have on SMIs, particularly when it comes from people they know and when it appears jealousy-driven. There was a recognition that criticism can lead to self-doubt, anxiety, or a shift in content to please audiences. The theme also captures how New Zealand-based SMIs are seen to manage criticism, including internal strategies, such as cognitive reframing, self-validation, and viewing criticism as constructive feedback. Externally, SMIs were perceived to express vulnerability, use humour, directly confront critics, block users, ignore and delete

comments, and even take breaks from social media. Some were also believed to provoke criticism to boast engagement strategically. These responses highlight the diverse and intentional ways SMIs manage criticism to preserve their emotional wellbeing, maintain credibility, and sustain audience engagement.

4.2.6.1 How Does Criticism Impact SMIs

Participants expressed complex views on how their criticism affects SMIs, often acknowledging emotional and professional consequences. While some participants distanced themselves from responsibility, others demonstrated empathy and a deeper understanding of how criticism could influence an SMI's mental health, self-perceptions and content decisions. Some participants showed indifference toward the potential impact of their criticism, particularly when there was no personal connection with the SMIs. For example, Kevin shared, "I generally couldn't care less. I don't even know them, to be honest." He explained that knowing the SMIs might make him feel more cautious or guilty about criticising them. However, without a personal relationship, he felt less concerned. This sense of detachment illustrates how the lack of familiarity and anonymity reduces the perceived emotional consequences of criticism on SMIs.

In contrast, participants were generally more sensitive when considering criticism directed at smaller or emerging SMIs. Lily expressed concern over the vulnerability of newer SMIs, explaining,

"If they are starting out, and they all of a sudden get hate, and it's not over something that's morally wrong, I feel like, I personally would feel kind of guilty because they're trying their best to be themselves."

Similarly, Dani shared that she would avoid engaging with harmful content directed at smaller SMIs, stating she would not even like negative comments posted about them. However, when it comes to well-known SMIs, she stated, "Bigger influencer, it's okay, because they won't notice." These perspectives reveal a recurring belief that emerging SMIs are more emotionally vulnerable to criticism, leading participants to exercise greater caution. Several participants also shared a strong belief that criticism from close friends or family has a more significant emotional impact on SMIs than criticism from strangers. Participants felt

that when negative feedback comes from those who personally know the SMIs, especially individuals who have been part of their journey, it feels less like constructive feedback and more like betrayal. Wade explained that such criticism carries more weight, as SMIs typically expect emotional support from those closest to them. Lily echoed this, stating:

“Your worst criticisms are the ones you know. And so if someone comes on and it’s like someone you’ve known from, like, back in high school, or it’s a family member, or if it’s a close friend, I feel like that’s when the criticism burns.”

Thus, the emotional closeness of the critic makes the feedback more difficult to dismiss, potentially undermining the SMI’s confidence.

Many participants also acknowledged the psychological toll that criticism can take on SMIs. Lara highlighted how public reactions, such as negative comments, unfollowing, and shared content, can make SMIs feel like people are “talking behind their backs.” She elaborated:

“It probably could have an impact, for sure. Because, you know, like, online is quite scary, if you think about it, and people have a lot of opinions, so just make them, you know, to just deteriorate their mental health.”

She further explained that the act of sharing content could increase anxiety and self-doubt for SMIs, making them question whether people mock or criticise them rather than support them. This concern was echoed by Chase, who believed that such feedback could lead to self-doubt and internal conflict. He explained, “I feel like, yeah, just like them receiving that criticism can affect them in terms of how they view themselves and how they can progress and it gives them doubt.” Similarly, Summer pointed out that receiving backlash despite working hard could result in imposter syndrome, stating, “If they are doing somewhat well for a New Zealand influencer, but they are, like, they getting hate, and personally, they could create this feeling of like, imposter syndrome.” Emma also mentioned that these experiences can shift SMIs’ motivation, stating, “It influences their mental health because they’re not doing it for the fun of it anymore.” Collectively, these reflections reveal that participants perceive criticism as having the potential to impact SMIs’ mental health and self-esteem seriously.

Beyond emotional distress, participants also recognised that criticism could influence an SMI's behaviour and content strategy. For example, Dani suggested that criticism serves as a reality check, stating it can “keeps them humble.” Chase further observed, “It kind of puts a lot of pressure on them, like, to sort of change their content and just like, yeah, it does affect, like, how they perform.” Tom shared a similar view, expressing concern that persistent criticism could lead some SMIs to quit entirely. Emma added that this external pressure and criticism could lead to SMIs turning away from making content they enjoy and instead focusing on what is publicly liked, affecting their authentic voice.

Finally, participants also mentioned the indirect consequences of criticism. Wyatt reflected on how his negative WOM could influence others, mentioning that while his comments might not affect the SMI directly, they “lead to my friends unfollowing the influencer as well.” This demonstrates how criticism can spread through social networks, increasing its effect on the audience and perceived credibility of an SMI.

Participants revealed complex perspectives on how their criticism impacts SMIs, acknowledging emotional and behavioural consequences. While some distanced themselves from responsibility, others recognised the psychological distress, especially for emerging SMIs or when criticism comes from familiar sources. These insights highlight how direct or indirect criticism can affect SMIs' mental health, content strategies, and perceived authenticity.

4.2.6.2 How New Zealand SMIs Handle Criticisms

Participants identified a wide range of coping mechanisms that New Zealand SMIs employ in response to criticism. These strategies encompassed both internal and cognitive reframing processes and externally visible behaviours, reflecting how SMIs manage online negativity while maintaining their presence.

A typical internal strategy mentioned by participants was the reinterpretation of criticism as a form of engagement. Several participants believed SMIs cognitively reframe negative feedback to lessen their emotional impact. For example, Taylor shared that some SMIs view criticism through an algorithmic perspective, perceiving it as beneficial, “They would either see it as like, oh yeah, this is engagement. It can hype me up even more.” This perspective

suggests that SMIs may draw on platform metrics to cope with criticism, viewing all interactions, even the negative ones, to increase reach and visibility.

In addition to this strategic reframing, internal validation emerged as another coping mechanism. Kevin, referring to an SMI he knows personally, stated:

“I don’t think he really cares that much. I think he’s just in his head. He’s just like, I’m making way more money than all of y’all. I don’t care what you guys think. Like, yeah, it doesn’t matter. Like, like, in like, in like, a few years time, I’m gonna have a house everything like, I don’t got to worry about any of this.”

This statement highlights that some SMIs will focus on their personal success and financial achievement instead of criticism, allowing them to maintain self-assurance in the face of online criticism.

Several participants also believed that SMIs could view criticism as constructive feedback. Tom explained that some SMIs adapt their content based on community response:

“One can take that as constructive criticism, where they can use to improve their content in a way. So if they see that the community that created their content for doesn’t have a low interactivity with their content, then they’ll choose and plan again for something better to post.”

This suggests that for some SMIs, criticism functions as a feedback mechanism, prompting reflection and content redirection to align better with audience expectations.

Alongside internal cognitive strategies, participants observed external behavioural responses to criticism. For example, some SMIs were described as modifying their content following backlash. Taylor noticed that when SMIs receive significant hate, they often “change out what they’re posting.” Chase echoed this observation, referencing a Samoan SMI who adjusted his content after receiving criticism from his community: “Recently he has been changing his content, so it’s like, now it’s like, people are actually supporting it, especially with Samoan community.” This behaviour illustrates how some SMIs will adapt their content deliberately to repair their reputation or align better with audience values.

Another strategy participants mentioned was the visible emotional expression of SMIs in response to criticism. Taylor recalled an example where an SMI publicly broke down in response to hate, stating, “She recently posted her first video of her crying because of the amount of hate she gets.” Similarly, Lily shared an example of vulnerability, describing a TikTok video in which an SMU addressed the emotional toll of harmful comments; she stated:

“She actually came forward and was like, very, very vulnerable. Like, the most vulnerable video I’ve kind of seen of someone where she was sitting in front of the camera, like, this is, this is what happens when you comment things like that. And she was sitting in front of the camera, looked like she’d been crying quite a lot.”

Such displays of vulnerability were interpreted as attempts to prompt empathy from followers and cope to overcome criticisms.

Humour also emerged as a coping mechanism. For example, Sage explained that some SMIs respond to criticism through comedic content, stating, “They can make a video from the comment and call it out a little bit, but the best ones I’ve seen, and when they do it in a humorous way.” Thus, humour acts as a form of resistance and emotional regulation, helping SMIs deal with hurtful comments in a light-hearted way.

Direct confrontation was another common approach. Rico observed that some SMIs actively argue with critics in comment sections, mentioning, “They’re in the comments fighting about it.” Noah added that SMIs may reply to each hate comment or even produce response videos. Lara referred to a well-known SMI, Uncle Tics, who directly addressed criticism in a video; he mentioned in the video, “I’m actually sick of you guys talking about this. Like, this is my thing. Like, I don’t understand.”

Tom also highlighted this assertive approach, explaining that, rather than removing followers, some SMIs make direct statements, such as “If you don’t like what I’m sharing, you’re more than welcome to unfollow. You feel free to go or whatever.” However, Wade noted that while some SMIs may not directly post content in response to criticism, they address such

issues during podcase appearances when prompted. This suggests that podcasting is a method that SMIs use to reflect on and respond to public scrutiny.

Interestingly, a few participants suggested that some SMIs deliberately provoke criticism as a form of “rage bait” to increase engagement. Rico explained, “Use it to specifically create, like, a rage bait, and then more interaction.” Taylor supported this observation, describing controversy as a strategy to drive visibility. Thus, this reveals that some SMIs may use criticism strategically to enhance algorithmic exposure.

In contrast, some SMIs were perceived to adopt a more passive approach by avoiding engagement altogether. Participants mentioned that SMIs often ignore, filter, or delete negative comments. Summer explained that she found that many SMIs deal with hate comments by “ignore it, remove comments, or, like, turn comments off.” She further elaborated that, although SMIs may be aware of the criticism, they often choose to “just live in ignorance” as a means of protecting their mental wellbeing. This perception resonated with Wyatt, who observed, “Some influencers just ignore all the hate and all the comments because they don’t read the comment.” Similarly, Kevin believed that SMIs prefer to ignore their critics and maintain consistency in their content rather than directly engaging with negativity.

Blocking users was another strategy mentioned as a way to limit exposure to online criticism. Emma shared that some SMIs “go through and block people that are saying negative things.” This approach reflects a form of boundary setting, where SMIs actively manage their online spaces to protect themselves from harm.

Beyond avoidance, several participants discussed more significant responses to criticism, such as taking temporary breaks from social media. For example, Chase explained that SMIs may “take, like, a, you know, like, a good long break from social,” describing it as a common and effective method for coping with online criticism. By stepping away from their platforms, SMIs can distance themselves from negativity and prioritise their mental health. Lara supported this observation, sharing that SMIs have informed their followers by saying things such as, “Hey guys, I’m taking a break because of, like, the hate comments I noticed.” Participants see these social media breaks as a necessary recovery strategy for managing emotional distress caused by criticism.

Additionally, seeking emotional support from close relationships was identified as another coping mechanism. For example, Chase shared, “They tend to, like, look for family and friends, for, like, moral support,” and that after healing and reflection, SMIs often return to address the situation. This highlights the importance of a strong support system in helping SMIs process criticism and regain confidence before re-engaging with their audiences.

In summary, participants demonstrated that New Zealand SMIs employ diverse strategies to cope with criticism. These include internal strategies, such as cognitive reframing and self-validation, and external behaviours, such as changing content, confrontation, humour, avoidance, and temporary withdrawal from social media. Additionally, emotional support from personal networks was highlighted as a key factor in helping SMIs process and recover from criticism. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how SMIs navigate criticism while maintaining their public presence and protecting their mental wellbeing.

4.3 Comparison SMIs and Followers' Findings

Table 17

Identifying similarities and differences between the perceptions of SMIs and followers

Issue	SMI theme and code	Follower theme and code
Cultural Influence in Support	Community support > Cultural influence	Reasons to follow SMIs in New Zealand > Supportive to SMIs in the same cultural group
The Role of Humility	Community support > Cultural influence	What drives criticism towards SMIs > New Zealand's culture of humility is leading to SMIs getting criticised and Positive perception of New Zealand SMIs
Method of Expressing and Receiving Support	Community support > Motivation from community support	Methods of expressing support > Ways of showing support to New Zealand SMIs
The Challenge in Building Local Support	Driving criticisms > The challenge in gaining local support	Do not follow many New Zealand SMIs > Do not follow many New Zealand SMIs and New Zealand SMIs do not have many New Zealand followers
What Drives Criticisms	Driving criticisms > What drives criticisms towards SMIs	What drives criticism towards SMIs > Criticisms driven by envy, Reasons for avoiding commenting criticisms, Negative perceptions of New Zealand SMIs, Criticisms as an inherent aspect of SMIs' role
Vulnerability to Criticisms	Personal impacts of being an SMIs > The emotional and psychological impact of criticisms, Change in content due to criticisms	How SMIs handle criticisms > How does criticism impact SMIs
SMIs Adjust Content Strategy Due to Criticisms and Use It as a Coping Method	Coping with criticisms > Change in content due to criticisms	How SMIs handle criticisms > How does criticism impact SMIs and How New Zealand SMIs handle criticisms
Impact of Criticism	Personal impacts of being an SMIs > The emotional and psychological impact of criticisms, The professional impact of being an SMI and The social impacts of being an SMIs	How SMIs handle criticisms > How does criticism impact SMIs
Coping Methods	Coping with criticisms > Coping methods towards criticisms	How SMIs handle criticisms > How New Zealand SMIs handle criticisms

Several similarities and differences were identified by comparing the perceptions of SMIs and followers.

4.3.1 Cultural Influence in Support

Firstly, both SMIs and followers identified the significance of shared cultural background in shaping support towards SMIs, as shown in Table 17. Many SMIs believed their cultural background influenced their content's reliability and perceived credibility. For example, Jade shared that, as an Asian SMI, she tends to attract more Asian audiences, and she is perceived as more credible when commenting on topics, such as Asian food, due to her cultural background. This cultural influence on support was particularly noticeable among Māori and Pacific Island communities in New Zealand. Several Māori and Pacific Island SMIs experienced strong community support rooted in shared cultural connections. For example, Paul described how incorporating Polynesian catchphrases into his videos helped him better connect with Polynesian audiences, leading to increased support from this community. On the other hand, the followers echoed this perspective, with several Māori and Pasifika participants expressing that shared cultural values and experience increased their sense of connection with SMIs. They mentioned that culturally aligned humour, values, and backgrounds made these influencers feel more authentic and trustworthy. This shared identity fostered pride and reinforced their motivation to support SMIs from similar backgrounds. These insights demonstrate how cultural alignment significantly influences perceptions of credibility and drives stronger engagement between SMIs and their communities.

4.3.2 The Role of Humility

Another similarity identified in both SMIs' and followers' perspectives is the significant role New Zealand's cultural value of humility plays in shaping how success is perceived, shared and responded to, as presented in Table 17. SMIs described how this cultural expectation often conflicts with the visibility required of their role. The pressure to remain modest influences how they behave and how followers either support or withhold their support towards SMIs. For example, Dean shared that growing up with humility as a core cultural value makes it challenging to be comfortable with public recognition as an SMI. He explained that he actively works to be more expressive in his content and accept public recognition more openly. Similarly, Jean, a Māori and Pasifika SMI, shared that this cultural

expectation led her to keep much of her success private and made her hesitant to pursue opportunities that would increase her exposure.

Followers similarly emphasised that SMIs who overly display wealth or success often invite criticism. Many followers described a social expectation to downplay achievements, explaining that excessive celebration or material displays are often seen as “showing off.” This expectation is especially mentioned within Māori and Pacific communities. Several followers mentioned that while occasional milestone sharing is accepted, repeated displays of success are likely to trigger backlash.

Participants also observed that New Zealand SMIs tend to express greater humility than their overseas counterparts, often showing more appreciation toward followers. This approach fosters more positive perceptions and helps local SMIs avoid criticism associated with perceived arrogance in SMI culture.

Despite both groups mentioning the importance of humility and its impacts on the perception and sharing of success, slight differences in their approach emerge. Followers tend to judge SMIs based on the humility displayed in their content or interactions. In contrast, SMIs proactively manage their behaviour, adjusting their tone and responses to fit the cultural expectation of modesty to avoid being judged as arrogant. Thus, the findings highlight that while both SMIs and followers value humility as a cultural norm, their differing approaches, followers use it as an evaluator, and SMIs use it as a self-regulator, demonstrate how deeply humility shapes both the performance and reception of success in New Zealand’s social media landscape.

4.3.3 Method of Expressing and Receiving Support

Based on the findings, there is a noticeable difference between how SMIs feel supported by followers and how followers prefer to express support, which can result in a mismatch in expectations, illustrated in Table 17. SMIs emphasised that community support is crucial for sustaining their motivation, longevity and resilience against criticism. However, they appeared to value more active and personal forms of support. For example, Jean mentioned that positive comments keep her motivated, and Helen shared that in-person appreciation made her feel validated and encouraged.

In contrast, followers tended to favour more passive and indirect forms of support. Many participants, such as Lily, Tu, Chris, Wade and Emma, described liking posts, following SMI across platforms, and occasionally sharing content with friends as methods of expressing support rather than engaging through comments. Only a few participants, such as Taylor, indicated they would comment under specific circumstances, such as personally knowing the SMI.

This difference in preferred expressing and receiving support suggests a potential mismatch. At the same time, followers believe they are showing support through passive engagement, and SMIs may not perceive these actions as strongly, leading to feelings of underappreciation or disconnection.

4.3.4 The Challenge in Building Local Support

SMIs and followers highlighted the difficulty of building strong local support in New Zealand. SMIs shared feelings of limited support from local audiences, while followers admitted they tend to follow more international SMIs than local ones, as shown in Table 17.

A key reason both groups identified was New Zealand's small population size. SMIs, such as Dean, shared that most of his positive feedback comes from international followers in countries such as the United States, South America, and Australia, while rarely getting feedback from local audiences. He also pointed out that New Zealand's smaller market size makes it feel limiting in terms of growth, and he would rather focus on growing internationally. Similarly, Noah, a follower, shared that even the most successful New Zealand SMIs, such as Theo Shakes and Jess Thornton, have predominantly overseas audiences. He explained that due to New Zealand's small population, even if every local person followed a creator, the number of international followers would still outweigh local support.

Both SMIs and followers also highlighted content-related challenges that limit local engagement. SMI, Dean shared that focusing on New Zealand audiences felt creatively restrictive, as it required producing more general and less expressive content, limiting his authenticity. From the followers' perspective, local content was often perceived as

predictable and less engaging than international SMIs. For example, Rico mentioned that there are few New Zealand SMIs creating content aligned with his interests in engineering and electronics, while Summer found overseas “day in the life” content more interesting due to the different settings and lifestyles portrayed.

Additionally, both SMIs and followers acknowledged the dominance of international content on social media platforms. Emma shared that her social media is filled mainly with international SMIs, making it harder to discover or engage with local SMIs. On the other hand, SMIs reported receiving more visible and consistent support from international audiences, further illustrating the limited local engagement available in New Zealand. Both SMIs and followers showcased that building strong local support is challenging. This difficulty stems from New Zealand’s small population size, creative limitations faced by SMIs, the perceived lower appeal of local content, and the overwhelming presence of international SMIs that shape follower preferences.

4.3.5 What Drives Criticism

From the findings, both SMIs and followers identified several overlapping factors that drive criticism towards SMIs, which is identified in Table 17. The first shared factor that drives criticism towards SMIs was envy. Criticism often stemmed from followers comparing themselves to SMIs who shared similar characteristics, such as age, background, or cultural identity, but appeared more successful. These perceived distances led to feelings of inadequacy, resentment and negative feedback. For example, Paul, an SMI, observed that criticisms usually came from “someone from below you,” suggesting that envy was more common among those who saw themselves as less successful. Similarly, Lily, a follower, admitted that seeing SMIs her age achieving major milestones evoked a sense of failing behind, fuelling social comparison and jealousy. These reflections indicate that envy, primarily when rooted in perceived similarities and unequal outcomes, is a powerful emotional trigger for criticism.

This envy also extends to the material, lifestyle and opportunities that SMIs often showcase, further fueling criticism. Many SMIs reported that their visible success, such as owning property, receiving free products, or enjoying a flexible lifestyle, often attracted negative feedback. Followers saw these benefits as out of reach and sometimes questioned the fairness

of these achievements. For example, Jean, an SMI, shared that even when she posted about exciting opportunities such as brand deals and events, she experienced backlash, with critics focusing more on her perceived privileges than the hard work behind her success. Followers echoed this thought, with Lily expressing frustration over SMIs receiving free products while she struggled to afford similar luxuries and Dani sharing that SMIs' freedom to dictate their schedules contrasted with the strict nine-to-five routine many people navigate, which she believes contributed to feelings of envy. Taylor highlighted the case of SMI Helen Koumakis, who received significant criticism after purchasing a house. Her followers began questioning her content authenticity as she always talks about budgeting but has bought a house. These reactions suggest that envy is often tied to the material and lifestyle advantages SMIs appear to enjoy, driving followers to criticise towards SMIs.

Furthermore, both groups mentioned that perceiving an SMI's role as an effortless career contributes to criticism. SMIs, such as Jade and Shane, expressed that followers often overlook the time, effort and repetitive nature of content creation, assuming it is easy because they only see the polished final product. The misconception is further reinforced by the belief that SMIs constantly receive free products or experiences without much effort. In reality, SMIs, such as Helen, revealed that many opportunities, such as brand trips, are unpaid, making the work financially unstable and emotionally draining. The lack of public understanding of these challenges contributes to negative perceptions and increased criticism. Similarly, followers like Noah and Kevin viewed influencing as "easy money" and dismissed the hard work behind content creation. Others, such as Sam, even compared SMIs' work to traditional forms of entertainment, such as actors and singers, which demand training and live performance. This comparison led to questioning whether SMIs who self-edit and create content without technical expertise should be rewarded or recognised for their work, especially when their content is seen as simple. Noah also mentioned that his upbringing emphasises more traditional career paths, influencing his perception and making it challenging to take SMIs seriously, especially considering their rapid rise to fame. Therefore, both SMIs and followers misunderstand the complexity of SMIs' role, contributing to the criticism directed at them.

Additionally, both groups identified the anonymity enabled by social media as a key factor driving harsh criticism. SMIs, such as Helen and Jade, explained that the ability to hide behind fake accounts allows individuals to leave hurtful or bullying comments without facing

any real consequences. They felt that this anonymity encourages irresponsible behaviour online. Followers also echoed this perspective. For example, Lily noted that social media allows people to post anonymous and unfiltered comments that they likely would not express in a face-to-face setting, such as a traditional customer-facing job. Similarly, Dani shared that she only comments on TikTok because of the platform's perceived anonymity. These insights from both SMIs and followers highlight a shared understanding that social media's impersonal and consequence-free nature contributes to the volume and intensity of criticism directed at SMIs.

4.3.6 Vulnerability to Criticism

A theme that emerged from the followers' findings was the perceived vulnerability of newer SMIs to criticism, as illustrated in Table 17. Several followers, including Lily and Dani, believed that emerging SMIs are more emotionally vulnerable to negative feedback due to their limited audience size and experience. Lily shared that she would feel guilty criticising newer SMIs. Whereas Dani deliberately avoided such criticism, assuming that established SMIs possess greater emotional resilience and are less likely to be affected or notice negative feedback.

However, this assumption was not reflected in the experiences shared by the SMIs themselves. Regardless of follower count or years of experience, all SMIs interviewed expressed ongoing struggles with criticism. For example, Helen and Jean, who have been creating content for many years and have built large followings, spoke openly about criticism's deep and lasting impact on them. Helen shared that criticism has consistently impacted her wellbeing, emphasising that it has never become easier to manage over time. She reflected on how constant public scrutiny, which has left her feeling deeply wounded, highly sensitive, and struggling with low self-esteem, has impacted various areas of her life. Similarly, Jean, who began her SMI journey in her teenage years, reflected on how criticism has significantly undermined her self-confidence. She disclosed that the negative responses she received, particularly about her singing content, have led her to withdraw from sharing the very type of content that initially brought her online success. These narratives challenge that experience or popularity equips SMIs with greater emotional resilience. Instead, they highlight influencers' persistent emotional vulnerability, regardless of their status or experience in the field.

4.3.7 SMIs Adjust Content Strategy Due to Criticisms and Use It as a Coping Method

Both SMIs and followers recognised that criticism significantly influences how SMUs shape their content, often functioning as a coping mechanism to manage emotional strain and public criticism, as shown in Table 17. SMIs, such as Helen and Jean, described deliberately modifying or withholding content, particularly around personal achievements or passions, to avoid triggering negative responses. These strategic adjustments allowed them to protect their wellbeing while maintaining an online presence. From the follower perspective, Chase and Tom acknowledged that external pressure from criticism could compel SMIs to change their content, suggesting that it affects how they perform and what they choose to share. Emma echoed this, noting that such pressure can push SMIs to prioritise audience approval over enjoyment, ultimately impacting their authenticity and creativity. Collectively, content adjustment serves as a shared and recognised coping strategy that SMIs employ to maintain personal wellbeing and public engagement.

4.3.8 Impact of Criticism

Both SMIs and followers acknowledged the emotional and psychological impact that criticism can impose on SMIs, as indicated in Table 17. Commonly identified effects included increased self-doubt, feelings of imposter syndrome, reduced self-esteem, and questioning of self-worth. These shared observations suggest a mutual recognition regarding the emotional distress associated with public scrutiny. However, not all followers perceived the emotional consequences as particularly serious. For example, Kevin stated that he was unconcerned about the impact of his criticism unless he had a personal connection to the SMI. In contrast, SMIs described the effects as deeply personal and extensive, often influencing their wellbeing and professional lives.

Moreover, key differences emerged in these impacts' perceived scope and severity. SMIs extensively mentioned the broader social and professional repercussions of criticism, highlighting issues such as difficulties in maintaining authentic relationships, emotional strain on family members, reluctance to pursue career opportunities due to fear of public backlash, and challenges in negotiating the boundaries between their personal and professional identity. Followers largely unacknowledged these complex and diverse consequences. This

discrepancy suggests that followers may underestimate criticism's impact, particularly its professional and social consequences.

4.3.9 Coping Methods

While both followers and SMIs identified a range of coping mechanisms in response to online criticism, differences emerged in the emphasis and use of these methods, as outlined in Table 17. Followers predominantly highlighted observable external behaviours, such as ignoring, deleting hate comments, engaging in confrontation, displaying vulnerability, using humour, or taking social media breaks. These visible actions largely shaped followers' perceptions of how SMIs respond to online negativity. In contrast, SMIs reported a broader and more personal range of strategies, including internal mechanisms, such as reinterpreting criticism as engagement or constructive feedback, emotionally detaching themselves from negative comments, and drawing strength from personal support systems. Nonetheless, SMIs also acknowledged using external responses, such as altering content, blocking users, and publicly addressing criticism, indicating a more layered and complex coping process. These insights suggest that while followers focus on surface-level behaviours, SMIs simultaneously engage in deeper internal strategies to manage the emotional impact of online criticism and maintain their online presence.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study has investigated how SMIs in New Zealand experience and respond to public criticism, focusing on the unique cultural context shaped by TPS. With the growth in social media influence, understanding how SMIs are experiencing and responding to criticism is important for supporting SMI wellbeing and fostering healthier online environments.

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the study’s findings regarding each of the research questions. It then outlines the theoretical contributions made by the research, followed by practical implications for SMIs, followers, marketers, agencies, platforms, and policymakers. The chapter also addresses the study’s limitations and proposes directions for future research. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on the overall significance and contribution of the study.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

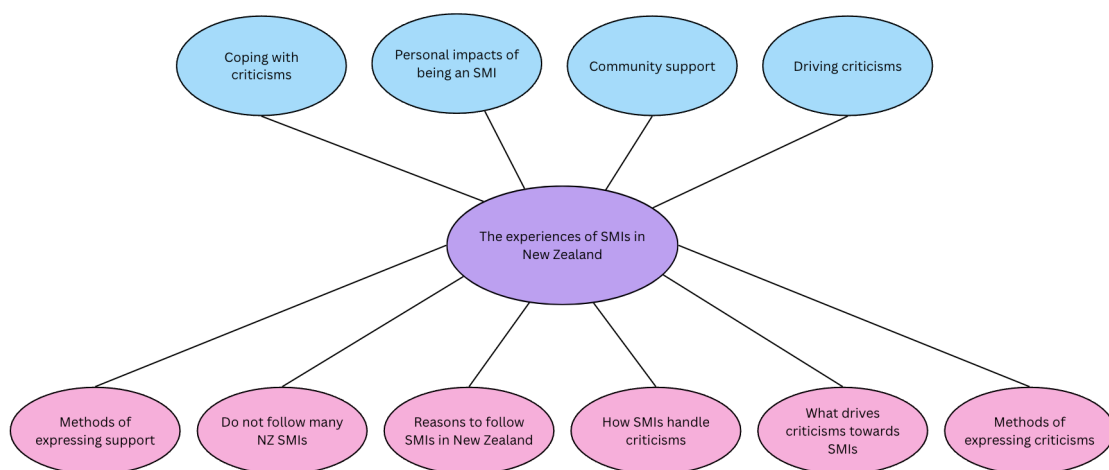


Figure 1
A visual diagram of the findings

Research question 1: What motivates New Zealand consumers to criticise social media influencers?

The findings of this research, viewed through the lens of followers, reveal several key reasons why individuals in New Zealand are motivated to criticise SMIs. One of the drivers is a perceived moral misalignment between the SMI's behaviour and the follower's moral values. From the followers' perspective, it frequently causes negative emotions when the actions of SMIs are viewed as morally questionable, such as propagating hate, maintaining faithful relationships, disobeying the law, acting unethically, or disregarding social standards. These reactions frequently manifested as subtle criticism, including liking unfavourable comments or disengaging by unfollowing the SMI.

Another strong theme emerging from the followers' point of view is the importance of humility within New Zealand culture. Many participants expressed discomfort when SMIs appeared to engage in self-promotion excessively and overly display their success, such as by flaunting wealth, achievements, or material possessions. While occasional displays of success were sometimes acceptable, repeated or excessive self-promotion was seen as unpleasant and often led to frustration and criticism. From the follower's perspective, such behaviour goes against the cultural expectations of modesty and groundedness, thus motivating individuals to criticise SMIs in New Zealand.

SMIs being over-commercialised was also a key factor motivating factor that were identified to drive criticism towards them. Followers reported that when SMIs shift from sharing authentic, relatable content to heavily promoting brands or products, it can affect their trustworthiness and credibility. From their perspective, content prioritising financial gain over genuine connection makes SMIs seem less authentic and ultimately promotes scepticism and criticism.

Another factor causing criticism of SMIs is the behaviour and motivations of fellow followers. Some criticism does not stem from genuine disagreement with the SMIs but is motivated by followers being attention-seeking, a desire for social validation, or

entertainment. In such cases, criticism becomes more of a performative act, used to gain likes, laughs or visibility rather than a sincere objection to the SMI's action or content.

Finally, SMIs comments on political, cultural, or complicated matters without appropriate expertise also often trigger negative criticism. When SMIs are seen speaking without the expertise to engage with important matters, followers regard this as irresponsible, undermining their credibility and public backlash. These findings demonstrate how followers in New Zealand judge SMIs' actions and how their perspective impacts criticism of SMIs.

From the SMIs' perspective, significant factors were found to be responsible for the online criticism they encounter. Their content creation type is one of the contributing elements. SMIs observed that information about their private life, financial choices, or business ventures that involve open or intimate sharing typically draws more criticism. This openness, while fostering connection, also increased their visibility and vulnerability, making them more susceptible to public criticism. Similarly, content focused on physical appearance, such as gym and fashion-related posts, was frequently met with greater judgement. In contrast, SMIs who emphasised on product-related or skill-based content claimed experiencing less criticism. These observations suggest that the nature of the content shared plays a significant role in shaping the type and intensity of response from followers.

Another significant driver, as expressed by the SMIs, is New Zealand's cultural expectation of humility, which they linked to the TPS. Several SMIs believe visible success or self-promotion often leads to a backlash in New Zealand, as cultural norms discourage standing out or appearing overly proud. They shared experiences where TPS helped explain the lack of local support and critical responses they received following personal or professional achievement. These reflections suggest that TPS contributes to a cultural environment where public success can attract social criticism, reflecting a broader discomfort with individuals who distinguish themselves too visibly. However, the discussion also exposed different viewpoints among SMIs. While some SMIs viewed TPS as a key reason for the negative feedback they received, others were more sceptical, suggesting that public criticism is a universal response to visibility rather than a phenomenon unique to New Zealand. Nonetheless, those who emphasised the influence of TPS noted that the country's small and closely connection population may intensify this scrutiny, making critical responses feel more personal or significant.

Additionally, SMIs expressed frustration that the public's tendency to overlook their feelings, mentioning that many people forget they are real individuals with genuine emotions who can be affected by negative comments. This perceived lack of empathy was seen as a key driver of online criticism, contributing to a digital society where harsh criticisms are acceptable. Despite offering free content and being transparent about their personal lives, many SMIs felt they were met with undeserved hostility and unfair criticism. This sense of emotional disregard was identified as a significant component causing the negative feedback they frequently get.

Furthermore, SMIs mentioned the false assumptions audiences often form based on the limited and curated online content as contributing factor to criticism. They explained that viewers often develop inaccurate opinions about their personalities, relationships and lifestyles from selective or edited representation. SMIs commonly discuss elements of their personal lives, which leads to misunderstanding and harsh judgment. Viewers would criticise their character, values, or relationships based on incomplete or decontextualised interpretations of their content, reinforcing oversimplified narratives that fail to reflect the complexities of their lived experiences.

SMIs also acknowledged how these misconceptions drive criticism. They mentioned that audiences often underestimate the effort involved in content creation, overlooking the time-consuming nature of tasks such as planning, filming and editing. This misjudgement is further complicated by the polished quality of the final content, which covers the behind-the-scenes work and reinforces the idea that the work is minimal. Furthermore, while appearing to enjoy brand perks, many SMIs said they frequently work without compensation and are under constant pressure to fulfil audience expectations. Increasing exposure comes with greater scrutiny, and any apparent contradiction, such as behaving against their personal brand, results in significant criticism. Together, these findings demonstrate how misunderstandings about SMI professions weaken their validity and motivate criticism of SMIs that overlook the invisible labour and emotional distress that comes with their work.

Several major drivers of criticism towards SMIs were consistently identified by both SMIs and followers, demonstrating the complex and reciprocal nature of views. The enabling nature of the online environment has been identified as one of the primary motivators for

criticism by both groups. Social media sites provide users with a sense of anonymity, which frequently intensifies undesirable habits. SMIs described how this anonymity allows individuals to post harsh, unfiltered comments without personal consequences. It lowers the threshold for critical behaviour and often leads to online bullying or excessively negative commentary. The SMIs believe that the absence of responsibility on social platforms encourages a culture where public figures are easy targets. Followers noticed how the digital environment amplifies criticism, making it more noticeable and persistent than offline. Some argue that negative feedback has evolved into social bonding in which users reinforce group dynamics through shared critique. Thus, the anonymity provided by social media normalises and amplifies criticism of SMIs.

Furthermore, both groups identified frequent negative perceptions of the SMI profession as their primary source of criticism. Many followers mentioned the validity of SMI, seeing it as an undeserved or superficial path to success that lacks the true skill or hard work that comes with more traditional occupations. SMIs were frequently compared unfavourably to other traditional celebrities, such as actors and musicians, who are perceived to possess more tangible skills and undergo a more demanding career journey. The belief that influencing is “easy money” or not a “real job” contributed to frustration and resentment, especially when SMIs gain rapid success through causal or seemingly effortless content. In addition, many followers sometimes perceived local SMIs to be less influential than SMIs from abroad, thereby contributing to doubts surrounding their importance and credibility. These perceptions undermined the work of SMIs and constructed negativity towards their visibility, achievement and credibility.

Additionally, followers and SMIs recognised the normalisation of criticism as they believed it had become an expected part of being an SMI. Some followers viewed backlash as a fair trade-off for the perceived privileges of being an SMI, reinforcing the belief that SMIs should tolerate criticism as part of their job. On the other hand, SMIs accept ongoing criticisms as an inherent aspect of their role. This normalisation creates a broader social environment in which criticism towards SMIs is accepted and expected, further driving critical behaviour.

Envy also emerged as a significant emotional driver of criticism, consistently mentioned by followers and SMIs. Many followers reflected that seeing SMIs, especially those of similar age, background, or socio-economic status, attain visible success triggered feelings of self-

comparison, inadequacy, and resentment. When SMIs engaged in sharing their achievements, such as buying property, receiving free products, or living flexible lifestyles, it heightened perceived inequities and feelings of jealousy. Thus, in many circumstances, envy was not only an internal emotion but frequently manifested as exterior behaviours such as dismissive comments or harsh judgments.

Similarly, SMIs recognised that envy played a key role in the negativity they received. They reflected that even posting content, such as vlogs or lifestyle posts, could generate critical responses, often rooted in followers' dissatisfaction or perceived inferiority. SMIs have also noted that criticism comes from followers who are more concerned with the apparent benefits SMI has gained than the effort necessary to obtain them; hence, their success is frequently perceived as undeserved, especially compared to their critics' demanding occupations.

SMIs also highlighted that feelings of envy are not limited to their followers. They described experiencing emotional pressure when comparing themselves to other SMIs who appeared to receive more brand deals, engagement, or recognition. This shows that social comparison happens between followers and SMIs and among SMIs themselves. These comparisons create a cycle of insecurity and competitiveness within the influencer community, where criticism and negative feelings are driven by perceived unfairness or imbalance in success.

Overall, the motivation behind criticism of SMIs in New Zealand is shaped by cultural norms, emotional responses, and misconceptions about the profession of SMIs. Factors such as moral misalignment, humility expectations, over-commercialisation, envy, the anonymity of social media and the performative nature of online platforms all fuel and normalise criticism towards SMIs. These insights highlight the complex social and emotional dynamics influencing how SMIs are perceived and judged.

Research question 2: What forms does such criticism take?

Followers expressed criticism of SMIs through subtle, indirect, and socially acceptable forms rather than confrontation, with one of the most common methods was liking critical comments posted by others. This approach enabled them to express disapproval without direct posting negative comments themselves, thereby reducing the risk of backlash or discomfort. This is particularly because it left a less obvious digital footprint than openly

publishing their own comments, this method was viewed as a low-risk form of participation in critical debate.

Several factors contributed to followers' reluctance to submit negative feedback. The first primary concern stated by followers is that expressing critical comments on their accounts would make them traceable, raising concerns about the long-term implications for their personal or professional lives. This concern was significant among many followers, driving them to use other methods to criticise SMIs rather than publicly posting their negative feedback.

Furthermore, cultural values and upbringings played a role in shaping followers' unwillingness to comment criticism. For some followers, public criticism was considered inappropriate or disrespectful, and voicing disapproval online was discouraged due to cultural norms and upbringing. This internalised social etiquette influenced their choice to engage in more private or indirect forms of disapproval.

Another reason for favouring indirect methods was the perception that individual comments held little weight in the crowded comment sections of SMIs. When participants saw that their views were already widely expressed, they often chose not to repeat them. Thus, followers prefer engaging with critical comments that already gained highly visible, such as likes from other social media users, as it is seen as a more efficient and less redundant way to signal disagreement.

Beyond liking critical comments, followers also engaged in other indirect forms of criticism. A method used by followers to express criticism is through WOM. Followers tend to voice their disapproval in conversations with friends or family, either in person or through private group chats, instead of posting publicly online. This serves as a way to vent, reflect, or validate their feelings with others while not experiencing the potential repercussions of posting criticism publicly. Thus, rather than aiming to influence the SMI, these conversations were more about emotional expression and processing reactions in a familiar and low-risk environment.

Another approach participants used was private messaging, where they directly contacted the SMI to raise concerns or offer feedback in a more constructive and less public setting. This

method allowed a more personal and potentially productive dialogue, as followers felt it avoided public scrutiny while enabling them to express disagreement or provide feedback.

Followers also employed passive digital strategies to express criticism without engaging directly. These included hiding content, selecting “not interested” options, unfollowing, blocking, or reporting SMIs. Such actions reflected a preference for quietly disengaging while retaining control over their digital experience. Unfollowing or hiding content was seen as a way to maintain emotional comfort, while blocking or reporting was used in cases where the content was perceived as offensive or harmful.

Overall, participants often expressed criticism through indirect, non-confrontation and socially acceptable means, with liking critical comments being the most common. Concerns about the digital footprint, cultural norms, and the perceived redundancy of adding similar comments shaped their preference for passive engagement. Other forms included WOM criticism with friends and family, direct messaging SMIs, and quietly disengaging through actions, such as hiding content, selecting “not interested” options, unfollowing, blocking, or even reporting SMIs, highlighting a careful balance between expressing disapproval and protecting personal boundaries.

Research question 3: In what ways might cultural differences amongst New Zealand followers affect the intensity and nature of criticism directed at social media influencers?

Cultural differences among New Zealand followers significantly shape the intensity and nature of criticism directed at SMIs. This study found that many followers expressed greater support for SMIs who shared their cultural background, a pattern particularly evident within Māori and Pasifika communities. This pattern seems to be supported by several interconnected cultural and social elements.

Many Polynesian followers described feeling a natural connection to SMIs from similar backgrounds. Shared humour, language and life experiences contributed to a sense of familiarity and reliability, which deepened engagement and support towards SMIs. For these followers, the content felt more authentic and aligned with their realities. Secondly, a strong

sense of community and collective identity influenced followers' support for SMIs. Those raised in community-oriented environments, where mutual support and collective engagement were highly valued, tended to carry these values into their online behaviours. Supporting SMIs who shared their cultural background was often perceived as a way to reinforce community ties and celebrate shared progress.

In addition, moral alignment further enhanced support. SMIs whose values and expressions resonated with their followers' cultural beliefs were perceived as more credible and trustworthy. This perceived alignment encouraged followers to engage positively and publicly defend these SMIs when criticised. Finally, the success of culturally similar SMIs was often interpreted as a collective achievement. These accomplishments generate pride and a sense of shared identity, strengthen emotional investment and deepen followers' support towards SMIs within the same cultural group.

However, this cultural closeness also introduced heightened expectations, particularly around humility. Within Māori and Pasifika communities, where modesty and collective values are deeply ingrained, SMIs are often expected to stay grounded and avoid behaviours perceived as bragging or self-promotional. When SMIs are seen as drawing too much attention to their success, criticism may arise not from the achievement but from how it is presented. Thus, SMIs from these communities can be held to a higher standard of behaviour, especially regarding the public expression of success. They may not be shielded from criticism by cultural similarity; instead, they may experience increased scrutiny due to their perceived role as representatives of their communities.

This dynamic was reflected in the experiences of several Māori and Pasifika SMIs, who described internal tensions between cultural expectations of humility and the demand of their role, which often requires visibility and self-promotion. Some reported hesitating to share personal achievements or seek opportunities that might increase their public profile due to concerns that such actions could be seen as arrogance or “rocking the boat.” This hesitation may limit their exposure and professional growth.

Nevertheless, SMIs expressed that they experience stronger community support from followers from similar cultural backgrounds, mainly when their content reflects shared language, values, or heritage. This pattern was not exclusive to Māori and Pasifika SMIs.

SIMs from other cultural backgrounds, including Asian communities, also noted that sharing a cultural identity with their audience often enhanced credibility. However, SIMs also acknowledged that support was not always guaranteed. When an SIM's behaviour violated cultural expectations or exceeded accepted success thresholds, criticism could still emerge within their own cultural group. This highlights the complex and duality of cultural similarity as it can foster both support and increased scrutiny, depending on whether the SIM's action aligns with community values.

SIMs also mentioned how the followers' cultural norms impact not only the level of support and criticism SIMs experience but also how it is expressed. Māori and Pasifika audiences were generally perceived as more outwardly expressive and vocal in their appreciation, creating a visible sense of support. In contrast, followers from Asian cultural backgrounds were often more reserved in offering public praise. While these differences stem from varying cultural communication styles, they do not necessarily reflect differing levels of support. However, they significantly affect how that support is perceived within the social media space.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of cultural identity in shaping both the nature and intensity of follower responses to SIMs. While shared cultural background can foster emotional connection and community support, it also brings heightened behavioural expectations. This complex interplay between cultural connection and accountability highlights how cultural norms impact New Zealand's social media landscape.

Research question 4: What are the potential impacts (social, emotional, psychological and professional) of criticism on New Zealand social media influencers?

This study revealed a wide range of social, emotional, psychological and professional consequences of criticism experienced by New Zealand SIMs. Participants consistently highlighted that being an SIM inherently involves navigating complex social challenges. For example, many described difficulties forming authentic friendships due to uncertainty about others' intentions, raising concerns that interaction might be motivated more by their status than by genuine interest. For example, Helen described the difficulty of recognising sincerity

in interactions, particularly when people from high school, who previously ignored her, began reaching out after learning of her influencer status. This uncertainty fosters mistrust, heightened social guardedness, and increased feelings of isolation. Romantic relationships also proved difficult, with SMIs mentioning that prior accessibility to personal information online disrupted the natural development of intimacy and connection.

Even within the influencer community, a competitive environment was identified as a significant barrier to forming meaningful relationships. SMIs reported rivalry and hesitance to support their peers, often attributed to limited brand opportunities and recognition in New Zealand. This resulted in superficial interactions and a lack of collective support. Importantly, participants acknowledged that the effects of criticism extended beyond themselves and affected those close to them, such as family members and romantic partners, who may also become targets of public scrutiny and emotional distress. These findings reflect the wider social consequences of online criticism within influencer culture.

Although participants did not always attribute these difficulties solely to criticism, it became apparent that criticism amplifies existing social pressures. The inherently sceptical environment in which SMIs operate, where they must continuously assess others' motives, was intensified by public critique. This further erodes trust and complicates interpersonal connections. While the causal relationship between criticism and social challenges was not always explicitly stated, participants consistently reflected on how criticism had knock-on effects on their close relationships and support networks.

The findings also reveal that criticism has significant emotional and psychological effects on New Zealand SMIs. Participants commonly described experiencing emotional distress in response to online criticism. This distress was not perceived as isolated or temporary but as ongoing and cumulative, contributing to feelings of sadness, vulnerability, and emotional exhaustion. A key consequence was a decline in self-esteem and increased self-doubt. Many internalised negative comments triggered new insecurities around their appearance, character, or creative output, areas they had not previously questioned. Consequently, some participants hesitated to post, second-guessed creative decisions, or deleted previously shared content.

Criticism also disrupted SMIs' sense of self and identity. Participants discussed the difficulty of authentically representing themselves while managing audience expectations, especially

when facing consistent public criticism. This disruption was amplified when criticism escalated into personal attacks or involved their close relationships. In such situations, psychological distress extends beyond the online space, promoting fears about physical safety and concerns over the accessibility of private information, including home addresses and workplaces. This heightened sense of vulnerability intensified emotional strain and demonstrated how online criticism can have real-world repercussions.

Over time, sustained exposure to criticism appeared to alter SMIs' emotional coping mechanisms. While some developed greater emotional resilience, others described becoming emotional numbs or desensitised. Participants mentioned that although they did not perceive themselves as changed, close friends and family observed increased emotional sensitivity and behavioural shifts. This suggests that long-term exposure to criticism may affect emotional expression and interpersonal dynamics in ways that are not immediately recognised. These impacts were particularly significant during the early stages of participants' influencer journeys when they lacked established coping strategies and support networks. During this formative period, criticism frequently led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty about belonging in the influencer space. While many participants ultimately developed strategies to navigate the impact of criticism, the long-lasting psychological impact of early criticism remained evident. Collectively, these findings highlight the significant emotional and psychological distress that sustained public criticism's impact on SMIs.

Despite the professional opportunities available to SMIs, public criticism presents significant challenges to their careers as SMIs and their professional identities outside of social media. Some SMIs reported that fear of criticism influenced their decisions about pursuing specific opportunities. For example, some hesitated to participate in public events or media appearances due to previous experiences with backlash, limiting their professional visibility and growth.

Participants also expressed concern that criticism might damage future brand partnerships. Some SMIs described receiving adverse reactions for expressing opinions on sensitive topics, which led to anxiety about how such responses could harm their relationships with brands. A common concern was the threat of being "cancelled" online, where public disapproval could prompt the brand to cut ties. This fear sometimes prompted SMIs to reduce their social media activity to protect future collaborations.

Criticism extended beyond their social media identities, impacting participants' professional careers outside the SMI space. Several shared experiences of critics tracking down their professional profiles, such as LinkedIn, and threatening to contact their employers. This created significant stress and concern about the potential loss of stable employment due to controversies stemming from their online content.

Maintaining a professional identity alongside a personal brand was also complicated by criticism. Some SMIs noted the need to deliberately separate their SMI identity from their business ventures and traditional professional roles to avoid potential reputational harm. Many expressed concerns that their online persona and content, particularly humour, casual language, or personal expression, could undermine their credibility in more conventional professional settings. For example, an aspiring personal trainer worried that humorous gym content he makes on his personal social media account might make him appear unprofessional to potential clients. Similarly, another SMI feared that clients of his cleaning business might come across unrelated content that could harm his business reputation. Despite these challenges, many SMIs continued their online presence due to financial needs and personal passion. They acknowledged the difficulty of balancing professional growth with the need to protect their emotional wellbeing and online presence.

The study demonstrates that criticism significantly impacts New Zealand SMIs across social, emotional, psychological, and professional domains. While criticism may not directly cause every challenge SMIs face, it intensifies existing pressures, reinforcing mistrust, insecurity, and professional vulnerability. These impacts are not confined to the SMIs alone; they often extend to close personal relationships and manifest beyond the digital space. These insights highlight the urgent need for greater awareness of the sustained effects of public criticism and the importance of developing stronger emotional, social, and structural support systems for those working in the SMI space.

Research question 5: What strategies, if any, do New Zealand's social media influencers employ to cope with the effects of criticism?

New Zealand's SMIs employ various strategies to manage and cope with criticism, often shaped by proactive and reactive approaches. A significant strategy involves carefully

regulating and adapting content to align with audience expectations and protect their public image, which includes moderating how personal achievements are shared. Many SMIs described experiencing a tension between the desire to inspire followers by sharing milestones, such as property ownership, luxury purchases, or financial gains, and the fear of appearing boastful or disconnected from their audiences. To mitigate potential backlash, they often downplay or selectively present such content, emphasising the challenges and hard work behind their success rather than just showing the outcomes. This anticipatory self-censorship reflects an effort to conform to New Zealand's cultural expectations of modesty, especially in the context of TPS, and to avoid provoking envy or criticism.

Some SMIs employ reactive coping strategies developed in response to previous negative experiences. While initially confident in expressing personal success, repeated criticism often led them to withdraw or modify their content. Over time, certain posts, especially those highlighting personal accomplishments, were perceived as high-risk. Thus, many deliberately retreat from sharing aspirational or identity-driven content, especially those involving professional achievements, financial milestones, or displays of wealth, to minimise exposure to potential judgment.

This withdrawal extended beyond material success. Creative self-expression, such as singing, personal storytelling, or faith-based content, was often suppressed due to fears of being misinterpreted, judged, or criticised. These concerns made many SMIs hyper-aware of how their content might be perceived, causing them to overanalyse and carefully curate their posts to avoid future judgment. While protective, this strategic self-curation often comes at a personal cost, with several SMIs reporting decreased spontaneity, creativity, and confidence in their original online personas. These behaviours reflect a broader effort to manage emotional and reputation risk, whether by pre-emptively content moderation or retreating after experiencing public criticism.

Avoidance also emerged as a significant coping strategy, particularly concerning personal relationships. Some SMIs deliberately withheld information about their SMI roles from family members to avoid potential disapproval. This pre-emptive distancing was particularly relevant when anticipating resistance or criticism from close relations and protected both themselves and their families from discomfort.

Cognitive reframing was identified as a key strategy to reduce criticism's emotional burden. Many SMIs consciously focused on positive or constructive criticism, viewing negative comments as opportunities for growth or content improvement rather than personal attacks. Some reframed hateful comments as algorithmic engagement, recognising that even negative interactions could increase visibility. This shift in perspective helped sustain motivation and reinforced emotional resilience, allowing SMIs to separate their self-worth from online negativity while maintaining a commitment to authenticity.

Self-reflection also played an essential role in helping SMIs navigate criticism. Participants evaluated the source, tone, and intent of comments to determine their validity. This process enabled them to embrace helpful suggestions while dismissing unhelpful, personal, or hateful comments. Many SMIs reported assessing whether the criticism came from individuals with expertise or whether it reflects others' insecurities or jealousy. Criticism about unchangeable traits, such as physical appearance, was often consciously dismissed to preserve mental wellbeing. By filtering feedback in this way, SMIs were able to protect themselves from harm while remaining open to constructive insights.

Non-confrontational strategies were commonly used to manage criticism to avoid escalating conflict or inviting further backlash. Instead of engaging in defensive or argumentative conversations, they often responded to negative comments calmly and respectfully, designed to de-escalate tension. This approach allowed them to preserve their public image and avoid being drawn into online disputes but also reinforced a respectful and professional tone in their interactions. For many SMIs, these strategies reflect a commitment to maintaining a positive environment for their followers and staying aligned with their values. They also signified a sense of emotional maturity and growth, allowing SMIs to acknowledge criticism without letting it derail their content or confidence.

Self-validation is also another coping strategy for SMIs when faced with criticism. This involved acknowledging and processing emotional responses to criticism rather than suppressing them. This strategy allows SMIs to experience feelings such as hurt or disappointment without allowing those emotions to undermine their self-worth. Many emphasised the importance of maintaining a strong and authentic sense of identity, which enabled them to remain grounded in their values despite criticism. While they recognised that emotional responses to criticism are natural and valid, they also highlighted the importance of

not allowing such reactions to define them. Instead, they developed a resilient mindset, understanding that criticism is an unavoidable aspect of online visibility and that universal approval is unrealistic. By trusting their intentions and remaining true to themselves, SMIs demonstrated greater emotional strength and confidence in navigating public scrutiny.

Emotion detachment also emerged as a significant coping mechanism. SMIs described developing the ability to disengage emotionally from harmful comments by recognising that much of the criticism they receive is often beyond their control. This detachment helped reduce the psychological distress of online negativity. Rather than dwelling on hurtful or unchangeable aspects, such as their appearance or personal choices, they consciously focused on aspects within their control, such as their content and values. This approach was not a form of avoidance but a conscious and adaptive strategy for maintaining emotional stability. Some participants viewed criticism as temporary and inconsequential in the long term, which helped them continue creating content without being derailed by external negativity. Others emphasised that not all feedback deserved emotional energy, especially when criticism was irrelevant to their content or personal growth.

A related theme was an emotional deflection, which involved reframing criticism as reflecting the critic's internal struggles rather than their shortcomings. SMIs reported shifting their perspective to view negative feedback as projecting the commenter's insecurities, envy, or unresolved personal issues. This reframing enabled participants to distance themselves emotionally from hostile comments, preserving their sense of self. This shift in perspective sometimes led to expressions of empathy or concern for the individual's wellbeing behind the negativity. Others acknowledged that many critics lacked a complete understanding of the SMIs' content and identity, further reducing the relevance of the criticism. By adapting this deflective perspective, SMIs were better equipped to protect their mental wellbeing and remain confident in their sense of self, avoiding unnecessary emotional harm from hostile feedback.

A good support network is critical in helping SMIs manage criticism and maintain emotional stability. Many SMIs emphasised the importance of having trusted individuals, such as close friends, family members, romantic partners, and therapists, who provided emotional support, reassurance and helped SMIs make sense of negative feedback. These relationships offered a buffer against online negativity, helping SMIs reflect on critical feedback without

internalising it. Several SMIs also shared the value of connecting with fellow SMIs, mentioning that while friends and family offered comfort, they often lacked an understanding of the specific challenges of online visibility. Having peers within the influencer space who have faced similar forms of criticism were able to provide more targeted guidance and empathetic support. These support systems helped reduce feelings of isolation, reinforced the SMIs' sense of identity, and contributed to their emotional resilience in navigating the stress created by public criticism.

To cope with negative perceptions associated with the influencer label, several SMIs preferred identifying themselves as “content creator.” This shift in terminology functioned as a strategy for distancing themselves from the stigma linked to the SMI label, which is often associated with superficiality or attention-seeking behaviour. By rebranding themselves as content creators, these individuals aimed to emphasise their work's creative, strategic, and professional dimensions. This reframing also allowed SMIs to assert greater control over their professional identity and resist the stereotypes linked to SMI titles.

Several SMIs have developed a range of practical coping strategies to protect and maintain their wellbeing when facing criticism. One widely used strategy is taking breaks from social media. SMIs shared that stepping away from their online platforms helped them emotionally reset, offering relief from the constant scrutiny and pressure. For some, these breaks were prompted by a build-up of negative feedback over time, leading to moments of emotional burnout. These breaks allowed them to regroup, regain clarity, and return to content creation with a refreshed mindset.

Another key strategy involved setting intentional boundaries around social media usage. SMIs managed their exposure by limiting their time on apps, avoiding frequent content checks, and resisting the urge to scroll excessively. This proactive approach helps reduce emotional strain, prevent obsessive behaviours, and foster a healthier relationship with their online presence. For example, some would delay reviewing feedback on their content to protect their immediate emotional state, while others avoided engaging with performance metrics altogether during certain times.

In addition, ignoring or blocking negative feedback emerged as a common tactic to safeguard emotional wellbeing. Rather than engaging with harmful comments, some participants

removed or blocked users to prevent the negativity from affecting their mindset. This method of protecting themselves from toxic online behaviour allowed them to stay focused on their goals without being discouraged by external judgements.

Participants also shared personal strategies that supported their emotional resilience. These included physical activity, such as going to the gym, and reflective practices, such as daily journaling. Some drew strength from their faith, which provided a sense of grounding and reinforced self-worth while facing criticism. These individuals' approaches were seen as vital in managing stress and maintaining perspectives during criticism.

In summary, New Zealand SMIs use various strategies to cope with criticism, reflecting both proactive and reactive approaches. These strategies help protect their wellbeing and public image, often at the cost of authenticity and creative freedom. While generally effective, many SMIs acknowledged that coping with online negativity is an ongoing process, requiring continuous effort and emotional resilience. Thus, they adapt these strategies to manage their reputations while safeguarding their mental and emotional wellbeing.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis offers several important theoretical contributions by examining how SMIs and their followers navigate visibility, credibility, and criticism within the distinctive cultural context of New Zealand.

First, the study extends the literature on TPS by situating it in the digital SMI landscape, an area largely unexplored in prior research, which has focused on domains such as entrepreneurship, sport, and academia (Feather, 1989; Holmes et al., 2017; Kirkwood & Warren, 2020; Pierce et al., 2017). The findings show that online visibility amplifies social scrutiny, and perceived over-promotion often invites criticism, supporting Feather's (1989) conceptualisation of TPS as a socially acceptable response to success. By highlighting how social media intensifies and makes visible "cutting down" behaviours, this research extends TPS theory to digital contexts.

Second, by integrating social comparison theory, the study reveals how upward comparisons drive followers' critical responses, which are culturally mediated in New Zealand's egalitarian, low power distance society (Festinger, 1954; Hofstede, 2011; Vogel et al., 2014). Followers critique SMIs to restore perceived social balance, illustrating how envy and resentment operate at the intersection of individual cognition and societal norms, thereby extending social comparison theory into culturally grounded online interactions.

Furthermore, this study advances understanding of source credibility within a culturally specific framework (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ohanian, 1990). Findings show that credibility is not static but actively negotiated in response to public scrutiny. SMIs maintain credibility by displaying vulnerability, setting boundaries, and demonstrating authenticity, behaviours aligned with New Zealand's cultural expectations of modesty and genuineness. This insight positions credibility as a continuous, culturally influenced process rather than a fixed attribute, demonstrating how SMIs balance authentic self-presentation with audience expectations.

Moreover, the study advances the TPS and cultural dimension literature by linking Hofstede's low power distance and egalitarianism to the social regulation of success (Hofstede, 2011). Findings indicate that cultural expectations shape the ways SMIs are criticised and compel them to moderate self-promotion. This demonstrates how macro-level cultural norms influence micro-level interactions between SMIs and followers, thereby bridging the gap between cultural theory and social media behaviour.

The research further contributes to understanding cognitive dissonance theory in digital and culturally mediated contexts (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019a). Dissonance manifests when followers both admire and critique an SMI, leading them to "cut down" visible success to restore psychological and cultural balance. This finding extends cognitive dissonance theory into the online, culturally mediated context, illustrating how dissonance drives behaviour in digital spaces.

Another important theoretical advancement of this study is the extension of parasocial and trans-parasocial frameworks by showing that influencer-follower relationships are reciprocal and co-constructed, particularly in egalitarian cultures (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956; Lou, 2022). Followers feel entitled to critique SMIs, shaping both the nature and tone of online

engagement. This challenges the traditional one-sided view of parasocial relationships and provides a more detailed understanding of digital social connections, highlighting the interplay of mutual trust, engagement, and culturally shaped expectations in these co-constructed relationships.

This study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of online harassment by critically examining how culturally accepted forms of criticism, particularly those shaped by TPS norms, can blur the boundary between constructive feedback and subtle harassment. While existing literature largely focuses on extreme forms of online harassment, such as threats, flaming, or trolling, this research draws attention to more socially acceptable but mentally demanding types of criticism. In cultures that value modesty and egalitarianism, critical comments are often framed as accountability or public interest, even when they generate emotional distress. By situating these behaviours within the broader cultural context, this research brings a complex, culturally informed lens of online harassment, showing how normalising criticism can become a mechanism for regulating behaviour and reinforcing social conformity.

Finally, this research uncovers the often overlooked “dark side” of being an SMI, offering an in-depth understanding of the complex impacts of public criticism on New Zealand SMIs. It reveals that criticism not only affects emotional and psychological wellbeing, leading to stress, low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion, but also disrupts social relationships and professional opportunities. The findings highlight how criticism compounds existing social challenges, including mistrust, social isolation and strained personal connections, particularly in the context of New Zealand’s small and competitive influencer landscape. Professionally, criticism influences SMIs’ willingness to engage in public-facing work, shapes self-censorship practices, and creates reputational concerns that affect brand partnerships and offline employment. The study also uncovers how criticism alters SMIs’ sense of identity and emotional resilience over time, with some becoming emotionally desensitised and vulnerable. By understanding these complex and often underexplored effects, the research expands the current understanding of the emotional distress experiences by SMIs and calls for greater attention to the structural and support needed in the influencer space.

In conclusion, this study offers a complex and culturally grounded theoretical contribution to the literature on influencer culture, TPS, and online harassment. By situating SMIs within the

unique sociocultural context of New Zealand, the research extends existing theories and introduces fresh perspectives on how visibility, criticism, and success are negotiated online. It not only broadens the application of TPS and introduces a trans-parasocial lens to digital relationships but also deepens understanding of how socially acceptable criticism can function as a form of subtle harassment. Furthermore, by revealing the emotional, social, and professional impacts of public criticism, the study highlights the urgent need for greater practical frameworks to support the wellbeing of digital creators. Collectively, these contributions highlight the complexity of SMI experiences and invite future research to continue exploring the intersection of culture, identity, and online visibility.

5.4 Managerial (Practical) Contributions

This study also offers several important managerial contributions relevant to a range of stakeholders, including SMIs, followers, marketers, brands, influencer management agencies, social media platforms and policymakers. By uncovering how cultural values, such as egalitarianism, modesty, and authenticity shape the experiences and expectations of New Zealand SMIs, the research provides actionable insights for enhancing digital wellbeing, fostering constructive engagement, and designing culturally informed strategies within the influencer space.

For SMIs, the findings provide practical insights into how New Zealand's cultural values, particularly egalitarianism and humility, influence public expectations around self-promotion, visibility, and perceived authenticity. In particular, the strong emphasis on humility and social equality means that SMIs must carefully manage their personal branding and content strategies to avoid being perceived as boastful or disconnected from their audiences.

Understanding these dynamics can help SMIs navigate the fine line between self-expression and social acceptability, thereby protecting their credibility and emotional wellbeing.

Furthermore, the research shares the perspectives of SMIs on how they have effectively coped with TPS and online criticism, offering encouragement, practical coping strategies, and the reassurance that they are not only facing these challenges.

For social media followers, this study brings attention to their influential role in shaping the digital environment and the emotional experiences of SMIs. Critical comments or unwanted

feedback are often rooted in cultural values that emphasise on modesty and discourage overt displays of success. While such feedback may be perceived as accountability or honesty, it can contribute to the emotional distress and reputational damage of SMIs. By highlighting these effects, this study encourages followers to become more self-aware of how their interactions, such as likes, comments, shares, and criticisms, can support or undermine SMIs, impacting them emotionally, socially and professionally. This insight promotes more mindful, empathetic, and responsible forms of digital engagement that prioritise mutual respect and psychological safety.

For marketers and brands, the findings emphasise the importance of aligning influencer partnerships with cultural expectations and community values. Rather than focusing solely on performance metrics, such as follower counts or engagement rates, marketers are encouraged to assess the authenticity, relatability, and communication style of potential SMIs partners. This research suggests that marketers should select SMIs whose values and self-presentation styles align with local cultural norms, those who demonstrate a culturally appropriate balance of self-promotion and humility, as they are more likely to generate stronger audience trust and long-term brand equity. Moreover, the research suggests that brands should be sensitive to the emotional pressures SMIs face, particularly in small markets such as New Zealand, where visibility is high and criticism can be amplified. Supporting SMIs through transparent communication, access to mental health resources, and long-term relationship-building can enhance both campaign success and influencer wellbeing. These insights support the development of culturally sensitive and effective influencer marketing strategies.

For influencer management agencies, the findings provide a foundation for delivering more targeted support and training to their clients. Agencies can use these insights to develop an onboarding programme and training that prepare SMIs to manage the complexities of being on social media as a public figure, including content moderation, boundary setting, and emotional self-regulation. By recognising TPS as a real and culturally embedded challenge, agencies can offer tailored guidance to help SMIs frame their achievement in inspiring ways rather than alienating their audience. This includes supporting SMIs in handling backlash, maintaining authenticity, and building resilience in the face of criticism, which is essential to sustaining long-term careers in the industry.

For social media platforms and policymakers, this research draws attention to the urgent need for systemic interventions to address the unique emotional and psychological pressures faced by SMIs. It highlights the need for platforms and governing bodies to take a more active role in safeguarding the wellbeing of SMIs by implementing policies to protect them from online harassment, provide mental health support, and promote healthier digital environments. These insights can inform platform guidelines and wellbeing initiatives that prioritise caring for SMIs and foster a more sustainable and supportive online ecosystem.

5.5 Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the study provides valuable insights into how SMIs experience, interpret, and respond to criticism within the New Zealand context, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is culturally and contextually specific, focusing on New Zealand, a country where values such as TPS, egalitarianism and modesty, strongly influence public conversation. While this context provides a rich backdrop for exploring criticism, the findings may not be applicable to SMIs operating in cultures with different norms around success, visibility, and online expression. Future research could extend this work by conducting cross-cultural comparisons to explore how SMIs navigate criticism in varying socio-cultural environments.

Secondly, the study draws on a small, purposively selected sample of SMIs and followers with active reciprocal engagement. While this approach enabled a rich, in-depth understanding of trans-parasocial relationships and experiences of criticism, the limited sample size restricts the generalisability of the findings. The experiences captured may not reflect those of the broader influencer or follower populations, particularly those with different levels of visibility, engagement styles, or platform usage. Future research could strengthen the transferability of findings by including a larger and more diverse participant pool across various influencer types, content categories, and audience segments.

Third, the data relies on self-reported interviews for SMIs and followers' focus groups. These methods are subject to biases, as they rely on participants' willingness to share openly and accurately, which may be affected by social desirability bias and selective memory. In the focus group setting, participants may have conformed to dominant opinions, limiting the

depth and diversity of follower perspectives. Future research could incorporate additional methods, such as one-on-one interviews with followers or digital ethnography, to capture more comprehensive individual experiences.

Moreover, this study primarily focused on interpersonal and cultural factors influencing criticism and did not deeply examine the role of social media platforms in shaping the frequency, visibility, and impact of online criticism. Future research could explore how reporting tools, originally designed to protect social media users, can be weaponised against SMIs, intensifying the criticism they face online.

5.6 Conclusion

This research offers a comprehensive and detailed understanding of how SMIs in New Zealand navigate the complex landscape of public criticism within a cultural context deeply influenced by TPS. It clarifies the motivations behind criticism, the various forms it takes, and the influence of cultural values on how criticism is expressed and perceived.

Additionally, the research highlights the significant social, emotional, psychological, and professional impacts of criticism on SMIs, as well as strategies they use to cope with these challenges.

By providing a thorough of these dynamics, this research contributes valuable knowledge to the fields of SMI studies and highlights the critical role of cultural context in interpreting online interactions. Importantly, it offers practical insight for SMIs, followers, marketers, and platforms seeking to foster healthier, more supportive digital environments. Ultimately, this study lays a solid foundation for future research, advancing our understanding of the complex relationship between criticism, cultural norms such as TPS and the wellbeing of SMIs, which is essential for fostering sustainable and positive online communities.

References

- Abidin, C. (2019). Victim, rival, bully: Influencers' narrative cultures around cyberbullying. In H. Vandebosch & L. Green (Eds.), *Narratives in research and interventions on cyberbullying among young people* (pp. 199–212). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04960-7_13
- AlFarraj, O., Alalwan, A. A., Obeidat, Z. M., Baabdullah, A., Aldmour, R., & Al-Haddad, S. (2021). Examining the impact of influencers' credibility dimensions: Attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise on the purchase intention in the aesthetic dermatology industry. *Review of International Business and Strategy*, 31(3), 355-374. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RIBS-07-2020-0089>
- Arora, A., Bansal, S., Kandpal, C., Aswani, R., & Dwivedi, Y. (2019). Measuring social media influencer index-insights from facebook, twitter and instagram. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 49, 86-101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.03.012>
- Audrezet, A., De Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 557-569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>
- Aw, E. C. X., & Chuah, S. H. W. (2021). "Stop the unattainable ideal for an ordinary me!" fostering parasocial relationships with social media influencers: The role of self-discrepancy. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 146-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.025>
- Balaji, M. S., Jiang, Y., & Jha, S. (2021). Nanoinfluencer marketing: How message features affect credibility and behavioral intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 136, 293-304. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.07.049>
- Barrett, T. (1989). A consideration of criticism. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 23(4), 23-35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333029>
- Beck, A. T. (1979). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. Penguin. <https://bit.ly/4eryjuH>
- Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial relationships with media personae: Why they matter and how they differ among heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 21(3), 457-485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1416295>
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage. <https://shorturl.at/goE7x>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brinol, P., & Petty, R. E. (2009). Source factors in persuasion: A self-validation approach. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 20(1), 49-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280802643640>
- Caliskan, F., Idug, Y., Uvet, H., Gligor, N., & Kayaalp, A. (2024). Social comparison theory: A review and future directions. *Psychology & Marketing*, 41(11), 2823-2840. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22087>
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Egalitarian. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved May 27, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/egalitarian>

- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469-479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>
- Carter, A. E., & Hoy, M. G. (2024). We're all friends here: Examining parasocial interaction on twitch and its effects on strategic communications. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 24(2), 127-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2024.2320343>
- Chen, C. F., & Lu, H. H. (2024). Transforming a social media influencer's influential power to followers' word of mouth and purchase intention: The role of brand attachment, brand credibility, and parasocial relationship. *Journal of Brand Management*, 31(4), 415-429. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00349-2>
- Chen, C. P. (2016). Forming digital self and parasocial relationships on youtube. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(1), 232-254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540514521081>
- Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2017). Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: Implications for celebrity endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34(4), 481-495. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21001>
- Cohen-Charash, Y., & Mueller, J. S. (2007). Does perceived unfairness exacerbate or mitigate interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors related to envy? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 666. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.666>
- Collins, R. L. (1996). For better or worse: The impact of upward social comparison on self-evaluations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(1), 51-69. <https://shorturl.at/87lrL>
- Conde, R., & Casais, B. (2023). Micro, macro and mega-influencers on instagram: The power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship. *Journal of Business Research*, 158, 113708. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113708>
- Contreras, B. (2021, December 3). 'I need my girlfriend off tiktok': How hackers game abuse-reporting systems. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-12-03/inside-tiktoks-mass-reporting-problem>
- Cooper, J. (2012). Cognitive dissonance theory. In P. A. M. K. Van Lange, A. W.; Higgins, E. T. (Ed.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 377-397). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n19>
- Cramer, E. M., Song, H., & Drent, A. M. (2016). Social comparison on facebook: Motivation, affective consequences, self-esteem, and facebook fatigue. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 64, 739-746. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.07.049>
- Daniels, M. E., & Wu, F. (2024). No comments (from you): Understanding the interpersonal and professional consequences of disabling social media comments. *Journal of Marketing*, 88(6), 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429241252842>
- Dewey, J. (2022). *How we think*. DigiCat. <https://tinyurl.com/5dxyvbkp>
- Duffy, B. E., Miltner, K. M., & Wahlstedt, A. (2022). Policing "fake" femininity: Authenticity, accountability, and influencer antifandom. *New Media & Society*, 24(7), 1657-1676. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099234>

- Environmental Health Indicators New Zealand. (n.d.). *Ethnic profile*. Retrieved May 27, 2025, from <https://www.ehinz.ac.nz/indicators/population-vulnerability/ethnic-profile/>
- Erdogan, B. Z. (1999). Celebrity endorsement: A literature review. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15(4), 291-314. <https://doi.org/10.1362/026725799784870379>
- Feather, N. T. (1989). Attitudes towards the high achiever: The fall of the tall poppy. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 41(3), 239-267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049538908260088>
- Feather, N. T. (1991). Attitudes towards the high achiever: Effects of perceiver's own level of competence. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 43(3), 121-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049539108260134>
- Feather, N. T. (1994). Attitudes toward high achievers and reactions to their fall: Theory and research concerning tall poppies. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 26, pp. 1-73). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60151-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60151-3)
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
- Festinger, L. (1962). Cognitive dissonance. *Scientific American*, 207(4), 93-106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24936719>
- Filieri, R., Acikgoz, F., Li, C., & Alguezaui, S. (2023). Influencers' "organic" persuasion through electronic word of mouth: A case of sincerity over brains and beauty. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40(2), 347-364. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21760>
- Fischer, P., Kastenmüller, A., Frey, D., & Peus, C. (2009). Social comparison and information transmission in the work context. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(1), 42-61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00428.x>
- Fragale, A. R., & Heath, C. (2004). Evolving informational credentials: The (mis) attribution of believable facts to credible sources. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(2), 225-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203259933>
- Garcia, S. M., & Tor, A. (2024). Social comparison and competition: General frameworks, focused models, and emerging phenomena. In S. M. Garcia, A. Tor, & A. J. Elliot (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of the psychology of competition* (pp. 401-419). Oxford University Press. <https://tinyurl.com/3yz8xna8>
- Garcia, S. M., Tor, A., & Schiff, T. M. (2013). The psychology of competition: A social comparison perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 634-650. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613504114>
- Gaydos, R. (2025, May 7). *Social media influencer gabriela moura stirs kentucky derby controversy over alleged 'inappropriate' attire*. New York Post. Retrieved May 9, 2025 from <https://nypost.com/2025/05/07/sports/kentucky-derby-influencer-gabriela-moura-sparked-outrage-with-large-hat-at-churchill-downs/>
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), 15-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>
- Haenlein, M., & Libai, B. (2017). Seeding, referral, and recommendation: Creating profitable word-of-mouth programs. *California Management Review*, 59(2), 68-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125617697943>

- Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M., & De Lacey, S. (2016). Qualitative research methods: When to use them and how to judge them. *Human Reproduction*, 31(3), 498-501. <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019a). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.), *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 3-24). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019b). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.), *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology* (2 ed., pp. 3-24). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001>
- Harrington, L., & Liu, J. H. (2002). Self-enhancement and attitudes toward high achievers: A bicultural view of the independent and interdependent self. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33(1), 37-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022102033001003>
- Hassan, S., Yacob, M. I., Nguyen, T., & Zambri, S. (2018). Social media influencer and cyberbullying: A lesson learned from preliminary findings. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 21(7), 103-119. <http://bit.ly/3Gos8uX>
- Heine, S. J., & Lehman, D. R. (1997). Culture, dissonance, and self-affirmation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 389-400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297234005>
- Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture and organizations. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 10(4), 15-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.1980.11656300>
- Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>
- Hofstede, G., & Bond, M. H. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational Dynamics*, 16(4), 5-21. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(88\)90009-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(88)90009-5)
- Holmes, J., Marra, M., & Lazzaro-Salazar, M. (2017). Negotiating the tall poppy syndrome in New Zealand workplaces: Women leaders managing the challenge. *Gender & Language*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.31236>
- Horton, D., & Richard Wohl, R. (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>
- Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. (1951). The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15(4), 635-650. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266350>
- Hu, L., Min, Q., Han, S., & Liu, Z. (2020). Understanding followers' stickiness to digital influencers: The effect of psychological responses. *International Journal of Information Management*, 54, 102169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102169>
- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 37(5), 567-579. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375>

- Johnson, C. (2012). Behavioral responses to threatening social comparisons: From dastardly deeds to rising above. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(7), 515-524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00445.x>
- Jun, S., & Yi, J. (2020). What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(6), 803-814. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-02-2019-2280>
- Kapitan, S., Van Esch, P., Soma, V., & Kietzmann, J. (2022). Influencer marketing and authenticity in content creation. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 30(4), 342-351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18393349211011171>
- Kay, S., Mulcahy, R., & Parkinson, J. (2020). When less is more: The impact of macro and micro social media influencers' disclosure. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(3-4), 248-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1718740>
- Kim, D. Y., & Kim, H.-Y. (2021). Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer marketing on social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 223-232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>
- Kim, D. Y., Park, M., & Kim, H.-Y. (2023). An influencer like me: Examining the impact of the social status of influencers. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 29(7), 654-675. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2022.2066153>
- Kim, J., Liu, J. T., & Chang, S. R. (2022). Trans-parasocial relation between influencers and viewers on live streaming platforms: How does it affect viewer stickiness and purchase intention? *Asia Marketing Journal*, 24(2), 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.53728/2765-6500.1587>
- Kirkwood, J. (2007). Tall poppy syndrome: Implications for entrepreneurship in new zealand. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 13(4), 366-382. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jmo.2007.13.4.366>
- Kirkwood, J., & Warren, L. (2020). Legitimizing entrepreneurial success in an environment of tall poppy syndrome: Lessons from celebrity entrepreneurs in new zealand. *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 21(2), 101-112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465750319845483>
- Labrecque, L. I., Markos, E., & Milne, G. R. (2011). Online personal branding: Processes, challenges, and implications. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 25(1), 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2010.09.002>
- Li, Y. (2019). Upward social comparison and depression in social network settings: The roles of envy and self-efficacy. *Internet Research*, 29(1), 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-09-2017-0358>
- Liu, X., & Zheng, X. (2024). The persuasive power of social media influencers in brand credibility and purchase intention. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11(1), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02512-1>
- Lou, C. (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>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of interactive advertising*, 19(1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>

- Lumivero. (n.d.). *Nvivo* (Version 14) [Computer software].
<https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/>
- Mancl, A. C., & Penington, B. (2011). Tall poppies in the workplace: Communication strategies used by envious others in response to successful women. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 12(1), 79-86.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2011.601701>
- Marques, M. D. (2023). Tall poppy syndrome, heroism, and villainy. In S. T. Allison, J. K. Beggan, & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of heroism studies* (pp. 1-5). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-48129-1_441
- Marques, M. D., Feather, N., Austin, D. E., & Sibley, C. G. (2022). Attitudes towards favoring the fall of tall poppies: The role of social dominance orientation, authoritarianism, political ideologies, and self-esteem. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 162(5), 640-653. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2021.1944034>
- Masuda, H., Han, S. H., & Lee, J. (2022). Impacts of influencer attributes on purchase intentions in social media influencer marketing: Mediating roles of characterizations. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 174, 121246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121246>
- McCarthy, K. (2019, May 21). Is james charles and tati westbrooks's feud over? A new video shows signs of understanding. *ABC News*.
<https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/james-charles-speaks-emotional-41-minute-youtube-video/story?id=63147444>
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 415-444.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415>
- Meisner, C. (2023). The weaponization of platform governance: Mass reporting and algorithmic punishments in the creator economy. *Policy & Internet*, 15(4), 466-477. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi.3.359>
- Miller, M. K., Clark, J. D., & Jehle, A. (2015). Cognitive dissonance theory (festinger). In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*. John Wiley & Sons.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosc058.pub2>
- Moran, S., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2008). When better is worse: Envy and the use of deception. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, 1(1), 3-29.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-4716.2007.00002.x>
- Mouly, V. S., & Sankaran, J. K. (2002). The enactment of envy within organizations: Insights from a new zealand academic department. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 38(1), 36-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886302381003>
- Munnukka, J., Uusitalo, O., & Toivonen, H. (2016). Credibility of a peer endorser and advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 33(3), 182-192.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-11-2014-1221>
- O'Loughlin, C. (2023, July 14). Wealthy influencer sarah's day slammed for tone-deaf post revealing her 'big life update' is that she bought a block of land for a holiday home: 'The rest of us are struggling to pay rent'. *Daily Mail*.
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-11860455/Wealthy-influencer-Sarahs-Day-slammed-tone-deaf-post.html>
- Ohanian, R. (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>

- Ooi, K. B., Lee, V. H., Hew, J. J., Leong, L. Y., Tan, G. W. H., & Lim, A. F. (2023). Social media influencers: An effective marketing approach? *Journal of Business Research*, 160, 113773. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113773>
- Otter.ai. (n.d.). Otter.Ai. <https://otter.ai/>
- Packer, M. (2014). Mimetic theory: Toward a new zealand application. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 44(4), 152-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2014.974623>
- Park, J., Lee, J. M., Xiong, V. Y., Septianto, F., & Seo, Y. (2021). David and goliath: When and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 584-602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980470>
- Peeters, B. (2015). Tall poppies in the land down under: An applied ethnolinguistic approach. *International Journal of Language and Culture*, 2(2), 219-243. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ijolc.2.2.04pee>
- Pierce, S., Hodge, K., Taylor, M., & Button, A. (2017). Tall poppy syndrome: Perceptions and experiences of elite new zealand athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 15(4), 351-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2017.1280834>
- Pradhan, B., Kishore, K., & Gokhale, N. (2023). Social media influencers and consumer engagement: A review and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(6), 2106-2130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12901>
- Ren, S., Karimi, S., Velázquez, A. B., & Cai, J. (2023). Endorsement effectiveness of different social media influencers: The moderating effect of brand competence and warmth. *Journal of Business Research*, 156, 113476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113476>
- Safdar, G., & Khan, A. (2023). Relationship between social anxiety, social comparison and competitive behavior among social media users. *Online Media and Society*, 4(2), 101-108. <https://doi.org/10.71016/oms/2w56b079>
- Schmuck, D., Karsay, K., Matthes, J., & Stevic, A. (2019). "Looking up and feeling down". The influence of mobile social networking site use on upward social comparison, self-esteem, and well-being of adult smartphone users. *Telematics and Informatics*, 42, 101240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2019.101240>
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2021). Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product-endorser fit. In S. Yoon, Y. K. Choi, & C. R. Taylor (Eds.), *Leveraged marketing communications* (1st ed., pp. 208-231). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003155249-12>
- Sedikides, C., & Hepper, E. G. (2009). Self-improvement. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(6), 899-917. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2009.00231.x>
- Shan, Y., Chen, K. J., & Lin, J. S. (2020). When social media influencers endorse brands: The effects of self-influencer congruence, parasocial identification, and perceived endorser motive. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(5), 590-610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1678322>
- Shepherd, I. (2024, May 31). When criticism cuts deep: The power and pitfalls of influencer reviews. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ianshepherd/2024/05/31/when-criticism-cuts-deep-the-power-and-pitfalls-of-influencer-reviews/>

- Solomon, M., Bamossy, G., Askegaard, S., & Hogg, M. (2016). *Consumer behaviour pdf ebook : A european perspective*. Pearson Education Limited.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=5187637>
- Suls, J., & Wheeler, L. (2012). Social comparison theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (pp. 460-482). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n23>
- Takano, M., Taka, F., Ogiue, C., & Nagata, N. (2024). Online harassment of Japanese celebrities and influencers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1386146.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1386146>
- Tesser, A., & Smith, J. (1980). Some effects of task relevance and friendship on helping: You don't always help the one you like. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *16*(6), 582-590. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(80\)90060-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(80)90060-8)
- The Culture Factor Group. (2023). *Country comparison tool*.
<https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool>
- Thomas, K., Kelley, P. G., Consolvo, S., Samermit, P., & Bursztein, E. (2022). "It's common and a part of being a content creator": Understanding how creators experience and cope with hate and harassment online. Proceedings of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, New Orleans, LA, USA. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3501879>
- Trevor-Roberts, E., Ashkanasy, N. M., & Kennedy, J. C. (2003). The egalitarian leader: A comparison of leadership in Australia and New Zealand. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *20*, 517-540. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026395127290>
- Valenzuela-García, N., Maldonado-Guzmán, D. J., García-Pérez, A., & Del-Real, C. (2023). Too lucky to be a victim? An exploratory study of online harassment and hate messages faced by social media influencers. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, *29*(3), 397-421. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-023-09542-0>
- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Roberts, L. R., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *3*(4), 206.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000047>
- Wang, W., Wang, M., Hu, Q., Wang, P., Lei, L., & Jiang, S. (2020). Upward social comparison on mobile social media and depression: The mediating role of envy and the moderating role of marital quality. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *270*, 143-149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.03.173>
- Weinstein, E. (2017). Adolescents' differential responses to social media browsing: Exploring causes and consequences for intervention. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *76*, 396-405. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.07.038>
- Weismueller, J., Harrigan, P., Wang, S., & Soutar, G. N. (2020). Influencer endorsements: How advertising disclosure and source credibility affect consumer purchase intention on social media. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, *28*(4), 160-170.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2020.03.002>
- Wheeler, L. (1966). Motivation as a determinant of upward comparison. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *1*, 27-31. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(66\)90062-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(66)90062-X)
- White, J. B., Langer, E. J., Yariv, L., & Welch, J. C. (2006). Frequent social comparisons and destructive emotions and behaviors: The dark side of social comparisons.

- Journal of Adult Development*, 13, 36-44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-006-9005-0>
- White, J. B., Schmitt, M. T., & Langer, E. J. (2006). Horizontal hostility: Multiple minority groups and differentiation from the mainstream. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 9(3), 339-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430206064638>
- White, R. E., & Cooper, K. (2022). Grounded theory. In *Qualitative research in the post-modern era: Critical approaches and selected methodologies* (Vol. 4, pp. 339–385). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85124-8_9
- Wiedmann, K. P., & Von Mettenheim, W. (2020). Attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise—social influencers’ winning formula? *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 30(5), 707-725. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-06-2019-2442>
- Wills, T. A. (1981). Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological Bulletin*, 90(2), 245. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.90.2.245>
- Yuan, S., & Lou, C. (2020). How social media influencers foster relationships with followers: The roles of source credibility and fairness in parasocial relationship and product interest. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(2), 133-147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>
- Zniva, R., Weitzl, W. J., & Lindmoser, C. (2023). Be constantly different! How to manage influencer authenticity. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 23(3), 1485-1514. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-022-09653-6>

Appendices

Appendix 1

Ethics approval letter



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

8 November 2024

Ken Hyde
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Ken

Re Ethics Application: **24/304 Tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand.**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 6 November 2027.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: Venesse1122@gmail.com

Appendix 2

Information sheet for SMIs



Participant Information Sheet

Information sheet for social media influencers (Phase 1)

Date Information Sheet Produced:

17/09/2024

Project Title

Tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand.

An Invitation

Hello, my name is Venesse Cheng Yan Tong. I am a Master of Business student at Auckland University of Technology, specialising in marketing. My master's research is on the tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand. I invite you to participate in a 45- to 60-minute one-on-one interview to understand your experience as a social media influencer in New Zealand.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research examines the impact of tall poppy syndrome among social media influencers in New Zealand, where successful people often face criticism or are undermined because of their achievements. The study aims to understand how social media influencers in New Zealand experience tall poppy syndrome, how it affects them socially, emotionally, psychologically, and professionally, and what strategies they use to cope. Additionally, the research will explore the motivations of people who criticise influencers, known as detractors, and how cultural differences might influence the nature of the criticism directed at social media influencers.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You are a social media influencer from one of the following cultural groups in New Zealand: Māori/Pasifika, Pākehā, or Asian. You have a minimum of 10,000 followers on one or more social media platforms and exhibit consistent posting behaviour, with at least two weekly posts.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can express your interest in participating by replying to the email invitation. Before the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form; without it, you will not be able to participate. Your involvement is entirely voluntary and will not impact you regardless of your decision to participate. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you can either request the removal of your identifiable data or permit its continued use. However, please note that once the findings are finalised, removing your data may be impossible.

What will happen in this research?

You will participate in a 45 to 60-minute one-on-one interview with the researcher. This interview can occur in a meeting room at the WG Auckland University of Technology building or, if more convenient, in a quiet café or online via Teams. During the interview, you will be asked open-ended questions about your experiences as a social media influencer in New Zealand.

What are the discomforts and risks?

I do not anticipate any discomfort or risks for participants. You can withdraw from the interview at any time without any disadvantage. Your privacy will be safeguarded by using alternative names or labels instead of your real names, ensuring that you are not publicly identified in the research findings and that your confidentiality is maintained.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

n/a

What are the benefits?

Your participation in this study will gain valuable insights that benefit you and the broader community. Firstly, your involvement is crucial for supporting my academic journey toward completing my master's degree. Secondly, your insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of how TPS impact your emotional and professional well-being. By engaging in this research, you can gain important perspectives on the challenges posed by public criticism and

learn effective coping strategies to manage TPS-related negativity. This knowledge aims to enhance your resilience, improve your emotional well-being, and strengthen your ability to navigate the professional obstacles inherent in the digital landscape.

Additionally, this study will provide non-social media influencer, with an opportunity to reflect their motivations and behaviours related to TPS, fostering greater self-awareness and empathy toward social media influencers.

The wider community will also benefit from this research. The insights gained will help brands and marketers better understand the dynamics of influencer marketing and the challenges influencers face, leading to the development of more effective and empathetic marketing strategies. Furthermore, this research can inform the creation of support systems and resources for influencers, assisting them in managing the effects of TPS and enhancing their overall well-being. The study will also explore how TPS manifests within the unique cultural context of New Zealand, offering valuable perspectives for both local researchers and international scholars interested in the influence of egalitarian values on social behaviour.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your privacy will be protected by using pseudonyms or alternative labels instead of participants' real names, ensuring confidentiality. No individual names or contact details will be recorded or reported. All data will be analysed and presented in summary form to prevent the identification of personal responses. Your information will remain confidential, and results will not be shared with third parties.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

About 45 to 60 minutes of participants will be requested.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You have two weeks to consider this invitation.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

After the thesis is completed, a research project summary will be available for those interested in reading it.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Ken Hyde, ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Researcher Contact Details: Venesse Cheng Yan Tong (csq5407@autuni.ac.nz)

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Assoc.Prof. Ken Hyde, ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEK Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix 3

Information sheet for followers



Participant Information Sheet

Information sheet for participants who are not social media influencers participating in a focus group (Phase 2)

Date Information Sheet Produced:

17/09/2024

Project Title

Tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand.

An Invitation

Hello, my name is Venesse Cheng Yan Tong. I am a Master of Business student at Auckland University of Technology, specialising in marketing. My master's research is on the tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand. I invite you to participate in 60 to 90-minute focus group interviews to understand your views on social media influencers in New Zealand.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research examines the impact of tall poppy syndrome among social media influencers in New Zealand, where successful people often face criticism or are undermined because of their achievements. The study aims to understand how social media influencers in New Zealand experience tall poppy syndrome, how it affects them socially, emotionally, psychologically, and professionally, and what strategies they use to cope. Additionally, the research will explore the motivations of people who criticise influencers, known as detractors, and how cultural differences might influence the nature of the criticism directed at social media influencers.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You are 18 and above, not a social media influencer, and belong to one of the following cultural groups: Māori, Pasifika, Pākehā, or Asian. You have fewer than 10,000 followers on any of your social media platforms, engage in social media for at least 30 minutes daily, and follow at least one social media influencer.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can express your interest in participating by replying to the email invitation. Before the focus group, you will need to sign a consent form; without it, you will not be able to participate. Your involvement is entirely voluntary and will not impact you regardless of your decision to participate. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you can either request the removal of your identifiable data or permit its continued use. However, please note that once the findings are finalised, removing your data may be impossible.

What will happen in this research?

You will participate in a 60 to 90-minute focus group session with approximately four other participants. This focus group will take place in a meeting room at the WG Auckland University of Technology building or, if more convenient, online via Teams. During the focus group, you will be asked open-ended questions about your opinions about social media influencers in New Zealand. Following the focus group, you may be invited to a follow-up interview if you have shared critical perspectives and negative views about social media influencers. This additional interview aims to explore these viewpoints in greater depth.

What are the discomforts and risks?

I do not anticipate any discomfort or risks for participants. You can withdraw from the focus group at any time without any disadvantage. Your privacy will be safeguarded by using alternative names or labels instead of your real names, ensuring that you are not publicly identified in the research findings and that your confidentiality is maintained.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

n/a

What are the benefits?

Your participation in this study will provide valuable insights that will benefit various stakeholders and society at large. Firstly, your involvement is crucial to supporting my academic journey toward completing my master's degree. Secondly, your participation will benefit social media influencers by offering them important insights into how TPS affect their emotional and professional well-being. By understanding the challenges posed by public criticism, social media influencers can learn effective coping strategies to manage TPS-related negativity. This knowledge can enhance their resilience, improve their emotional well-being, and strengthen their ability to navigate professional obstacles in the digital landscape.

Additionally, this study will provide you, as a non-social media influencer, with an opportunity to reflect on your motivations and behaviours related to TPS, fostering greater self-awareness and empathy toward social media influencers.

The wider community will also benefit from this research. The insights gained will help brands and marketers better understand the dynamics of influencer marketing and the challenges influencers face, leading to the development of more effective and empathetic marketing strategies. Furthermore, this research can inform the creation of support systems and resources for influencers, assisting them in managing the effects of TPS and enhancing their overall well-being. The study will also explore how TPS manifests within the unique cultural context of New Zealand, offering valuable perspectives for both local researchers and international scholars interested in the influence of egalitarian values on social behaviour.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your privacy will be protected by using pseudonyms or alternative labels instead of participants' real names, ensuring confidentiality. No individual names or contact details will be recorded or reported. All data will be analysed and presented in summary form to prevent the identification of personal responses. Your information will remain confidential, and results will not be shared with third parties.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

About 60 to 90 minutes of participants will be requested.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You have two weeks to consider this invitation.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

After the thesis is completed, a research project summary will be available for those interested in reading it.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Ken Hyde, ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Researcher Contact Details: Venesse Cheng Yan Tong (csq5407@autuni.ac.nz)

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Assoc.Prof. Ken Hyde, ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date final ethics approval was granted*, AUTEK Reference number *type the reference number*.

Appendix 4

Content form for SMIs



Consent Form

Project title: Tall Poppy Syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand

Project Supervisor: **Ken Hyde**

Researcher: **Venesse Cheng Yan Tong**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 17/09/2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8 November 2024 AUTEK Reference number 24/304.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 5

Content form for followers



Consent Form

Project title: Tall Poppy Syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand

Project Supervisor: **Ken Hyde**

Researcher: **Venese Cheng Yan Tong**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd 17/09/2024.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8 November 2024 AUTEK Reference number 24/304.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 6

Interview guide for SMIs

Follow-Up Questions

- Can you elaborate on that?
- How did that situation make you feel?
- What led you to that conclusion?
- Have you noticed any changes over time?
- Can you give an example of that?
- How did you handle that experience?

Interview script for social media influencers

Hello, I'm Venesse, a Master of Business student at Auckland University of Technology, specialising in marketing. Thank you so much for taking the time to be part of this interview for my Master's thesis on tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand. Your insights are invaluable, and everything you share will be kept confidential. I'll be asking you a few questions today, so feel free to let me know if you'd like me to repeat or clarify anything. Take your time with your responses—there's no rush. This interview should take about 45 to 60 minutes. Is it okay if I audio-record our conversation for note-taking purposes?

General Questions

1. Do you identify as a social media influencer? What does that title mean to you?
2. What type of content do you create?
3. What social media platforms do you use most often, and how have these platforms shaped your journey as an influencer?

Audience and Feedback

1. Can you describe your follower base and the feedback you typically receive?
2. Do you find that comments vary based on the platform? Is one more positive than others?
3. How do you usually react to criticism, and how does it impact you?

The Tall Poppy Syndrome

1. Do you know what tall poppy syndrome is, what does it mean to you?
2. Has it been relevant to your experience as an influencer?

3. Have you ever felt judged or isolated as a social media influencers? Can you remember a time when you felt like that?

Cultural Context

1. How do you think people in New Zealand generally feel about success? Has that affected your experiences as an influencer?
2. Do you think different cultural groups in New Zealand view public recognition differently? If so, how?

Motivation for detractors

1. What do you think motivates some individuals to criticise or undermine influencers?
2. In what ways do you think feelings of envy might influence how followers behave toward influencers?
3. In what way do you think people's cultural backgrounds affect how they interact with or view influencers? If so, can you think of any examples?
4. Do you think some followers feel threatened by influencer success? If so, how does that show in their behavior?

Emotional and Psychological Impact

1. How has receiving positive, neutral, or negative feedback impacted your relationships with other influencers, friends, or family?
2. How have your relationships with others changed since you became an influencer? Can you give an example?
3. How has public criticism impacted your career opportunities or professional growth?
4. Has public feedback ever led you to reconsider your career path?
5. How does negative feedback impact your mental health and self-esteem?
6. How has criticism affected how you view yourself and your identity as an influencer?
7. Have there been moments when you questioned your abilities or worth because of public feedback?

Coping Strategies

1. Have you developed any personal rituals or habits that help maintain your mental well-being while being an influencer?

2. What methods do you use and find most effective for managing stress related to public feedback?
3. Do you have any support systems in place to help you cope?

Reflection

1. Is there any advice you would give to other influencers about handling public feedback?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences that we haven't covered?
3. Would you want a copy of our interview transcript to check it?

Thank you and I will send the prezze giftcard to your email.

Appendix 7

Interview guide for followers

Interview guide for focus group

Hello everyone, I'm Venesse, a Master of Business student at Auckland University of Technology, specialising in marketing. Thank you for participating in this focus group for my Master's thesis on the tall poppy syndrome and social media influencers in New Zealand. I really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts—it's going to be a really valuable discussion.

Before we get started, I just want to go over a couple of things to keep everything running smoothly:

- This is a safe, judgment-free space, so feel free to be open and honest. There are no right or wrong answers, and I want everyone to feel comfortable sharing.
- This is a conversation, so feel free to add to each other's points or share your own perspective.
- Let's keep it respectful—different opinions are welcome, and that's what makes these discussions interesting.
- What we talk about here stays in this room. Everything you say will remain confidential.
- You don't have to answer every single question. Jump in when you feel like you have something to share, and it's totally okay to pass if you don't.
- Let's try to take turns talking so everyone has a chance to contribute.
- I'll do my best to keep us on track, but if we drift off-topic, I'll gently bring us back so we can make the most of our time together.

That's it for the housekeeping—does anyone have any questions before we start?

Could everyone please put their phones on silent? If you'd like to have your drink, can you please open it now.

This session should take about 60 to 90 minutes. Is it okay if I audio-record our conversation for note-taking purposes?

General questions

1. How would you define a social media influencer?
2. Do you follow any New Zealand influencers? Which platform do you follow them on, and what content do they post?
3. How do you feel about social media influencers in New Zealand?
4. How do you usually show support to an influencer?

5. Have you ever posted any positive comments to an influencer? Can you share an example and what motivated you to do so?
6. What do you believe motivates people to criticise social media influencers in New Zealand?
7. What impacts do you think criticism has on social media influencers, personally and professionally?
8. Have there been times when you have felt the need to criticise a social media influencer? What led you to that point? Can you describe any specific reasons or situations?
9. What methods do you use to express your criticism about a social media influencer?
10. How do you feel about the potential impact of your criticism on the influencers you target?

Cultural Context

1. Can you share how your cultural background shapes your views and interactions with social media influencers? Are there specific examples you can provide?
2. Are there particular cultural factors from your background that influence how you criticize social media influencers?

Understanding the Tall Poppy Syndrome

1. How do you think New Zealand's cultural attitudes toward success and recognition impacts people's behaviour towards social media influencers in New Zealand?
2. What is your understanding of the tall poppy syndrome? How would you describe it in your own words?

Tall poppy syndrome refers to a phenomenon in which people criticize, attack, or resent someone due to their success. It's often associated with New Zealand and Australia. They just want to cut down the tall poppy

Influencer Responses

1. In your opinion, how do influencers handle the criticism they receive? Have you noticed any specific strategies or approaches they use to manage it?

Reflection and Closing

1. After discussing these topics, has your perspective on criticising social media influencers changed?
2. Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't covered or any questions about the research?

Thank you and I will send the prezze giftcard to your email.