

Competence is power: How digital influencers impact buying decisions in B2B markets

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ABSTRACT

In B2B markets, vendor companies increasingly rely upon influential individuals in the digital environment to communicate information about their offerings to client organizations. Given the growing B2B digital engagement, cues that help to differentiate highly impactful digital influencers are crucial for vendor companies. Drawing from Stereotype Content Model, we analyze competence and warmth as relevant cues of digital influencers. Employing experimental studies, we examine how competence and warmth influence B2B purchasing managers' evaluation and selection of vendors' solutions. We find that the digital influencers' competence enhances purchasing managers' intention to buy the advocated vendor's offering. When compared with warmth, competence minimizes capability and relational concerns associated with the purchase decision. Further, we show that such effect of competence is prominent when manager-influencer identification is low. Our research advances knowledge on the characteristics of digital influencers that shape B2B purchasing managers' evaluation and selection of vendors. We identify concern-based psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of influencers' characteristics, and related boundary conditions. Our findings provide implications for digital influencers seeking to expand reach in B2B markets, and for vendor companies and marketing agencies in the selection of digital influencers.

1. Introduction

When marketing technologically advanced business products and services, B2B companies strive to provide accurate and relevant information that could help potential clients to evaluate and select the vendor and their offering (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). The digital sphere has created opportunities for new approaches of communicating information to the client companies (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019). An increasingly popular approach is to engage influential individuals in the digital space; these individuals are commonly referred to as “digital influencers” (Forbes, 2019; Valsesia, Proserpio, & Nunes, 2020). In the technology sector, for instance, TE Connectivity successfully engaged a well-known YouTube influential to raise awareness of the brand and its reputation for the engineering of Andretti's Formula E electric race car (Melzer & Zech, 2018). Similarly, for Cisco, technology enthusiasts and influencers called ‘Cisco Champions’ shared the brand's expertise online, generating engagement via social media mentions and

product tweets (Cisco Community, 2021). Investments in new forms of marketing communications, such as influencer marketing, are growing, with business spending projected to reach USD15 billion by 2022 (Business Insider, 2021), a sum equivalent to 70% of digital marketing budgets (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021).¹

The relevance of digital influencers in consumer (B2C) markets is well-established. While the B2C literature on digital influencers is expanding, research in B2B markets remains scant. B2B marketing literature has so far focused on examining the effect of online references (Aarikka-Stenroos, Sandberg, & Lehtimäki, 2014), testimonials, and case studies (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010) on buying agents' purchase decisions. Other streams of work investigate information strategies employed by vendor firms and representatives including salespeople (Gao, Ghosh, & Qian, 2018; Hartmann, Plouffe, Kohsuwan, & Cote, 2020). The B2B literature, however, is yet to address the role of digital influencers who are increasingly being deployed by vendor companies to influence the decisions of potential client organizations. In practice,

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¹ See Appendix A for examples of B2B companies engaging influentials in the digital sphere.

digital influencers can play a pivotal role in facilitating vendor assessment and selection, assisting key members of the buying center in their decision making (Gao et al., 2018). Client organizations might attend to the digital influencers' characteristics and employ those as cues to evaluate vendors and ultimately make purchase decisions. B2B literature shows that country of origin image, for instance, acts as a relevant cue in shaping buyers' preferences and decisions (Jacob & Schätzle, 2020; Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). Similarly, recent evidence suggests that the characteristics of an entrepreneur endorser, including their expertise and trustworthiness, provide important information about human capital that customers attend to (Yuan, Moon, Wang, Yu, & Kim, 2021).

Research in B2C markets suggests that digital influencers impact followers' purchase intentions through building parasocial relationships, that is, in the form of make-believe relationships developed by consumers with a media personality (Farivar, Wang, & Yuan, 2021; Horton & Wohl, 1956). In B2B markets, the intricacies and high stakes involved in business decision-making imply a somewhat complex mechanism by which digital influencers shape purchasing managers' decisions (e.g., Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Lee & Watkins, 2016). While evaluating information communicated by digital influencers, client firms seek to assess risk in order to lower uncertainty attached with the purchase decision. For instance, client organizations are not merely interested in a vendor's offering, but also in the likely performance and potential for cooperation with the vendor (Schätzle & Jacob, 2019). Purchasing managers are, therefore, likely to exercise extra caution when assessing vendors and their offerings and in making purchase decisions (Yuan et al., 2021). The above indicates a different mechanism functioning in B2B markets when evaluating information advocated by digital influencers, as compared with parasocial relationship building suggested in consumer literature. Thus, a new theoretical perspective that unravels mechanisms by which digital influencers can assist vendor companies in their marketing efforts, and purchasing managers in buying decisions, is valuable.

Against the above backdrop, our research aims to understand how the characteristics of digital influencers are attended to by purchasing managers when evaluating vendors and making purchase decisions. Drawing on the theoretical perspective from impression formation literature (Wojciszke & Abele, 2008), and the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), we posit that the universal stereotypes of competence and warmth denote important trait characteristics of digital influencers. The stereotypes serve as a cue for purchasing managers to infer uncertainty associated with the purchase of a vendor's offering, with downstream consequences on their intentions to buy the offering. An inference-making process is activated, wherein stereotypes help managers to select a vendor's offering (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Fiske et al., 2002).

Our findings show that purchasing managers attach more value to competence stereotype than warmth, when making a decision about a vendor's offering. Lowered concerns about capability and opportunistic behavior are identified as a meaningful psychological mechanism underlying the effect of digital influencers' characteristics on purchasing managers' decisions (Güntürkün, Haumann, & Mikolon, 2020). Furthermore, we show that the effect of competence is particularly marked when identification between the purchasing manager and the digital influential is low. Consistent with interpersonal identification literature in marketing (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Wieseke, Kraus, Ahearne, & Mikolon, 2012), a less objective and rather biased judgment is triggered when identification is high. Competence, which is an objective measure, is leveraged when identification is low.

By documenting how stereotypes serve as a cue of influence in vendors' evaluation, our research contributes to theory in three important ways. First, we advance knowledge on the characteristics of social influence in the digital environment. We do so by examining the two universal stereotypes captured by warmth and competence and their effect on purchasing managers' decisions (Fiske et al., 2002). Notably, we provide evidence that in B2B markets, competence effectively

supports evaluations of vendor companies and their offerings. Second, we advance research on the concern-based mechanisms explaining the effect of digital influencers' characteristics on managers' intentions to purchase technologically advanced business solutions. We show the sequential mediating effect of capability and relational concerns in explaining how digital influencers' characteristics impact purchasing managers' decisions (Das & Teng, 2001; Güntürkün et al., 2020). Third, we advance literature on interpersonal identification by establishing the level of identification at which the advantageous effect of competence stereotype holds. At a broader level, our research advances B2B marketing literature by examining, for the first time, the role of digital influencers in the evaluation and selection of vendors. From a managerial perspective, our findings shed light on managers' understanding of the stereotypes attached to digital influencers and the downstream effect on vendor selection decisions. Our paper offers actionable insights for vendor companies and agencies engaging digital influencers as part of marketing efforts as well as to B2B digital influencers.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Extant B2B research demonstrates the growing scholarly interest in B2B social media marketing. A review of the literature suggests that the adoption of social media marketing in B2B markets is driven by a variety of factors, including perceptions of social media usefulness and effectiveness (e.g., Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014; Lacka & Chong, 2016; Steyn, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2010), ease of use (e.g., Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015), individual factors such as commitment (e.g., Guesalaga, 2016) as well as organizational factors such as organizational competence and innovativeness (e.g., Guesalaga, 2016; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Siamagka et al., 2015). A number of business outcomes have been linked to social media usage in B2B markets. Among others, social media usage has been associated with improved competitive intelligence and selling behavior, as well as sales performance (Itani, Agnihotri, & Dingus, 2017), enhanced trust in salespersons' ability, integrity and benevolence, which ultimately impact customer loyalty (Zhang & Li, 2019), customer satisfaction (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016) and more generally business performance (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016).

Within this growing body of work, the role played by influential individuals operating in the B2B digital space has thus far remained unaddressed. The B2B literature on digital influencers is limited to practice-oriented publications (e.g., Melzer and Zech, 2018), and scholarly research in the domain is confined to the analysis of corporate online references (e.g., Tóth, Nieroda, & Koles, 2020) and electronic word-of-mouth recommendations (e.g., Jalkala & Salminen, 2009). We advance this body of work by analyzing the role of digital influencers in the evaluation of vendors' business solution offerings.

2.1. The characteristics of digital influencers

In influencer marketing literature, a prominent stream of studies focuses on the characteristics turning individuals in the digital sphere into 'influentials'.² Our study is located within the above body of research. We present a review of the relevant literature in marketing in Appendix B (the Appendix includes how our study contrasts vis-à-vis the reviewed sources). As evidenced in the review, scholarly research on the characteristics that influence the success of influencers is sparse. Beyond the studies in the domain of computer science that focus on numeric requirements, such as the number of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), page rank and the number of retweets or mentions

² We use the term "influentials" to refer to individuals who exert influence on the attitudes and behaviors of others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Valsesia et al., 2020). "Digital influencers" specifically concern influentials in the digital sphere.

(Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010), empirical studies in marketing are still emerging. Marketing literature has long relied upon the source-credibility model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Studies have emphasized attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness as characteristics explaining influencers' strength of influence (e.g., Balabanis & Chatzopoulou, 2019), along with the effect on customer trust (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019) and perceptions (e.g., Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020).

From the perspective of the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), expertise relates to the domain of competence, while trustworthiness taps into one's intentions, hence warmth, while both can influence attractiveness. In practice, expertise and trustworthiness only partially capture the universal stereotypes of warmth and competence. Expertise does not account for other dimensions of competence such as efficiency and dominance (e.g., Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). Likewise, trustworthiness represents one of the facets of warmth yet overlooks other aspects such as being friendly and caring (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). It follows that examining expertise and trustworthiness reveals only a partial picture of the effect of characteristics of influencers. Recent evidence from Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) points to the possibility that the low importance of expertise in influencer marketing could be explained by high warmth attributed to influencers. Such an effect should be evident when competence and warmth stereotypes are explicitly compared.

Moreover, research addressing the psychological process by which the characteristics of digital influencers impact decision-making is limited and provides motivation for further research. This is especially important in B2B markets where the evaluation of suppliers and of their complex technological offerings is associated with high levels of uncertainty, as buying firms cannot fully assess the supplier and/or the future state of the technology (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020). In B2C markets, influencers not only share content for utilitarian reasons, but also for altruistic or self-enhancement purposes (e.g., Wojnicki & Godes, 2008). In B2B markets, by contrast, influencers can be crucial in helping key decision makers at buying centers to gain pivotal information about vendors and their offerings, thereby informing vendor selection. Our study addresses the above limitations by analyzing the effect of influencers' characteristics on managers' intentions to purchase technological solutions.

2.2. Digital influencers in vendor evaluation: the role of stereotypes

Our premise is that, in B2B markets, purchasing managers evaluate digital influencers based on information conveyed by stereotypes, and this can have meaningful downstream consequences. According to the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002), individuals form social perceptions based on stereotypes. Stereotypes are best captured by the two universal dimensions of social cognition, namely warmth and competence (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fiske et al., 2007). As put forth by Fiske et al. (2007: 1), warmth captures “*traits related to perceived intent, including friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness and morality*”, while competence reflects “*traits concerning perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy*”.

The dimensions of competence and warmth were originally developed to explain intergroup perceptions, and specifically, society's overgeneralized beliefs about the characteristics of certain social groups (Fiske et al., 2002). Seminal work in psychology (Cuddy et al., 2007) as well as in marketing (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020) however suggests that predictions based on the Stereotype Content Model operate at the level of interpersonal interactions as well as intergroup interactions. Research has also applied the two dimensions to the study of consumer

perceptions of brands as intentional agents (e.g., Aaker et al., 2010; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). Proposing the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), Kervyn et al. (2012) show that individuals relate to brands in a social way, similar to how they relate to people. Social perceptions of competence and warmth are, therefore, meaningful for brand evaluations. Our analysis is at the level of interpersonal interactions, based on which the universal stereotypes of competence and warmth underlie managers' perceptions of influencers and shape behavioral reactions (Cuddy et al., 2009). Given their leverage on personal branding, digital influencers are intentional agents as well, and are evaluated based on warmth and competence. Having established the relevance of warmth and competence stereotypes, we focus on the hypothesized effect of influencers' characteristics on purchasing managers' evaluation of vendors.

2.3. The impact of stereotypes on managers' purchase intentions

As fundamental and distinct dimensions of social perceptions, warmth and competence have traditionally been examined for their individual effect on judgments (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 1996; Wojciszke, 2005). Past psychological research refers to warmth as having a privileged position in influencing interpersonal judgments (e.g., Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Stellar & Willer, 2018). This is due to information about warmth being more malleable and readily available than competence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), thus processed faster (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011). The seeming importance of warmth is also attributed to its impact on wider, nonspecific benefits gained by the perceiver, such as social acceptance, well-being, and integrity (Carrier, Dompnier, & Yzerbyt, 2019; Montoya & Horton, 2014).

The literature further reveals that in situations where companies and brands are involved, the primacy of stereotypes is highly contextual, thus driven by the circumstances under which one or the other stereotype is elicited. In fact, the primacy of warmth over competence is observed in contexts where warmth-related traits are prominent, such as in cases where brands engage in CSR (e.g., Bolton & Mattila, 2015; Shea & Hawn, 2019), or launch social innovations (e.g., Crisafulli, Dimitriu, & Singh, 2020). In a similar way, competence can take primacy in situations where establishing the competence of others is fundamental toward social perception formation. Cuddy, Glick, and Beninger (2011) explain the situation of a recruiter mandated to evaluate the suitability of applicants for a job, where the very goal of the perceiver (the recruiter) is to assess the competence of others (the applicants). The perceiver here stands to benefit from recruiting a capable applicant. The aims of the perceiver and of the receiver are interdependent, and this impacts primacy to competence (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Carrier et al., 2019). In sum, we advance the view that the predominant position of one stereotype over the other is situational and dictated by the context within which social perceptions are formed.

The above can apply to situations where purchasing managers evaluate vendor companies and their offerings prior to making buying decisions that often require high levels of financial involvement (Kennedy & Deeter-Schmelz, 2001). Under such circumstances, purchasing managers rely upon influencers in order to make advantageous decisions (Moriarty & Spekman, 1984). In particular, competence can lower risk perceptions and can be crucial toward the accomplishment of the purchasing manager's goals (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2011). By contrast, wider and nonspecific benefits, such as social acceptance, well-being, and integrity, accorded by warmth, are likely given lower importance (e.g., Carrier et al., 2019). We posit that in B2B markets, competence is not merely a sign of skill and efficiency, but a necessary component toward

goal attainment. Competence of digital influencers, therefore, will have primacy over warmth in shaping managers' intentions to purchase a vendor's offering. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1. In vendors' evaluation contexts, digital influencers' competence (vs warmth) increases purchasing managers' intentions of buying the advocated vendor's offering.

2.4. *The concern-based mechanisms underlying the effect of stereotypes on managers' purchase intentions*

Past psychological research frequently models emotional reactions of contempt, admiration, envy, and pity, as explanatory mechanism of the differential effects of warmth and competence stereotypes on various outcomes (e.g., Ivens, Leischnig, Muller, & Valta, 2015; Kervyn et al., 2012). The reliance on emotions is not surprising given the theoretical roots of stereotyping literature focusing on emotional reactions to person and/or group perceptions (Fiske et al., 2007). Recent research, however, suggests alternative mechanisms that explain how stereotypes help to reduce uncertainty and latent concerns about the capability and goodwill of others (e.g., Abele & Brack, 2013; Güntürkün et al., 2020; Wojciszke, 2005; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). We argue that uncertainty reduction is particularly important when evaluating and selecting vendors advocated by influencers in B2B markets, as purchase decisions invariably entail both performance and relational risks (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020; Das & Teng, 2001; Yuan et al., 2021). This is in contrast with consumer research suggesting that influencers impact followers' purchase intentions through building parasocial relationships, that is in the form of make-believe relationships developed by consumers with a media personality (Farivar et al., 2021; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

We theorize two concerns-based mechanisms, namely capability and relational concerns, to explain the relationship between stereotypes concerning the digital influencer and managers' purchase intentions. As elucidated in service research, capability concerns “relate to the substance of the exchange that is determined by the degree to which the service provision is effective and of high quality” (Güntürkün et al., 2020, p. 484). Research suggests that competence is highly pertinent when capability concerns are important (Das & Teng, 2001; Ybarra et al., 2001). In circumstances of vendor evaluation and selection, wherein decisions can impact business operations and the attainment of business goals (e.g., Smith & Barclay, 1997; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998), we expect competence to be pivotal. Digital influencers who are perceived as competent can lower capability concerns of purchasing managers.

In addition to capability concerns, prior marketing research stresses the importance of relational uncertainty and associated concerns in business relationships (Das & Teng, 1996; 2001). Relational concerns refer to the likelihood of opportunistic behavior by another party in the relationship (Liu, Li, Tao, & Wang, 2008; Nooteboom, Berger, & Noorderhaven, 1997). In service research, warmth is found to reduce relational concerns more strongly than capability concerns while competence lowers capability concerns more (Güntürkün et al., 2020). This effect is explained by the context in which customer decisions are made. When exchange norms dominate the relationship with the service provider, capability concerns are salient, and competence is highly diagnostic. By contrast, decisions grounded on a relational bond with the service provider make relational concerns more salient (Güntürkün et al., 2020). The above evidence reaffirms the contextual nature of stereotype adoption advanced earlier, and consequently the notion that attitudes toward others depend on the individual accomplishment of personal goals (Carrier et al., 2019).

When evaluating a vendor's offering advocated by a digital influencer, purchasing managers might deliberate uncertainty concerning opportunistic intent, in addition to assessing capability issues (e.g., Güntürkün et al., 2020; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). While lowering capability concerns, competence is an equally important aspect when making inferences about intent. This is consistent with the view that competence predicts the perceived chances of success in cooperation contexts, while also affecting impressions of good intent and integrity (Carrier et al., 2019; Das & Teng, 2001). We argue, therefore, that capability and relational concerns are intertwined in such a way that competence lowers capability concerns by increasing the prospect of achieving business goals, while also impacting positive impressions about the intent of digital influencers. Lowered capability concerns driven by the competence stereotype minimize relational concerns. Therefore, we posit that capability and relational concerns will sequentially mediate the effect of competence on purchasing managers' intentions. The hypothesized effect finds further theoretical grounding in the B2B research on inter-organizational trust (e.g., Yu, Chen, Guan, & Zhang, 2021). This body of work suggests that competence trust (i.e., beliefs about a partner organization's professional expertise) and affective or goodwill trust (i.e., faith in a partner organization's intentions) facilitate inter-organizational collaboration and knowledge sharing (Shou, Guo, Zhang, & Su, 2011; Yu et al., 2021) and contribute positively to alliance performance (Jiang, Jiang, Cai, & Liu, 2015). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2. In vendors' evaluation contexts, the effect of digital influencers' competence (vs warmth) on purchasing managers' intentions of buying the advocated vendor's offering is sequentially mediated by capability and relational concerns.

2.5. *The moderating effect of manager-influencer identification*

The preceding discussion proposes that competence has an advantage over warmth in explaining digital influencers' impact on managers' purchase decisions. When compared with warmth, competence is more effective at lowering concerns around performance and intentions inherent to decisions to select a vendor's offering. Given that past social perception research suggests that warmth is as important as competence when it comes to determining interpersonal identification (Abele, Ellemers, Fiske, Koch, & Yzerbyt, 2021; Abele & Hauke, 2020), a theoretically and practically relevant question relates to whether factors such as the purchasing manager-influencer identification contributes to weakening or strengthening the hypothesized effect of stereotypes. Identification is therefore a potentially relevant boundary condition to the effect of competence in shaping purchasing managers' decisions.

The literature on the Stereotype Content Model suggests that people are generally interested in the effective pursuit of their own goals and in benevolent relationships with others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). People, therefore, perceive and evaluate the self and others in a way that their own goals are maximized (Kunda, 1999). In this sense, warmth and competence have an adaptive value depending on whether they are profitable to the self (i.e., self-profitable) or to others (i.e., other-profitable) (Peeters, 1992). The competence stereotype is generally perceived as self-profitable, and as likely to enable individuals' expansion of the self and attainment of goals. The warmth stereotype, on the other hand, is considered as other-profitable. Being friendly and warm is useful to others' attainment of goals, as such traits are indicative of someone who is respectful of others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Accordingly, competence should be a particularly dominant concern

when evaluating the self, while warmth should overshadow the evaluation of others.

We contend that the reasoning, however, is more intricate. Competence can, under certain conditions, be considered as an other-profitable stereotype (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). For instance, when traits such as being competent and efficient are pivotal in the pursuit of goals that are desirable to both the self and others, competence can be at the same time can be both self- and other-profitable. We argue that the dual nature of competence as being self- and other-profitable applies to contexts where purchasing managers evaluate vendors' offerings advocated by digital influencers. In such contexts, competence has individual and social utility, given the usefulness of advocated information for the purchasing manager deliberating their buying decisions (Peeters, 1992). Such dual nature of competence is plausible in terms of the specific relationship between a purchasing manager and the digital influencer, as manifested in interpersonal identification.

When the purchasing manager and the digital influencer are highly interdependent, identification is on the *high* end of the scale, as the goal attainment of the influencer is likely to be important for purchasing managers' goal attainment (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). In such circumstances, warmth and competence are equally important stereotypes, as postulated in prior research (Abele et al., 2021). We, therefore, expect that competence of the digital influencer will not have a differential advantage over warmth. The effect is reversed when identification is on the *medium to low* end of the scale, and competence gains more importance than warmth. In cases of low identification, the degree of goal attainment of the digital influencer would be irrelevant to the purchasing manager (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). In such instances, reliable information regarding the digital influencer's competence is most useful. Competence rests on realities of resources (Hornsey, 2008; Yzerbyt & Corneille, 2005), is a less malleable and more objective measure than warmth; hence it represents a reliable source of information in vendor evaluation and consequent purchase decisions.

Our reasoning is consistent with marketing research suggesting that interpersonal identification can lead to both positive and negative outcomes (Ahearne, Haumann, Kraus, & Wieseke, 2013). Interpersonal identification can lead to positive outcomes by activating an efficacy-enhancing process, providing a sound basis for effective cooperation between the parties, and helping the other is seen as a mechanism of helping the self (Ahearne et al., 2013; Aron et al., 2004). Interpersonal identification, however, leads to negative outcomes when two parties reach a state of co-dependency, wherein the identification referent becomes part of the self, in a process known as over-identification (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Under such circumstances, biased judgments are likely to prevail, even if inappropriately (Ahearne et al., 2013).

In sum, when identification is high, a less objective and biased judgment is at play. More objective measures of others are instead leveraged when identification is low. This explains why competence, which is as an objective and less flexible measure than warmth (Abele et al., 2020), presents an advantage over warmth when identification is medium or low. In such instances, purchasing managers seek to attain personal and business goals by relying on digital influencers who fit the competence stereotype (e.g., Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Wieseke et al., 2012). Prior studies argue that competence is indeed a diagnostic measure of assessing performance-related concerns (Marinova, Singh, & Singh, 2018) and the quality of the service (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012). When identification is low, competence would impart confidence regarding task performance, thereby diminishing capability and relational concerns, while enhancing purchase intentions. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3. In vendors' evaluation contexts, the effect of digital influencers' competence (vs warmth) on purchasing managers' intentions of buying the advocated vendor's offering, mediated by capability and relational concerns, will occur if purchasing manager-influencer identification is low (vs high).

Fig. 1 summarizes the conceptual model tested across our two experimental studies. In Study 1, we focus on the main effect of digital influencers' characteristics and the mediating concern-based mechanisms. First, we seek to provide empirical evidence on the prominent effect of competence on managers' intentions to purchase the advocated vendor's offering. Second, we test the sequential mediation of capability and relational concerns. In Study 2, we test the moderating effect of manager-influencer identification theorized in H3.

3. Study 1

3.1. Research design and sample

We conducted a one factor (stereotype: warmth vs competence vs control) between-subjects, scenario-based experiment. We recruited 152 UK participants from a large UK-based data provider, Prolific, an online panel with about 55,000 active members in the UK, including several thousands with management experience in a role involving contract negotiations (<https://www.prolific.co/participants>). Scholars note the suitability of Prolific for social science research, commending the reliability and high quality of data collected through the panel when compared to other online panels and/or institutional participant pools (e.g., Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). The panel has also been employed in prior B2B research (e.g., Crisafulli et al., 2020).

Using pre-existing screeners on Prolific panel, professionals with management experience in a contract negotiation role in B2B settings were recruited. As a further check, we included similar screening questions at the start of the survey. Members without sufficient experience were automatically disqualified and directed to the end of the survey, consistent with procedures followed in prior B2B research (e.g., Tóth et al., 2020). In addition, we included attention check questions to ensure that participants paid sufficient attention in completing the survey.³

We asked participants to read a scenario of a purchasing manager appointed to select and purchase a technology solution based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) that would help the company to streamline internal processes and enhance cyber security. Next, participants were informed that, while searching for the best solution they came across FSeCX, a solution sold by JBL (a fictitious company) and the online post written by James Lawley (a digital influencer). Participants in the experimental conditions read about the profile of James Lawley, which could be accessed by clicking on the digital influencer's name, while the control group was exposed to the online post only. Finally, the participants answered questions measuring the core constructs in the model, as well as questions concerning their employer and demographics. The survey lasted approximately 10 min and the participants received monetary compensation from the online panel for completing the survey. Profile details of the study participants are in Table 1.

3.2. Stimuli

The stimuli were developed following extensive secondary research and two pilot tests (pilot test 1, $N = 137$; pilot test 2, $N = 91$). Warmth and competence traits were manipulated in the description of the influencer profile, following the approach by Abele and Brack (2013). Consistent with prior influencer marketing literature (e.g., Farivar et al., 2021), warmth is conveyed by describing influencers whose influence is based on hands-on, friendly attitude and involvement in a social

³ Participants who failed the attention check as well as our screening questions were removed from the dataset, following recommendations in the literature (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). However, in all studies we analyzed the data with and without participants who failed the attention checks. Excluding these participants did not affect the results.

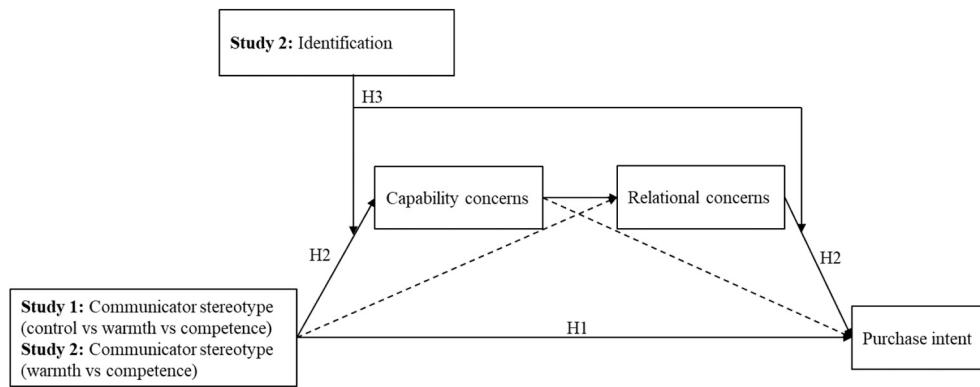


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

Table 1
Profile details of participants.

	Study 1	Study 2
Tenure in a negotiation role		
Less than 1 year	8.6%	9.1%
1–2 years	20.4%	18.3%
3–5 years	30.3%	28.4%
More than 5 years	40.7%	44.2%
Experience in negotiation		
Buying products and services	45.4%	42.6%
Involved in make or buy decisions	7.9%	9.6%
Involved in supplier relationship management	21.1%	23.1%
Involved in negotiating contracts	25.6%	24.7%
Size of employer		
Less than 10 employees	22.4%	16.6%
10–50 employees	13.8%	20%
51–250 employees	18.4%	20.5%
251–1000 employees	19.1%	16.1%
More than 1000 employees	26.3%	26.8%
Age		
18–24 years of age	1.3%	2.9%
25–34 years of age	21.7%	23.9%
35–44 years of age	40.1%	30.7%
45–54 years of age	19.1%	24.9%
55 years and older	17.8%	17.6%
Gender (male)	56.6%	51.7%

network, often handling a variety of even unrelated topics. Competence is primarily prominent when describing influentials whose influence is attributed to domain-specific, technical knowledge (e.g., Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Valsesia et al., 2020), and the status through which they exercise opinion leadership (e.g., King & Summers, 1970). The above details were accounted for when designing the stimuli, thereby enhancing ecological validity. In the competence condition, James Lawley was presented as sharing an online post about JBL's solution on a blog. The profiling information depicted James Lawley as an influential with experience sitting on the boards of large IT companies, and often invited to speak at global tech conferences. In the warmth condition, James Lawley was presented as sharing an online post about JBL's solution on Instagram. The profile information depicted James Lawley as an influential with experience working as a technology enthusiast and known as being a highly approachable individual who provides free advice on technological products and solutions. We also included a control group not exposed to any manipulation. The online post was the same in content and length in the experimental conditions. The scenarios are included in Appendix C.

Consistent with the approach from prior marketing research using social media content (e.g., Valsesia et al., 2020) and for ecological validity reasons, the stimuli replicated the features of real-life content on

social network sites, including the user's name. For the Instagram post, the number of “likes” were included, denoting the social leadership of influentials in the digital sphere. To ensure that the number of likes did not affect responses, we adapted questions from Valsesia et al. (2020). In particular, participants were asked “When forming your opinion of an online post, how frequently do you look at the number of likes” (1 = not at all/never, 7 = very much/frequently). Results confirmed that there is no significant difference in the extent to which participants formed opinions based on the likes ($M_{Warmth} = 5.53$, $M_{Competence} = 5.41$, $M_{Control} = 5.75$; $F(2, 91) = 0.33$, $p = .72$). Furthermore, to inspect how “likes” might affect perceived influence, participants were asked “To what extent do you think James Lawley is influential?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Once again, there was no significant difference in perceived influence across conditions ($M_{Warmth} = 5.22$, $M_{Competence} = 5.41$, $M_{Control} = 5.07$; $F(2, 91) = 0.45$, $p = .64$).

3.3. Measures

We employed established scales from the literature. We measured capability and relational concerns with three items each from Güntürkün et al. (2020), and purchase intent with three items from Crisafulli et al. (2020). In designing the questionnaire, we took steps toward reducing common method bias (CMB), including the randomization of measurement items, ensuring confidentiality of responses, and checked for the use of simple language throughout, in line with recommendations from MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012).

3.4. Analysis and results

Realism and manipulation checks. Participants perceive the online post as clear ($M = 5.36$), believable ($M = 5.10$), and representative of online posts seen previously ($M = 5.07$), with no significant differences between conditions ($p > .05$). As manipulation checks, we used established measures of competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2007; Kervyn et al., 2012) (sample items: “James Lawley is competent” and “James Lawley is friendly” – rated from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).⁴ The manipulations are successful (competence: $M_{warmth} = 4.99$, $SD = 0.99$; $M_{control} = 5.23$, $SD = 0.76$; $M_{competence} = 5.90$, $SD = 0.89$; $F(2, 151) = 14.50$, $p < .001$; warmth: $M_{warmth} = 4.85$, $SD = 1.13$; $M_{control} = 4.40$, $SD = 0.83$; $M_{competence} = 4.62$, $SD = 1.16$; $F(2, 151) = 2.33$, $p = .05$). Tukey's HSD post-hoc test shows that the mean value of competence is

⁴ The measure of warmth included three items - friendly, trustworthy, warm. The competence measure included four items - competent, skillful, efficient, intelligent. The measurement followed established procedures (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002).

significantly different between competence and control conditions ($p = .001$, 95% CI [0.25, 1.09]) and between competence and warmth conditions ($p = .000$, 95% CI [0.50, 1.33]). Ratings are therefore in line with our expectations.

Assessment of measures. All scales performed adequately in terms of reliability with high loadings on the intended constructs. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were above established thresholds of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Bollen & Lennox, 1991), confirming internal consistency. Discriminant validity was established through Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and the HTMT ratio (highest value of 0.84; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Detailed measurement items and statistics are presented in Appendix D. To statistically assess the potential impact of CMB, we employed the unmeasured latent method factor (ULMF) approach following the procedure suggested by Liang, Saraf, Hu, and Xue (2007). All the measures in the model were included as indicators of the method construct, and the average variance (calculated by squaring the loadings) of the substantive factors and method factor were inspected. The average variance explained by the substantive constructs (0.867) was greater than the average variance explained by the method factor (0.574). This indicates that CMB is not a cause for concern in our findings.⁵ Detailed statistics are presented in Appendix E.

Hypothesis testing. We analyzed the impact of stereotypes⁶ on purchase intentions, capability and relational concerns by means of MANCOVA analysis with age, gender and involvement with technological, AI-enabled solutions included as covariates.⁷ Results show a main effect of stereotypes on purchase intent ($M_{Control} = 4.61$, $SD = 0.92$; $M_{Warmth} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.12$; $M_{Competence} = 4.80$, $SD = 1.17$; $F(2, 146) = 6.50$, $p < .05$), capability concerns ($M_{Control} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.25$; $M_{Warmth} = 4.33$, $SD = 1.43$; $M_{Competence} = 3.65$, $SD = 1.39$; $F(2, 146) = 2.89$, $p < .05$), and relational concerns ($M_{Control} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.36$; $M_{Warmth} = 4.76$, $SD = 1.59$; $M_{Competence} = 4.07$, $SD = 1.46$; $F(2, 146) = 3.31$, $p < .05$). A post-hoc analysis shows that, consistent with H1, the warmth condition differs significantly from the control ($p = .041$) and the competence conditions ($p = .003$) in terms of purchase intentions. The highest level of intentions to purchase the advocated vendor's offering are reported by purchasing managers exposed to digital influencers showing competence ($M = 4.80$) as opposed to warmth ($M = 4.06$).

To test our model of sequential mediation, as hypothesized in H2, we conducted a regression-based conditional effect analysis using a sequential model in PROCESS (Model 6, Hayes, 2018). The model was estimated using 5000 resamples for the calculation of confidence intervals (CIs) and used bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap (Hayes, 2018). Given that the factor of stereotype was set at two levels – competence and warmth – we estimated the model in two consecutive runs: first by comparing control vs competence conditions, and second by comparing competence vs warmth conditions. Table 2 and Table 3 present the results of the regression model and conditional effects analysis.

The indirect effect, comparing warmth and competence conditions, reveals a significant effect of competence on purchase intent, sequentially mediated by capability and relational concerns; the effect is statistically significant when competence is compared with warmth (effect = -0.17 ; 95% CI [-0.37 , -0.03]), but not as much when competence is compared with control (effect = -0.05 ; 95% CI [-0.13 , 0.002]). The

⁵ As part of pre-test 2, we inspected the correlations between our conceptual constructs and the marker variable. Only purchase intent shows a significant correlation with the marker variable ($r = 0.29$, $p < .05$). The correlations between our conceptual constructs remain unchanged when running partial correlation analysis with the marker variable as a control (Bagozzi, 2011).

⁶ The independent variable was coded as 0 for control, -1 for warmth and $+1$ for competence.

⁷ Involvement influenced purchase intentions ($F(1,146) = 8.20$, $p < .05$), while age ($p = .60$) and gender ($p = .45$) did not.

Table 2
Sequential mediation model (Study 1).

Parameter estimated	β	95% CI
Competence (vs control) → Capability concerns (path a ₁) $R^2 = 0.04$, $F(1, 99) = 3.89$, $p = .05$	0.26	-0.002; 0.53
Competence (vs control) → Relational concerns (path a ₂)	0.11	-0.09; 0.30
Capability concerns → Relational concerns (path d ₂₁) $R^2 = 0.59$, $F(2, 98) = 71.56$, $p < .01$	0.84***	0.69; 0.98
Competence (vs control) → Purchase intent (path c')	-0.18*	-0.38; 0.01
Capability concerns → Purchase intent (path b ₁)	-0.07	-0.29; 0.15
Relational concerns → Purchase intent (path b ₂)	-0.22**	-0.42; -0.02
$R^2 = 0.21$, $F(3, 97) = 8.61$, $p < .01$		
Competence (vs control) → Purchase intent (path c')	-0.27**	-0.48; -0.07
Competence (vs warmth) → Capability concerns (path a ₁) $R^2 = 0.06$, $F(1,100) = 5.84$, $p < .05$	0.67***	0.12; 1.23
Competence (vs warmth) → Relational concerns (path a ₂)	0.14	-0.27; 0.55
Capability concerns → Relational concerns (path d ₂₁) $R^2 = 0.59$, $F(2, 99) = 71.87$, $p < .01$	0.82***	0.68; 0.96
Competence (vs warmth) → Purchase intent (path c')	-0.54**	-0.97; -0.11
Capability concerns → Purchase intent (path b ₁)	0.02	-0.21; 0.25
Relational concerns → Purchase intent (path b ₂)	-0.31**	-0.52; -0.09
$R^2 = 0.24$, $F(3, 98) = 10.05$, $p < .01$		
Competence (vs warmth) → Purchase intent (path c')	-0.74**	-1.19; -0.29

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Conditional indirect effect analysis (Study 1 and 2).

Study	Hypothesized indirect effect	β	95% CI
Study 1	Competence (vs control) → Capability concerns → Purchase intent	-0.02	-0.10; 0.04
	Competence (vs control) → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	-0.02	-0.08; 0.02
	Competence (vs control) → Capability concerns → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	-0.5	-0.12; 0.00
	Competence (vs warmth) → Capability concerns → Purchase intent	0.01	-0.17; 0.16
	Competence (vs warmth) → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	-0.04	-0.18; 0.08
	Competence (vs warmth) → Capability concerns → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	-0.17	-0.37; -0.03
Study 2	Competence (vs warmth) → Capability concerns → Purchase intent	-0.11	-0.02; 0.26
	Competence (vs warmth) → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	-0.001	-0.07; 0.07
	Competence (vs warmth) → Capability concerns → Relational concerns → Purchase intent	0.16	0.06; 0.28
	Competence (vs warmth) → Relational concerns → Purchase intent		

Statistically significant indirect effects are highlighted in bold.

above results indicate that communicating competence of the digital influencer explicitly is effective in helping purchasing managers to evaluate and select vendor's offerings.

3.5. Discussion

The findings from Study 1 confirm H1 and H2. We find that digital influencers' competence enhances purchasing managers' intentions to acquire the advocated vendor's offering. The result establishes the power of competence-related traits of digital influencers at lowering uncertainty surrounding business purchase decisions. While the difference between the control and competence conditions is not statistically significant, the results confirm a marked effect of competence, especially

when compared with warmth, and consistently lower scores for the warmth condition. The lack of significant difference between control and competence conditions in terms of purchase intent could be attributed to the fact that the online post might have in itself helped managers in their evaluation of the technological solution advocated by digital influencers. The indirect effect of competence on purchase intent, sequentially mediated by capability and relational concerns is however statistically significant and confirms our hypotheses.

Study 1, therefore, establishes the relative prominence of competent digital influencers in supporting purchasing managers with the evaluation of vendor companies. Theoretically, the finding supports the contextual perspective on the effect of stereotypes in social perceptions (e.g., Carrier et al., 2019). Study 1 however does not explain whether interdependence between the digital influencer and the purchasing manager impacts decisions. We hypothesize that the importance of competence is contingent upon the level of manager-influencer identification (H3). We test H3 in Study 2.

4. Study 2

4.1. Research design, sample and measures

We conducted a one factor, between-subjects, scenario-based experiment following the procedure from Study 1. Given the focus on establishing the relative importance of stereotypes at different levels of manager-influencer identification, we solely focused on comparing the two stereotype conditions. We collected 208 cases from the Prolific panel using the procedures described in Study 1 (see details of participants in Table 1). We retained the measures employed in Study 1. For identification, we adapted measures from Ahearne et al. (2005) and Singh, Crisafulli, and Quamina (2019). Participants answered the identification question toward the end of the survey (sample item: “I would consider James Lawley’s success as my success” from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

4.2. Analysis and results

Realism and manipulation checks. The online content shared about JBL’s solution is perceived as clear ($M = 5.62$), believable ($M = 5.30$) and representative of content seen previously ($M = 4.87$), with no significant differences between conditions ($p > .05$). The manipulations are successful (competence: $M_{warmth} = 5.35$, $SD = 0.99$; $M_{competence} = 5.95$, $SD = 0.71$; $t(206) = 5.06$, $p < .001$; warmth: $M_{warmth} = 4.90$, $SD = 1.14$; $M_{competence} = 4.70$, $SD = 0.90$; $t(206) = 1.37$, $p < .10$).

Assessment of measures. Similar to Study 1, all scales performed adequately in terms of internal consistency, with composite reliability, AVE and discriminant validity within the accepted thresholds. The measurement items and statistics are presented in Appendix D. Results from the unmeasured latent method factor (ULMF) approach to testing for CMB (Liang et al., 2007) confirmed that the average variance explained by the substantive constructs (0.820) is greater than the average variance explained by the method factor (0.001; see Appendix E). This indicates that CMB does not represent a concern in our findings.

Hypothesis testing. The MANCOVA results show a main effect of the stereotypes on purchase intent ($M_{warmth} = 4.52$, $SD = 1.27$; $M_{competence} = 5.10$, $SD = 0.94$; $F(1,200) = 11.62$, $p < .05$), capability concerns ($M_{warmth} = 4.40$, $SD = 1.49$; $M_{competence} = 3.55$, $SD = 1.30$; $F(1, 200) = 19.92$, $p < .01$), and relational concerns ($M_{warmth} = 4.62$, $SD = 1.54$; $M_{competence} = 3.95$, $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 200) = 9.16$, $p < .05$).⁸ Consistent with Study 1, intentions to purchase the advocated business solution are greater when the digital influencer shows competence. Further, capability and relational concerns are significantly lower when the digital

⁸ Involvement ($F(1,198) = 13.70$, $p < .01$) and gender ($F(1,198) = 5.35$, $p < .05$) influenced purchase intentions, not age ($p = .13$).

Table 4
Moderated-mediation model (Study 2).

Parameters estimated	β	95% CI	
		lower	upper
Competence → Capability concerns	−2.32**	−3.47	−1.17
Identification → Capability concerns	−0.51**	−0.69	−0.33
Competence X Identification → Capability concerns	0.43*	0.15	0.71
$R^2 = 0.21$; $F(3,201) = 18.03$, $p < .001$			
Competence → Relational concerns	−0.91*	−1.79	−0.04
Capability concerns → Relational concerns	0.74**	0.64	0.85
Identification → Relational concerns	−0.22*	−0.36	−0.08
Competence X Identification → Relational concerns	0.24*	0.03	0.45
$R^2 = 0.61$; $F(4, 200) = 78.01$, $p < .001$			
Competence → Purchase intent	0.09	−0.16	0.34
Capability concerns → Purchase intent	0.07	−0.37	0.52
Relational concerns → Purchase intent	−0.59**	−1.04	−0.14
Identification → Purchase intent	0.11	−0.12	0.34
Capability concerns X Identification → Purchase intent	−0.04	−0.14	0.05
Relational concerns X Identification → Purchase intent	0.09	−0.004	0.19
$R^2 = 0.47$; $F(6, 198) = 29.64$, $p < .001$			

β represents unstandardized path coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Warmth was coded as −1 and competence as +1. The average of all the items is used for the analysis.

influencer is seen as competent. The indirect effects estimates confirm the results from Study 1 and accordingly the sequential mediation of capability and relational concerns in explaining the effect of competence on purchase intent.

Further, we examined moderated mediation using a custom model in PROCESS, constructed using the syntax function in SPSS and 5000 resamples for the estimation of confidence intervals (CIs) (Hayes, 2018). We present the results in Table 4. In line with our expectations, and as set out in H3, there is a significant interaction between competence and identification on capability and relational concerns, and overall on the sequential mediation model. Competence of digital influencers is highly relevant toward lowering capability concerns when identification is low (effect = −1.17; 95% CI [−1.68, −0.67]) or medium (effect = −0.59; 95% CI [−0.69, −0.33]). This effect disappears when identification is high (effect = −0.16; 95% CI [−0.63, 0.32]). A similar effect is found when relational concerns are examined. The indirect effects presented in

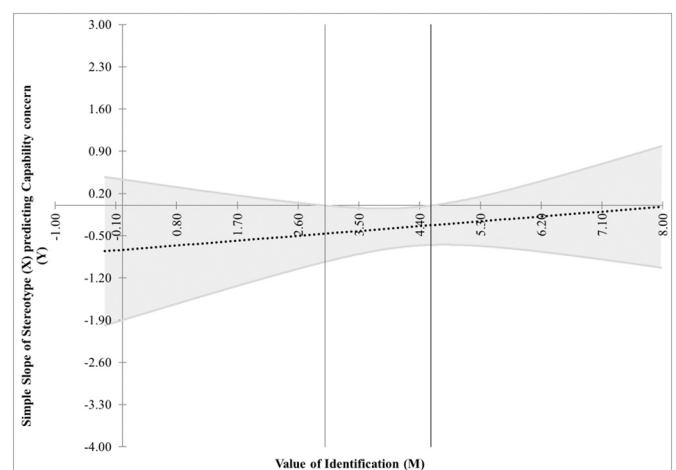


Fig. 2. The effect of stereotype on purchase intent at different levels of identification.

Table 3 further confirm the above results. We find significant sequential mediation when the identification is low (effect = 0.29; 95% CI [0.05, 0.62]) or medium (effect = 0.09; CI [0.01, 0.19]), but not when identification is high (effect = 0.01; 95% CI [-0.04, 0.08]).

A Johnson-Neyman analysis (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch Jr, & McClelland, 2013) shows that there is a significant difference between the stereotypes for values of identification between 3.00 and 4.59, and not significant for values above 4.59 (see Fig. 2). This confirms that the effect of competence is significant at low levels of identification.

5. Discussion

The findings support H3. Consistent with Study 1, we find that compared with warmth, competent digital influencers increase managers' intent to purchase the advocated vendor solution. Competence-related traits lower the capability and relational concerns of purchasing managers. In addition, we find that the effect of competence is prominent when manager-influencer identification is low to medium. When identification is low, the objective and less flexible measure of competence instils confidence about performance, thereby diminishing capability and relational concerns (e.g., Abele et al., 2021).

6. Theoretical contributions, managerial implications and areas for further research

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research makes several novel and noteworthy contributions to theory. Despite the growing interest and usage of social media, research pertaining social media activities in the B2B domain remains scant. Existing literature has examined strategies such as eWOM (Jalkala & Salminen, 2009) and corporate online references (e.g., Tóth et al., 2020), and the effect of social media usage in B2B sales on customer satisfaction (Agnihotri et al., 2016), competitive intelligence collection and adaptive selling (Itani et al., 2017), and B2B customer loyalty (Zhang & Li, 2019). Our study is a timely addition to the growing B2B literature on social media usage broadly, and more specifically on the role of influencers in B2B. Notably, our paper advances knowledge on the hitherto overlooked role of digital influencers advocating vendors' offerings in B2B markets to assist managers with their purchase decisions. Addressing this research gap we establish, for the first time in B2B literature, the role of digital influencers in the evaluation of vendors' solutions. Our findings underline the relevance of the stereotype of competence as a meaningful cue for purchasing managers to evaluate vendors' technological offerings and to make purchase decisions.

Our study extends knowledge concerning the characteristics of social influence in the digital environment. Prior influencer research in B2C markets has focused on expertise and trustworthiness as dimensions of credibility that explain influencers' strength of influence (Balabanis & Chatzopoulou, 2019), the impact on customer trust (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019) and perceptions (e.g., Schouten et al., 2020). However, expertise and trustworthiness only partially capture the universal stereotypes of warmth and competence discussed in the B2C literature (e.g., Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020), thus provide an imperfect perspective on the interpersonal effect of stereotypes. Along with offering a parsimonious classification of traits, the universal stereotypes of warmth and competence are apt for explaining the characteristics of social influence in the digital environment, with competence being particularly meaningful in B2B markets. Our study is the first to establish that stereotypes play a pivotal role in explaining managers' decisions concerning the purchase of complex business solutions advocated by digital influencers. Notably,

we provide evidence that digital influencers effectively support vendor evaluation processes when perceived as highly competent. Our study thus contributes to the stereotype content model literature. Prior B2C research examines the role of stereotypes in the formation of social perceptions, including consumers' social perceptions of brands (Aaker et al., 2010; Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012). Our study advances the above stream of work by applying the stereotype content model to purchasing managers' evaluation of vendors' solutions endorsed by B2B digital influencers.

Our second contribution is in establishing the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of digital influencers on managers' intentions to purchase complex, technological solutions. In particular, we show the relevance of capability and relational concerns in explaining the effect of stereotypes on purchasing managers' decisions (Das & Teng, 2001; Güntürkün et al., 2020). Past consumer research commonly models emotional reactions as explanatory mechanism of the differential effect of warmth and competence stereotypes on various outcomes (e.g., Ivens et al., 2015; Kervyn et al., 2012). Recent research, however, suggests alternative mechanisms including how stereotypes help to reduce uncertainty and latent concerns about the capability and goodwill of others (e.g., Abele & Brack, 2013; Güntürkün et al., 2020). Consistent with B2B literature suggesting that performance and relational risk are fundamental concerns in risky business decisions (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020) and in achieving satisfactory cooperation (Das & Teng, 1996), we show that competence of digital influencers, when compared with warmth, is prominent in shaping managers' evaluations of vendor companies in that it lowers capability and relational concerns, with downstream consequences on intentions to purchase the vendor's technological solution. Our study establishes the primacy of competence in the B2B domain, thus extending knowledge and setting foundations for a new line of investigation into the psychology underpinning managerial decision making.

The third novel contribution of our work lies in the domain of interpersonal identification. Prior research has focused on interpersonal identification between the sales manager and the salesperson (Abele et al., 2021; Abele & Hauke, 2020). We extend the literature in the area by focusing on B2B manager-influencer identification, a key aspect often associated with goodwill and trust in industrial marketing literature (Arvidsson & Melander, 2020). While identification with digital influencers has, to some extent, been examined in consumer research (e.g., Croes & Bartels, 2021; Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2020), our study provides a new perspective on identification as a boundary condition to the effect of stereotypes on vendor evaluation and selection. We show that when identification between purchasing managers and digital influencers is high, warmth and competence are given equal importance. In such instances, competence does not have an advantage over warmth in shaping purchasing managers' decisions. The reverse occurs when identification is low, and competence becomes an objective and reliable source of information in vendor evaluation, and positively impacts purchase intent. Identification level has, therefore, implications for the characteristics of digital influencers that purchasing managers attend to when making purchase decisions.

6.2. Managerial implications

In B2B markets, companies often take on lengthy processes of evaluating and selecting vendors. In order to ease and aid such processes, influencers can play a pivotal role and ultimately shape decision-making at client companies. Increasingly, vendor firms in B2B markets broadcast information about their business offerings through influential individuals on social media, commonly referred to as digital influencers.

Invariably, with the growth of several influencers in the digital space, selection can be a challenging task, as noted in prior literature (e.g., Valesia et al., 2020). Likewise, understanding the likely impact of digital influencers on purchasing managers' evaluation and selection of vendors can be highly valuable. Our results offer insights on the type of cues that make digital influencers impactful in vendors' evaluation contexts. More specifically, our findings offer recommendations for vendor firms and marketing agencies working closely with digital influencers, as well as for digital influencers seeking to expand reach in B2B markets.

We recommend vendor firms and marketing agencies to take cognizance of the profiling of digital influencers. Our study indicates that the characteristics of digital influencers communicated via online profiling information represent a meaningful cue that purchasing managers attend to. The characteristic of competence is more impactful than warmth in influencing purchasing managers in the evaluation and selection of a vendor's offering. Given the high financial involvement in purchasing complex and sophisticated business solutions, purchasing managers are most concerned about reducing risk and uncertainty (e.g., Yuan et al., 2021). We find that competence is an effective cue for reducing uncertainty about vendors' offerings.

Furthermore, we demonstrate that the characteristic of competence is particularly important when the purchasing manager-influencer identification is low. We advise vendor firms to appraise identification as part of regular business customer segmentation and/or satisfaction research conducted through surveys and/or customer workshops. In circumstances where identification cannot be measured, characteristics linked to identification can be employed. Research shows that high identification tends to be associated with interpersonal cooperation (Ahearne et al., 2013) as well as with prospects of generating positive thoughts and recommendations about a company (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006). Prior research further suggests that self-uncertainty and self-enhancement contribute to the formation of cognitive and affective forms of identification (Wolter & Cronin, 2016). This body of work, supported by our study, can aid decisions and lead to the selection of suitable target segments with whom to communicate by employing competent digital influencers.

For the digital influencers seeking to work in B2B markets, our findings suggest that high identification with the purchasing manager is not essential. Instead, digital influencers are advised to equip themselves with specialist knowledge and to communicate their competence. Possessing and communicating skill, intelligence and efficiency, which are facets of competence, are more effective strategies than communicating social leadership and caring attitudes. In the eyes of purchasing managers, competence lowers concerns about performance and goodwill, which are often associated with high involvement purchases.

6.3. Limitations and areas for further research

The limitations of our study offer fruitful areas for future research. Our research focuses on the stereotype traits of influentials working in the digital environment and their impact on purchasing managers' intentions to buy novel business solutions. Our findings show the views of purchasing managers, yet such views might not fully align with those of a buying center in client organizations. While purchasing managers are key decision makers in the buying center, we acknowledge that the decision-making process for the acquisition of complex business solutions can at times involve a much larger team holding the purchasing

manager ultimately responsible for proceeding with the final purchase decision. Future research can advance knowledge on how digital influencers could affect the decision-making process of an entire buying center including purchasing managers as well as other actors, such as approvers or end users. Moreover, buying centers and the decision power of purchasing managers might vary across organizations of different size and complexity. Future research can explicitly address whether and how company size and complexity of the decision-making process inside client organizations play a role in shaping intentions to purchase vendors' solutions advocated by digital influencers.

Our results suggest that digital influencers who are perceived as competent, rather than warm, impact purchasing managers' evaluations and decisions. Competence of digital influencers, in fact, diminishes uncertainty while enhancing intentions to purchase the advocated vendor's offering. Our experimental scenarios considered buying decisions concerning novel, technological business solutions. Future research could test our model in the context of organizational buying decisions concerning non-technological solutions to enhance generalizability. Our experiments focused on warmth and competence traits of digital influencers as portrayed in their profiling, while keeping the content of the online post consistent across experimental conditions. Prior research suggests that online posts can differ in valence and content (e.g., Purnawirawan, Eisend, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2015; Srivastava & Kalro, 2019; Zablocki, Schlegelmilch, & Houston, 2019). Future research could consider the content of online posts to understand whether there are systematic relationships between the traits of digital influencers and the content of online posts.

The findings of Study 2 suggest that purchasing manager-influencer identification is an important variable in explaining the extent to which competence (vs warmth) shapes managers' evaluations and purchase intentions. Our results show that the competence stereotype matters especially in circumstances of vendors' evaluation where identification is low. The evidence aligns with the view in stereotype content model literature that interdependence of goals (also measured as outcome dependency, e.g., Carrier et al., 2019) influences the stereotypes individuals attend to, with competence being an objective piece of information that matters to the self and to others under certain circumstances. Future research could extend our evidence by using alternative measures of interdependence of goals.

In addition, future study could incorporate other influentials in the study design. For example, a number of B2B companies are active on Instagram, often employing their staff as influentials, and stereotype perceptions attached to company representatives might differ. Such research could reveal a nuanced perspective on the impact of the two stereotypes when employees of the company act as influentials and manipulative intent motives might be prominent. Further, gender is identified as a stereotype in the stereotype content model literature, with women stereotypically associated with warmth traits (e.g., Fiske et al., 2007). Gender was not within the scope of our work hence the male gender of the digital influencer was consistent across conditions. Such a methodological choice might have contributed toward the prominent effect of competence. Future research could replicate our design by theoretically addressing the role of gender as a stereotype of digital influencers more explicitly. Finally, warmth could have different effect as compared to competence when non-purchase outcomes are investigated. For instance, research could reveal that warmth operates differently from competence when it comes to brand-building outcome variables such as brand commitment, trust, engagement, or loyalty.

Appendix A. Examples of companies engaging digital influencers in B2B markets

Company	Sector	Platform	Key business objective(s)
American Express	Finance	Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase sales of the brand's storefront decals • Raise awareness of Business Platinum Card benefits
Cherwell Software	Technology	Twitter & Blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase brand awareness and sales of the brand's ITSM business software
Cisco	Technology	Youtube, Twitter & Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and increase sales of the brand's suite of business solutions
Content Marketing Institute	Marketing	Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and registration of the brand's business conference
DivvyHQ	Marketing/Tech	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, LinkedIn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance brand reputation and increase buyer engagement
G.E.	Energy	Instagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust and brand transparency • Generate interest among shareholders and employees
Introhive	Law/Tech	Twitter & Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and increase sales of the brand's CRM business systems
Oracle Dyn	Technology	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and increase sales of the brand's business web security system
PWC	Finance	Instagram, Snapchat & Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase brand visibility • Build brand appeal to a younger audience • Leverage employee advocacy
SAP	Technology	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build engagement and increase subscription of business members to the annual business conference
SAP SuccessFactors	Human Resources/Tech	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and increase sales of the suite of health care business management programs
TE Connectivity	Technology	Youtube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build brand credibility in Formula E • Grow the brand's database of business contacts
Video Fruit	Marketing	Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness and increase sales of the suite of web programs for small businesses
3 M	Manufacturing	Instagram & Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build goodwill and brand engagement

Appendix B. Summary of marketing studies examining the characteristics of social media influencers

Study	Research focus	Method	Characteristic(s) examined	Proxies to warmth vs competence	Context	Measured buying decisions
Lee and Watkins (2016)	Examines video blogs' impact on luxury brand perceptions	Survey	Social & Physical attractiveness, Homophily	No	B2C	yes
Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019)	Examines the impact of bloggers' characteristics and blog content on information seekers	Survey	Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Homophily, Authority, Approachability, Inspirational	Measured Expertise, Trustworthiness & Approachability	B2C	no
Ki & Kim (2019)	Examines the persuasion cues of influencers	Survey	Attractiveness, Prestige & Information of message, Interaction & Expertise of SMI	Measured Expertise	B2C	yes
Lou and Yuan (2019)	Examines the impact of message value and credibility of SMI in customer trust of branded content	Survey	Information and Entertainment value of message, Expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Similarity of SMI	Measured Expertise & Trustworthiness	B2C	yes
Casaló et al. (2020)	Examines the opinion leadership of Instagram fashion influencers	Survey	Originality, Uniqueness, Quality, Quantity of Instagram account	No	B2C	no
Sakib, Zolfagharian, and Yazdanparast (2020)	Examines the characteristics of Youtube health bloggers	Experiment	Credibility, Homophily, Attractiveness	Manipulated Credibility	B2C	no
Schouten et al. (2020)	Examines the effectiveness of celebrities vs influencers in endorsement advertising	Experiment	Trustworthiness, Expertise	Measured Expertise & Trustworthiness	B2C	yes
Lee and Eastin (2020)	Examines the impact of SMI's perceived sincerity on consumer evaluations	Experiment	Sincerity	Manipulated Sincerity	B2C	yes
Farivar et al. (2021)	Examines the effect of opinion leadership and parasocial relationship in influencer marketing	Survey	Opinion leadership, Parasocial relationship	Yes	B2C	yes
Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020)	Examines the impact of source cues in influencer marketing	Experiment	Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, Expertise	Measured Expertise & Trustworthiness	B2C	yes
Our Study	Examines the differential impact of social and expert influencers in B2B	Experiment	Warmth, Competence	Manipulated Warmth & Competence	B2B	yes

Appendix C. Study scenarios

Competence stereotype

James is a tech consultant, with over 10 years of industry experience. James also acts as a consultant to the boards of several large IT companies, providing tech advice for which he gets paid. James is known for his extensive experience with various software solutions, and he is often remunerated for sharing his expertise at global tech conferences. He is seen as a highly proficient expert in the IT space.

Blog post

The screenshot shows a blog post on the 'Tech Savy' website. The header includes the site name 'Tech Savy' with a play button icon and the tagline 'Keeping you up to date with the latest tech developments'. Navigation links for 'Home', 'Blog', 'Industry Product Reviews', and 'About' are visible. Below the header, there are category links: 'All Posts', 'Finance', 'Health', 'Manufacturing', 'IT', and 'Business'. The post is by 'James Lawley' and dated 'Sep 9'. The title is 'JBL's new AI cloud-based security platform'. The main image shows a hand interacting with a glowing blue shield icon surrounded by circuit-like patterns. The text describes JBL's new purpose-built security platform FSeCX, highlighting its ability to streamline processes, ensure cyber security, and protect against threats like data breaches and phishing. A 'Read More...' link is present. At the bottom, it shows '1 view 0 comments'. The footer contains copyright information '© 2020 by Tech Savy. Proudly created with wix.com', a 'Get Social' link, and a 'Let's Chat!' button with the promise 'We'll reply as soon as we can'.

Warmth stereotype

James is a social media influencer, with over 1 million followers on social media. James also acts as a technology enthusiast providing free advice on technology-related stuff on social media to companies and end users. James is known for his hands-on attitude and willingness to share free tech advice via YouTube and Instagram. He is seen as highly approachable and likeable for giving his free advice in the IT space.

Instagram post

The screenshot shows an Instagram post by 'jameslawley'. The post features the same glowing blue shield icon image as the blog post. The caption reads: 'JBL's new purpose built security platform FSeCX has the potential to transform the way businesses operates when it comes to streamlining processes and ensuring cyber security. The solution is well designed to be able to protect businesses against threats, data breaches, phishing attacks, and online fraud. Its sophisticated dashboard can help companies to continually monitor compliance, to automate customer response, and troubleshoot for security threats.' The post has '921 likes' and 'View all 99 comments'. There is an 'Add a comment...' field. The Instagram navigation bar is visible at the bottom.

Appendix D. Measures in Study 1 and Study 2

Constructs	Study 1	Study 2
Capability Concerns (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) Study 1: $\alpha = 0.90$, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.84; Study 2: $\alpha = 0.91$, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.85 Source: Güntürkün et al. (2020)		
When thinking of a potential business relationship with James Lawley, I would be concerned: That the outcome would not meet my performance expectations	0.931	0.926
That James Lawley would not allow me to achieve promised results	0.939	0.933
That I would not be able to accomplish my job goals with the help of James Lawley	0.883	0.915
Relational Concerns (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) Study 1: $\alpha = 0.94$, CR = 0.96, AVE = 0.89; Study 2: $\alpha = 0.93$, CR = 0.95, AVE = 0.88 Source: Güntürkün et al. (2020)		
When thinking of a potential business relationship with James Lawley, I would be concerned: That James Lawley would slightly “bend” the facts for his own benefit	0.954	0.940
That James Lawley would engage in opportunistic behavior in the relationship	0.949	0.931
About potential hidden agendas of James Lawley	0.940	0.946
Purchase Intentions (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) Study 1: $\alpha = 0.94$, CR = 0.96, AVE = 0.86; Study 2: $\alpha = 0.94$, CR = 0.96, AVE = 0.86 Source: Crisafulli et al. (2020)		
I think the company I work for would be interested in purchasing JBL’s new AI-cloud based solution	0.910	0.915
I think the company I work for would be likely to buy JBL’s new AI-cloud based solution	0.931	0.951
I would recommend JBL’s new AI-cloud based solution for purchase by the company I work for	0.936	0.941
In a role of buyer, I would like to acquire JBL’s new AI-cloud based solution for the company I work for	0.938	0.919
Identification (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) Study 2: $\alpha = 0.78$, CR = 0.85, AVE = 0.66 Source: Ahearne et al. (2005); Singh et al. (2019)		
I would be interested in what others think about James Lawley	–	0.689
I would consider James Lawley’s success as my success	–	0.854
There could be similarity between James Lawley and my own identity	–	0.887

α = Cronbach’s Alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Appendix E. Results from UMLF approach to testing CMB

E.1. Study 1

Construct	Indicator	Substantive factor loading	Squared loading	Method factor loading	Squared loading
Purchase intent	PI_1	0.913*	0.834	–0.646**	0.418
Purchase intent	PI_2	0.936*	0.876	–0.648**	0.420
Purchase intent	PI_3	0.927*	0.859	–0.717**	0.514
Purchase intent	PI_4	0.937*	0.878	–0.678**	0.459
Capability concerns	CC_1	0.928*	0.861	0.803**	0.644
Capability concerns	CC_2	0.939*	0.882	0.787**	0.619
Capability concerns	CC_3	0.886*	0.786	0.736**	0.542
Relational concerns	RC_1	0.954*	0.909	0.860**	0.739
Relational concerns	RC_2	0.950*	0.903	0.820**	0.673
Relational concerns	RC_3	0.938*	0.880	0.841**	0.707
Average		0.931	0.867	0.216	0.574

* $p < .01$.

E.2. Study 2

Construct	Indicator	Substantive factor loading	Squared loading	Method factor loading	Squared loading
Purchase intent	PI_1	0.913*	0.834	–0.018	0.000
Purchase intent	PI_2	0.950*	0.902	–0.025	0.001
Purchase intent	PI_3	0.940*	0.884	–0.024	0.001
Purchase intent	PI_4	0.921*	0.848	–0.023	0.001
Capability concerns	CC_1	0.926*	0.858	0.040	0.002
Capability concerns	CC_2	0.935*	0.874	0.039	0.002
Capability concerns	CC_3	0.912*	0.832	0.041	0.002
Relational concerns	RC_1	0.939*	0.883	0.041	0.002
Relational concerns	RC_2	0.931*	0.868	0.046	0.002
Relational concerns	RC_3	0.946*	0.895	0.046	0.002
Identification	I_1	0.685*	0.470	0.028	0.001
Identification	I_2	0.867*	0.752	0.009	0.000
Identification	I_3	0.874*	0.764	0.002	0.000
Average		0.903	0.820	0.016	0.001

* $p < .01$.

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