

Social identity as a reflection of belonging to the professional community of influencers on LinkedIn

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Abstract: The emergence of the Internet, followed by the further development of digital platforms and the attention economy, gave rise in the twenty-first century to influencers, who form a distinct professional community within the digital environment, operating at the intersection of marketing, social media, and traditional media. This positioning allows influencers' social identity to be understood both as a reflection of their belonging to a particular professional community and as a strategic decision and resource in the process of building a personal brand in internet marketing. This paper examines the social identity of influencers on LinkedIn by analysing how it is articulated through interaction signals—reactions, comments, shares, and patterns of public support—as indicators of personal brand strength and legitimacy within a professional community. Particular attention is devoted to interpreting these signals as expressions of either validation or contestation of influencers' professional positioning. Drawing on social identity theory (SIT), personal branding, and social validation, the paper proposes an indicator-based framework for assessing the quality of a professional audience. The framework considers the composition of individuals who leave comments, including their expertise, public endorsement by professional peers, and discursive patterns, thereby complementing traditional quantitative engagement metrics. The empirical section of the study is based on a content analysis of 240 posts published by twelve professional influencers with different levels of geographical reach, including Serbia, the wider region, Europe, and the global reach, encompassing a total of 8,163 comments. The findings indicate that expert validation expressed through comments provides a more comprehensive insight into the strength of professional identity than the overall volume of reactions. The contribution of the paper lies in the development of a composite indicator for assessing the quality of professional audiences, with practical applications in influencer marketing research, B2B marketing, and personal brand management.

Keywords: LinkedIn, influencer marketing, personal branding, social identity, professional legitimacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of society, particularly the development of social media, has significantly changed the ways in which individuals communicate, exchange information, maintain relationships, and exert social and professional influence within their environment. In this context, influencer marketing has become one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary digital marketing, in which influencers act as important intermediaries between organisations, brands, and diverse user communities (Joshi et al., 2025; Vukmirović et al. 2020). In recent years, interest in professional social networking platforms, particularly LinkedIn, has increased. Unlike platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, LinkedIn differs considerably in terms of its communication objectives, the nature of its audience, and the forms of interaction it facilitates.

With the development of the digital attention economy, influencers have emerged and become established as a distinct group of actors operating at the intersection of marketing, media, and social media. As participants in digital communication, they do not operate online merely as producers or distributors of online content; rather, they position themselves as prominent trendsetters, opinion leaders, and creators of a particular social identity that is gradually constructed, maintained, cultivated, and reinforced through various forms of interaction with their audiences. Owing to the specificity of their position between audiences, organisations, and professional communities, influencers are increasingly becoming bearers of social and professional identities, meaning that their role cannot be reduced to that of mere communication channels. From this perspective, influencers' social identity can be understood both as an expression of belonging to a particular professional community and as a strategic decision and resource in the process of building a personal brand in internet marketing.

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Previous research on influencer marketing has primarily focused on analysing influencer characteristics, such as expertise, authenticity, credibility, and attractiveness, as well as assessing their influence on audience attitudes and behaviour (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Casaló et al., 2020; Petrović & Urošević, 2026). This approach also draws on earlier source credibility research, in which expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness were identified as important dimensions in the evaluation of individuals delivering promotional messages (Ohanian, 1990). Their relevance was subsequently examined in the context of social media and influencer marketing, with findings indicating that their importance may depend on the type of influencer, content, product, and relationship established between the influencer and the audience (Belanche et al., 2021; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). The systematic review conducted by Ying and Dikčius (2023) demonstrates that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are among the most frequently examined influencer characteristics, while considerably less attention has been devoted to the social and behavioural characteristics of the audiences interacting with influencers.

Despite the substantial body of research in this field, considerably less attention has been paid to the contribution of audience characteristics and to the forms of public interaction through which audiences engage with published content, particularly in terms of their participation in the construction of influencers' professional legitimacy. This research gap constitutes the starting point of the present study. The available literature predominantly relies on quantitative indicators of audience engagement, whereas qualitative dimensions of professional validation, such as the characteristics of the professional audience, are often neglected. Consequently, an integrated approach combining the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of professional validation remains insufficiently explored. Examining this concept is particularly important in the context of professional social networking platforms, where both the nature of the audience and the ways in which connections are established differ substantially from those found on other digital platforms. It is also important to examine how these platform-specific characteristics relate to social and professional identity on a particular social network and within a specific professional community.

Among contemporary platforms, LinkedIn has recently become particularly prominent. Unlike Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms, it retains a strongly professional character and enables users to develop a

visible professional identity through their profiles, which function as a form of professional biography and are further reflected through posts, comments, recommendations, and networking activities. One of the key differences between LinkedIn and other platforms, which are predominantly oriented towards entertainment content, lies in the opportunity to build individual professional credibility through the exchange of expert knowledge, public discussion, and mutual validation among members of a particular professional community. For this reason, the platform has moved beyond its initial function as a professional networking tool and has begun to establish itself within digital marketing as an important platform for building influencers' professional identities and fostering a sense of belonging to specific professional communities. In this process, influencers contribute to the formation of collective identities, norms, and values that are shared and cultivated within these communities.

In this context, traditional engagement metrics, such as the number of likes, impressions, or reach, are insufficient to explain the depth of an influencer's professional impact. Although the importance of these metrics as indicators of content visibility and reach is indisputable, they do not provide sufficient information about the quality of the professional audience or the nature of the social validation that an influencer receives within their community. Within such a framework, interaction signals reflecting audience quality and the types of validation that influencers receive from their communities become particularly significant. Reactions, comments, shares, and patterns of public support may be understood not only as indicators of popularity but also as mechanisms through which an influencer's professional positioning is confirmed or challenged.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the social identity of influencers on LinkedIn, specifically the ways in which it is articulated through interaction signals and patterns of public support. Particular attention is devoted to interaction signals as indicators of personal brand strength and to their interpretation as a basis for influencers' legitimacy within professional communities. The study draws on social identity theory and the concepts of personal branding and social validation, while its empirical component is based on an analysis of 240 posts published by twelve professional influencers with different levels of geographical reach. To address the identified research gap and drawing on the proposed theoretical framework, the paper introduces an indicator framework for assessing the quality of professional audiences as one of the possible

measures of influencers' professional legitimacy in the digital environment.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL IDENTITY, DIGITAL COMMUNITIES, AND PERSONAL BRANDING

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is based on the assumption that individuals define their identities through their membership in particular social groups and communities. The meaning of group membership is formed in relation to other members of the community, as well as to the broader social environment, context, and discourse (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This theory emphasises that an individual's identity is shaped not only by their personal characteristics but also by the way in which they define themselves as a member of a particular group. Social categorisation enables individuals to organise their social environment according to their membership or non-membership in a particular group, whereas social identification implies that individuals perceive group membership as part of their own identity. In this way, membership in a professional community may become a source of self-definition and social recognition, as well as a framework for appropriate social behaviour. Ashforth and Mael (1989) define social identification as the perception of oneness with a group, emphasising that the importance of group membership to an individual may increase depending on the distinctiveness and prestige of the group. Ellemers et al. (1999), on the other hand, argue that social identity is not a unidimensional concept. They distinguish self-categorisation, group self-esteem, and commitment as separate components of social identity. Group self-esteem is reflected in the evaluation of the group's status and reputation; self-categorisation refers to recognising oneself as a member of the group; and commitment refers to an individual's affective attachment to a particular group, as well as their willingness to undertake actions consistent with their group membership. This multidimensionality of social identity is particularly important in the context of influencers, because public support from professional audiences not only confirms membership in a particular group but also affects influencers' status, legitimacy, and reputation within the community.

It is important to distinguish between social identity, professional identity, and professional legitimacy. Social identity refers to the part of an individual's identity that is formed in relation to their membership

in particular groups. Professional identity, by contrast, is formed on the basis of how individuals understand and present their own role, position, and expertise within their professional environment. Professional legitimacy, on the other hand, concerns the extent to which other members of the community recognise and accept an individual as a relevant, credible, and knowledgeable actor. It is therefore formed relationally, through the recognition and validation of others. In the digital environment, this concept becomes particularly complex, as it encompasses not only direct communication and group membership but also publicly visible traces of interaction, such as comments, reactions, recommendations, and content sharing. In digital communities, unlike traditional ones, identification is based on visible interactions, the continuous exchange of content, and public expressions of agreement or disagreement with published content. For this reason, an individual's membership in a digital community is not established once and permanently but is continuously reassessed.

In the context of online platforms, particularly LinkedIn, communities function as virtual groups whose boundaries are not clearly recognised or defined but remain fluid, while influencers position themselves as symbolic leaders or "anchors" around whom a collective professional identity is formed. Farivar and Wang (2022) indicate that as the perceived similarity between users and influencers increases, so does the perceived similarity between users and the community gathered around the influencer, further confirming the importance of influencers as mediators of identity-based belonging. Public interaction between audiences and influencers has a dual function. On the one hand, it contributes to the construction of the influencer's identity, while, on the other hand, it enables members of the audience to present their own professional identities and positions within the community, once again highlighting the bidirectional nature of interaction. Baym (2015) emphasises that online communities are characterised by a continuous dynamic between personal expression and the social norms jointly shaped by the platform and the community. Within this dynamic, influencers seek to position themselves as opinion leaders and authorities, while audiences continuously validate, question, or challenge them. Szeto (2021) further points out that authenticity, social connectedness, and self-promotion are among the important motivations for identity presentation on social media, which is particularly relevant for influencers who build their professional identities through public visibility.

Professional identity understood in this way is connected to the concept of the personal brand, which represents the process of intentionally presenting one's professional knowledge, competencies, and values with the aim of establishing a distinctive position in the minds of the audience. Gorbato et al. (2018) define personal branding as an interdisciplinary process of strategically creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive perception of an individual, the outcome of which depends not only on how the person presents themselves but also on how they are evaluated by others. At the same time, personal branding may be viewed within the broader context of the market presentation of professional identity. Lair et al. (2005) argue that personal branding presents the individual and their career as a form of brand, which raises questions concerning the commercialisation of professional identity, self-promotion, and the ethical boundaries of presenting individuals in the labour market. However, the particular nature of an online personal brand lies precisely in the fact that it is not based solely on self-promotion. Labrecque et al. (2011) state that the way individuals wish to construct and manage their personal brands does not necessarily correspond to the audience's evaluation of their profiles. This leads to the conclusion that the personal brand should be understood as a relational construct shaped by the interaction between an individual's positioning and the audience's interpretations, evaluations, and reactions. This relational dimension is particularly evident in online communities, especially on LinkedIn, where both audience interaction signals and influencers' professional experience, as presented in their biographies, are simultaneously visible. Influencers may communicate their identities through the content they present to their audiences, but the broader acceptance of their professional identities largely depends on the audience—namely, on who participates in the discussion, how they respond to the content, and how they interpret it. Professional identity is therefore validated, to a certain extent, through the professional audience's validation of the influencer's positioning.

The motivations underlying people's participation in digital communities and their interaction with published content should not be neglected. Uses and Gratifications Theory is based on the assumption that audiences are not passive recipients of media messages but actively select and use media to satisfy particular needs and achieve specific goals (Filipović, 2012). In the context of professional digital communities, these motivations may be informational, such as the desire to learn something new; social, such as the desire or

need to belong to a community and connect with others; or identity-related, such as the desire for recognition and validation of one's own expertise, visibility, or status. These motivations explain why followers interact with published content. This means that audience interaction with content is not merely a spontaneous reaction but may also represent a form of knowledge exchange, professional positioning, and validation of expertise, status, and belonging.

Authors such as Kozinets (2015) emphasise the symbolic value of social interactions, particularly highlighting the role they play in foregrounding belonging, trust, and shared values, which is crucial for understanding professional online communities. Comments are of considerable analytical importance because they reveal how audiences perceive and interpret content and whether they validate or challenge it. Reinikainen et al. (2020) demonstrate that the nature of audience comments influences perceptions of influencer credibility, once again confirming that audience activity may affect the outcomes of influencers' communication.

When influencers' social identity is considered through the lens of internet marketing, it is linked to perceptions of expertise, credibility, and authenticity, which may affect the effectiveness of marketing communication. Meta-analytical findings indicate that higher levels of identification with an influencer are associated with increased engagement and purchase intention (Pan et al., 2025), while Han and Balabanis (2024) show that influencer credibility and a sense of parasocial closeness play an important role in explaining why people follow influencers and accept them as relevant sources of knowledge and recommendations. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) also confirm the importance of perceived influencer credibility and parasocial interaction in the acceptance of influencer recommendations. Ki and Kim (2019) further indicate that informativeness, interactivity, expertise, prestige, and content attractiveness may contribute to audiences perceiving influencers as opinion leaders, which may subsequently encourage identification with the influencer, electronic word-of-mouth communication, and other forms of audience behaviour. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that examining only the characteristics attributed to influencers by their audiences is insufficient. It is equally important to consider the nature of the audience interacting with the influencer and their content. Support provided by professional peers, practitioners, and experts may have greater reputational value than a larger number of reactions from users who are not relevant to the professional

field in question. For this reason, professional legitimacy derives, among other factors, from the quality of the public validation that influencers receive from their communities.

3. INFLUENCERS AS A PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY ON LINKEDIN

Influencer marketing can be understood as an evolution of word-of-mouth advertising, or more precisely, as its digital counterpart (De Veirman et al., 2017). However, in the contemporary digital environment, the role of influencers is no longer limited to the transmission of marketing messages, as they may also act within communities as opinion leaders and as actors who shape the norms and attitudes of the communities that form around them (Freberg et al., 2011). Unlike traditional professional communities, the influencer community does not operate according to formal professional standards and is not institutionally regulated. Instead, it functions through informal norms, patterns of recognition, and internal hierarchies. Membership in this community is reflected through mutual public support, networking, and participation in shared discussions.

Such communities may also be interpreted, to a certain extent, through the concept of communities of practice, which are formed around a particular topic in order to facilitate the exchange of professional knowledge and continuous learning (Wenger, 1998). Although the audience gathered around an influencer does not necessarily constitute a formally organised community of practice, the regular sharing of content enables audience members to participate actively in the production, evaluation, and dissemination of knowledge, while the influencer assumes the role of initiator or leader. In this sense, the professional community of influencers on LinkedIn may be understood as a community in which status and legitimacy are not formally assigned, but are continuously negotiated through publicly visible interactions. This understanding of professional communities draws on Social Identity Theory, according to which individual identity is shaped through interaction and recognition within a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In recent years, LinkedIn has increasingly established itself as a space for professional influencers and B2B creators, namely individuals who do not build their influence exclusively through entertainment-oriented content, but through expert insights, commentary on market trends, educational formats,

and public professional positioning. The professional character of LinkedIn is reflected not only in the type of content published on the platform, but also in its role in career networking, the maintenance of professional relationships, and the achievement of career-related benefits. Davis et al. (2020) indicate that the professional value of LinkedIn use is not determined solely by the size of one's network, but also by the frequency of platform use and the active management of professional connections. This finding further confirms that users' professional relevance on LinkedIn does not arise only from the number of established connections, but also from the continuity of their activity and the quality of the relationships and interactions they develop on the platform.

Unlike influencers whose work is based on entertainment-oriented platforms and whose content focuses on lifestyle topics or product promotion, LinkedIn influencers build their position on expertise, advice, experience, and credibility. Their ability to attract audience attention and initiate discussion brings them closer to the role of opinion leaders, since audiences use their posts as relevant sources of information (Casaló et al., 2020). Academic literature also confirms that credibility and expertise are key factors in audience assessments of whether an influencer constitutes a relevant source of information (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021).

Unlike other social networking platforms, where lifestyle content tends to dominate, LinkedIn provides a space in which influencers are not merely content creators but also representatives of expertise, experience, professional positioning, and legitimacy. These qualities are reinforced through the continuous and growing support of followers, professional peers, and other actors within the professional community (Khedher, 2014). For this reason, their status should not be assessed solely on the basis of follower numbers, but also according to the type of audience participating in the interaction.

When an influencer receives support from other experts, managers, business founders, consultants, or opinion leaders, such support carries additional reputational weight. Public validation, particularly in the form of comments from professionally relevant actors, sends a signal to the broader community that the influencer's positioning has also been accepted by other members of the professional field. It is particularly important that, unlike many other platforms, LinkedIn profiles publicly display professional experience, job positions, skills, and career trajectories. This means that public support on the platform cannot be

interpreted merely as spontaneous audience engagement, but also as a form of public professional validation and recognition within the community (Chiang & Suen, 2015; Farivar & Wang, 2022).

The visibility of professional biographies makes it possible to assess, at least approximately, the expertise and relevance of individuals participating in a discussion. LinkedIn therefore enables the simultaneous examination of the intensity of engagement and the professional composition of the audience producing that engagement. As a result, the platform allows for a more precise distinction between superficial engagement and reputationally relevant interaction.

Interactions on LinkedIn thus represent not only an exchange of information, but also a mechanism through which professional reputation is established and maintained in the digital environment. Such legitimacy is not unconditional, but is continuously reassessed. Positive forms of interaction with content, particularly comments and expert support, may validate an influencer's professional positioning. By contrast, critical comments and negative reactions to published content may call that positioning into question and potentially portray the influencer as irrelevant within the community, while well-reasoned disagreement may indicate that the content nevertheless encourages meaningful professional discussion. In this way, the professional community as a whole participates in evaluating the boundaries of the influencer's professional authority.

4. INTERACTION SIGNALS AS INDICATORS OF PERSONAL BRAND STRENGTH

In practice, influencer posts frequently affect the decisions of organisations and individuals (Pan et al., 2025). Traditional interaction signals, such as reactions, comments, and shares, play a significant role in influencer marketing because they provide publicly visible indications of content visibility and its resonance among users. ElSayad (2024) demonstrates that these forms of engagement may be associated with the perceived authenticity of the message, customer equity, and purchase intention, thereby confirming their relevance for assessing marketing outcomes. Nevertheless, although these metrics provide important information about the volume of engagement and audience responses, they do not, on their own, explain the professional composition of the audience or the

nature of the expert validation that an influencer receives within the community. Research indicates that this influence is based not only on message visibility, but also on assessments of message quality, particularly the perceived expertise and value of the message that the influencer seeks to communicate to the audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Petrović & Urošević, 2026).

Comments on posts offering specific business advice frequently show that followers have applied the recommendations in their own work and describe the effects that such advice has had on their business activities. In this way, influencers move beyond the role of message creators and become informal educators or advisers, while LinkedIn develops into a platform for the exchange of knowledge and experience outside formal educational institutions. Szeto (2021) emphasises that such interactions have both behavioural and cognitive dimensions, as they influence followers' perceptions of the influencer as well as of the community to which they belong. Interaction signals represent the audience's response to an influencer's content and professional positioning. Their importance lies not only in their frequency, but also in who participates in the interaction, what meaning is attributed to the content, and what type of support is provided. For this reason, comments, reactions, and other forms of public support may perform informational, reputational, and identity-related functions.

In digital professional communities, personal brand strength is not demonstrated solely through self-promotion and claims of expertise. Rather, it is primarily substantiated through interaction signals produced by the audience (Pan et al., 2025; Han & Balabanis, 2024). As these signals constitute publicly visible patterns of behaviour reflecting support for, acceptance of, or challenges to the influencer, they play a key role in the further legitimization of the influencer's professional identity within a particular professional community. In a business context, interaction signals as indicators of personal brand strength have direct implications for reputation, authority, B2B collaboration, and professional visibility. However, interaction signals should not be considered in isolation, since a large number of reactions may indicate visibility without necessarily demonstrating expertise or the quality of the relationship with the audience. A more comprehensive assessment therefore requires the integration of quantitative indicators with qualitative data concerning the composition of commenters and the content of their comments.

4.1. The composition of the audience publicly supporting the influencer

The strength of an influencer's personal brand cannot be assessed exclusively on the basis of follower numbers or the overall size of the audience interacting with the content. It is also necessary to consider one of the most important interaction signals: the composition of the audience that publicly expresses support for the influencer. In the case of this indicator, the quantity of participating actors is not the only relevant factor. Their quality, particularly their professional relevance and expertise, must also be taken into account.

Public support from other experts, opinion leaders, or members of the same professional community serves as a signal that the influencer is recognised as a legitimate actor within that community and may therefore constitute a form of symbolic capital. The influencer credibility literature generally focuses on influencers' own expertise and its effect on audience trust and attitudes. In the context of LinkedIn, however, the composition of the audience may also be highly significant, including the expertise of the person publicly validating the published content. Support received from a professionally relevant audience may signal to the wider community that the content has been accepted.

Given that LinkedIn profiles publicly present professional skills, experience, and career trajectories, support from professionals on LinkedIn acquires additional value (Chiang & Suen, 2015). When comments are posted by individuals with clearly presented professional experience and established reputations, such interaction functions as public validation of both the relevance of the content and the influencer. Nevertheless, publicly available professional information presented in platform profiles should be approached with caution and should not be treated as fully objective, since users are free to enter information about their own professional experience and career development.

4.2. Peer endorsement as a mechanism of legitimation

In practice, LinkedIn influencers frequently receive support from colleagues and experts working in the same or related fields, including directors, managers, consultants, and company founders. When individuals holding senior positions and possessing established professional experience publicly comment on influencers' posts and validate the insights and views

expressed, such interaction goes beyond ordinary engagement and becomes a form of professional validation. This type of interaction can therefore be interpreted as peer endorsement.

Compared with support from the broader audience, peer endorsement is characterised by support from professionals who stand out due to their experience or position within the field of expertise in which the influencer is positioned. The greater reputational value of this form of support is based on the assumption that professional peers are better positioned to recognise content quality and author credibility. At the same time, this form of support functions as a type of social proof.

The literature indicates that source credibility, expertise, and opinion leadership affect audiences' willingness to follow influencer recommendations and engage further with their content (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). Casaló et al. (2020) identify perceived opinion leadership as an important factor influencing users' intention to follow an influencer's profile and interact with both the profile and its content. In business practice, this type of support may contribute to the influencer being recognised as a relevant expert, potential lecturer, consultant, or collaborator. Peer endorsement can therefore be understood as an important indicator of both personal brand strength and the influencer's professional legitimacy.

4.3. Comments as a space for the validation or contestation of identity

Public comments in the digital environment represent one of the most significant qualitative indicators of interaction, as they provide a space for the continuous negotiation of an influencer's social identity. They make it possible to determine whether followers actively validate the influencer's identity and positioning or challenge and call them into question. The manner in which the influencer responds to comments also becomes a reflection of their identity narrative and influences the audience's perception of them.

Unlike reactions, which provide relatively limited feedback regarding the content, comments involve a more substantive form of follower interaction. Through comments, participants publicly verbalise their agreement or disagreement and express the extent to which they identify or do not identify with the published content. For this reason, both the meaning of the message and the professional background of the commenter are highly significant.

Comments may play an important role in shaping audience perceptions of the influencer. Reinikainen et al. (2020) demonstrate that comments make a significant contribution to the relationship between parasocial relationships and perceived influencer credibility. Through their activity, audiences therefore become active participants in the creation and shaping of an influencer's reputation rather than remaining passive recipients of the message.

Compared with likes and other rapid forms of engagement, comments require a higher degree of involvement and therefore possess greater analytical value. However, it is not sufficient to consider only the number of comments attracted by a particular post; the nature of the comments must also be distinguished. A brief addition to the content presented in the post, an affirmative statement, a negative reaction, and an explicit challenge to the content do not carry the same reputational value or weight.

Negative comments and reactions may signal weak or negative audience identification with the influencer's identity and published content. Nevertheless, a negative tone does not necessarily indicate the absence of professional legitimacy. It is therefore necessary to distinguish constructive criticism from discrediting content. Well-reasoned criticism may demonstrate that the influencer is recognised within the community as a participant in professional debate, whereas unfounded claims may be interpreted very differently.

It is important to emphasise that critical or sceptical comments in this environment and within these types of online communities do not necessarily carry negative connotations. In some cases, their very existence confirms that legitimacy in professional communities cannot be taken for granted but must be continuously established and reaffirmed. In business practice, comments may serve as a form of public reputational record and as an indirect tool for assessing professional credibility, which may be highly relevant to potential partners, clients, or employers.

4.4. Recurring discursive patterns

Recurring discursive patterns in audience comments and reactions have considerable analytical value. These include expressions such as "I trust your advice," "this makes sense," "this resonates," or "I will apply this in my work." Such statements and formulations go far beyond ordinary reactions. Following theoretical perspectives on the symbolic and identity-related functions of communication in digital communities, these responses reflect processes of identification and

the adoption of norms within the community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Kozinets, 2015; Szeto, 2021).

Recurring discursive patterns may perform several functions, including confirming the influencer's expertise or credibility, expressing the commenter's identification with particular values, experiences, or attitudes, affirming trust in the views presented, indicating an intention to apply advice in practice, and supplementing the content with the commenter's own professional experience.

Considering these functions, comments should not be examined solely through a division into positive and negative categories. They must also be analysed in terms of their role in the process of professional validation. Comments stating that a proposed piece of professional advice will be applied or has already been applied in practice are particularly significant, as they may indicate that the content is not merely accepted cognitively but also results in intended or realised professional behaviour.

Recurring discursive patterns extend beyond the significance of individual comments and may indicate a high level of identification and homophily between the audience and the influencer, thereby contributing to the validation of the influencer's authority within the community. Such messages constitute a form of influencer validation because they reflect the community's adoption of the influencer's values, attitudes, and norms.

The importance of discursive patterns lies precisely in their ability to reveal the meaning that the audience attributes to the influencer's content. While quantitative metrics demonstrate that a particular reaction has occurred, the quality and content of comments indicate how the influencer and their content are perceived, assessed, and evaluated.

In practice, influencers may become reference points for the interpretation and development of trends, methodologies, tools, and good practices. In dynamic fields such as marketing, influencers with strong interaction signals often approach the status of opinion leaders, influencing the framework through which good practices are understood and interpreted even before such practices are incorporated into formal business strategies.

These indicators enable a deeper understanding of how audiences participate in the construction and validation of influencers' professional identities within digital communities. Considered together, peer endorsement, comment content, and recurring discursive patterns provide a theoretical basis for their further operationalisation as dimensions of professional validation within the Professional Audience Quality Index.

5. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The indicator framework for assessing the quality of influencers' audiences on LinkedIn was developed on the basis of the theoretical framework presented in this paper. The main premise of the research is that traditional metrics, such as the number of reactions, comments, or reach, although informative regarding content visibility and reach, are not sufficient on their own to explain the strength of an influencer's professional identity. These metrics indicate the level of content visibility but provide limited information about audience composition and the nature of interaction developing within professional communities. For this reason, the empirical analysis integrates quantitative engagement indicators with qualitatively coded indicators of professional validation.

The indicators used in the research were selected on the basis of the literature on social identity, personal branding, influencers' professional credibility, professional digital communities, and public audience interactions. The professional composition of commenters is associated with the social position and reputational relevance of actors within a community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), while public support from professional peers represents a form of social validation and professional recognition. Discursive patterns of identification indicate acceptance of the content publicly shared by the influencer, whereas statements concerning the application of advice signal how the influencer's expertise is perceived and whether the published content has practical value (Farivar & Wang, 2022; Han & Balabanis, 2024).

Based on the systematisation of these findings, the Professional Audience Quality Index (PAQI) was developed as a composite indicator adapted to the analysis of publicly visible interactions involving professional influencers on LinkedIn. Unlike traditional metrics, this index focuses on assessing the reputational value of the audience and the level of expert validation received by the influencer within public discussions. The PAQI is therefore proposed as an indicator of publicly visible professional validation, the legitimacy of an influencer's personal brand, and the influencer's position within the surrounding professional community. Although the individual components of the index have previously been examined in the academic literature, they were integrated and operationalised in this study for the purpose of assessing influencers' professional and social validation.

The Professional Audience Quality Index was constructed as a composite indicator consisting of four components:

1. Share of expert commenters in the total number of comments – **EC**;
2. Presence of public support from professional peers (*peer endorsement*) – **PE**;
3. Presence of discursive patterns indicating identification with the influencer's content or views – **DPI**;
4. Presence of discursive patterns indicating the application or intended application of advice in professional practice – **DPA**.

The share of expert commenters was calculated as the ratio between the number of comments posted by professionally relevant actors and the total number of comments on each analysed post:

$$EC_i = \frac{\text{number of expert comments}_i}{\text{total number of comments}_i}$$

The value of this component ranges from 0 to 1. When a post received no comments, the share of expert commenters was coded as 0.

Peer endorsement, discursive patterns of identification, and discursive patterns indicating the application of advice were coded as binary variables. A value of 1 indicated that the relevant pattern was present in at least one comment below the post, while a value of 0 indicated its absence. The PAQI value was calculated as the unweighted arithmetic mean of the four components:

$$PAQI_i = (EC_i + PE_i + DPI_i + DPA_i) / 4$$

**In the formula, the letter "i" denotes an individual analysed post.*

Each indicator was standardised to a value between 0 and 1, after which the aggregate index value was calculated. Equal weights were assigned to all components because there was insufficient empirical justification for assigning different weights to individual components. This approach allowed for greater transparency in calculation and simpler interpretation of the index, in line with the recommendations provided by OECD (2008) regarding the construction of composite indicators. Higher values indicate a more frequent presence of social and professional validation, while lower values indicate a lower prevalence or absence of such validation.

The number of comments, the number of comments containing at least 15 words, and the comment-to-reaction ratio were also analysed in order

to provide a more detailed assessment of the volume and quality of engagement. However, these indicators were not included in the PAQI.

To conduct a preliminary test of the model, a analysis was performed on 240 LinkedIn posts published by twelve influencers with different levels of geographical reach. Geographical reach was operationalized across four levels: national, regional, European, and global. The national level included influencers from Serbia. The regional level was defined in relation to Serbia's immediate regional environment and included influencers from neighboring Balkan countries: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania. The European level included influencers from different parts of the European geographical space: the United Kingdom as a representative of insular Europe, the Netherlands as a representative of continental Europe, and Georgia as a representative of a country located on the geographical periphery of Europe. This selection was intended to ensure that the European category was not limited to a single, narrowly defined geographical area, but instead included profiles from different parts of the European continent. The global level comprised influencers from the United States, Canada, and Australia, whose professional activities, positioning, and communication extend beyond national and regional boundaries and are directed toward an international audience. Accordingly, the categories were defined based on a combination of the sample's predefined geographical framework, the country from which the influencer originates, and the geographical reach of their professional activities. Three influencers were analysed within each category, and the paper presents aggregated data for each category. A non-probability sample was used, with the selected influencers serving as examples of different levels of professional reach. This approach enabled a comparative analysis of interaction patterns across different contexts of visibility and influence.

The following criteria were applied when selecting influencers:

1. Visible and continuous activity on the platform;
2. Professional focus on marketing, branding, or related topics;
3. Different levels of geographical professional and social reach;
4. Regular publication of professional, educational, or analytical content;
5. Availability of publicly accessible audience interactions.

For each influencer, the twenty most recent publicly available posts at the time of data collection were analysed. Data collection was conducted between January and July 2026, resulting in a total sample of 240 LinkedIn posts and 8,163 comments. The sample of twenty posts per influencer was selected to ensure comparability across cases and to provide a sufficient number of units of analysis for the preliminary assessment of the index.

The units of analysis were the posts and their associated comments. Comments were examined as key indicators of professional validation, audience identification, and the potential application of advice in business and professional contexts. Data were collected manually through the analysis of publicly available content, without intervening in the natural course of communication and without interacting with either the influencers or the commenters.

The analytical criteria were based on predefined interaction indicators discussed in the theoretical section of the paper. A commenter was coded as an expert when publicly available profile information indicated relevant professional experience, expertise, or a position within the influencer's subject area and professional field.

Peer endorsement was coded as present when at least one comment contained validation of the influencer's expertise or the relevance of the content by a professionally relevant actor. When such validation appeared in comments posted by actors whose professional relevance was not publicly visible, peer endorsement was not coded as present.

Discursive patterns of identification were coded as present when comments expressed agreement, identification, or validation regarding the influencer's experiences, values, or views. The advice-application pattern was coded when a comment contained a statement indicating either the application or intended application of the advice in the commenter's own professional work.

Comments containing at least 15 words were classified as in-depth comments. This variable was used as a supplementary indicator of more detailed verbal engagement. The comment-to-reaction ratio was calculated by dividing the total number of comments by the total number of reactions on a post, with the aim of assessing the relative prevalence of more active forms of engagement.

These indicators have been recognised in the literature as relevant to understanding social validation and influencers' professional identities. To ensure that the analysis was systematic and analytically consistent,

Table 1: Results of the analysis of audience interaction with the selected influencers by sample level

Sample level	Number of influencers	Number of posts	Average number of comments	Average share of expert commenters	Average comment-to-reaction ratio	Average PAQI
National (Serbia)	3	60	35.27	39.34%	26.10%	0.67
Region	3	60	14.10	50.92%	20.43%	0.59
Europe	3	60	42.62	47.36%	32.69%	0.66
Global	3	60	53.47	63.13%	33.79%	0.86

Source: Author's analysis of LinkedIn posts (N = 240)

each indicator was translated into clearly defined coding categories and subsequently quantified according to its presence, frequency, and share within the total number of comments. Coding was conducted consistently in accordance with predefined criteria. The aim and focus of the research were not to achieve statistical generalisation, but to conduct a preliminary assessment of the index and examine its applicability.

The results revealed differences in interaction patterns among the analysed influencers with regard to the volume, composition, and content of audience interactions, as well as the geographical reach of their professional activity (Table 1).

To provide a more detailed insight into the structure of the Professional Audience Quality Index, the four individual index components were also analysed, as presented in Table 2.

The results indicate that global influencers generate the highest volume of discussion on their profiles, with an average of 53.47 comments per post, as well as the highest share of expert commenters, at 63.13%. They also achieve the highest PAQI value, at 0.86, indicating that influencers in this category more frequently attract professionally relevant audiences and generate strong expert validation and a high level of professional legitimacy within their communities.

Regional influencers generate a lower volume of discussion, with an average of 14.10 comments per post, but have a relatively high share of expert commenters, at 50.92%. This is reflected in a moderate PAQI value of 0.59. The results for influencers with

regional reach suggest that a lower volume of discussion does not necessarily imply a lower-quality professional audience. However, because the other index components recorded lower values, the total PAQI remained lower than in the other categories.

National influencers from Serbia achieve a higher average number of comments per post than regional influencers, at 35.27, but record a lower share of expert commenters, at 39.34%. This suggests that they attract a broader and more heterogeneous audience that follows their content and participates in discussions. The overall PAQI for Serbian influencers operating at the national level is 0.67.

European influencers achieve a similar overall PAQI value of 0.66, but record a higher volume of comments, at 42.62 per post, and a somewhat higher share of expert commenters, at 47.36%. This result indicates that similar overall PAQI values may arise from different combinations of values across the index's individual components.

The findings indicate that a large volume of reactions or comments does not necessarily reflect the quality of a professional audience. In some cases, posts with fewer comments attract a more professionally relevant audience and a higher proportion of expert validation, whereas high engagement may also result from a broader and more heterogeneous audience. These results confirm the need to complement traditional metrics with indicators relating to audience composition and the quality of professional validation.

Table 2: Components of the professional audience quality index by sample level

Sample level	Share of expert commenters	Peer endorsement	Discursive patterns of identification	Advice-application patterns	PAQI
National (Serbia)	39.34%	78.33%	88.33%	63.33%	0.67
Region	50.92%	70.00%	73.33%	48.33%	0.59
Europe	47.36%	83.33%	83.33%	55.00%	0.66
Global	63.13%	95.00%	95.00%	90.00%	0.86

Source: Author's analysis of LinkedIn posts (N = 240)

6. DISCUSSION

The results of the empirical analysis indicate that the professional identity and legitimacy of influencers on LinkedIn are not expressed exclusively through self-presentation, but also through the way in which audiences respond to the content that influencers publicly share. Interaction signals produced by the audience may therefore publicly validate an influencer's professional identity and authority, while at the same time questioning or challenging them. From this perspective, the social identity of influencers may be understood as a relational link between the influencer's individual positioning and collective validation within the community.

This interpretation of the findings is consistent with the central assumptions of Social Identity Theory, according to which an individual's identity is shaped not only by personal characteristics, but also through social processes of recognition and membership in a particular group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The results may also be linked to the arguments of Ashforth and Mael (1989), who suggest that social identification is based on an individual's perception of oneness with a group and may increase further depending on the group's status and reputation. In the context of professional digital communities, public comments and support from professional peers may therefore be understood as mechanisms through which the community validates or challenges the influencer's professional identity.

It is particularly important to distinguish professional identity from professional legitimacy. Professional identity refers to the way in which an influencer presents their expertise, experience, and professional role to the audience. Professional legitimacy, by contrast, depends to a considerable extent on how a relevant professional audience responds to such positioning—that is, whether it validates, questions, or challenges it. Interaction signals do not directly measure the influencer's professional identity. Instead, they indicate professional legitimacy and social validation, which are understood as a relational outcome of the interaction between the influencer's self-presentation and the response of the professional audience.

The findings are largely consistent with previous studies indicating that influencer credibility and perceived expertise play an important role in audience engagement and professional validation (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Pan et al., 2025). The importance of expertise and trustworthiness is also confirmed by Lou and Yuan (2019), Kim and Kim (2021), and Petrović

and Urošević (2026), who identify these characteristics as key components of influencer credibility and the acceptance of influencer recommendations. The results may also be linked to studies suggesting that a sense of community belonging and identification with an influencer are associated with perceived similarity between the influencer and the audience, as well as with a greater willingness among audience members to interact with the influencer and accept their recommendations (Farivar & Wang, 2022; Ki et al., 2020).

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in shifting the analytical focus. Previous influencer marketing studies have primarily examined influencer characteristics and measured their effects on audiences through engagement, credibility, or purchase intention (De Veirman et al., 2017; Vukmirović et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2025; Petrović & Urošević, 2026). By contrast, the findings of this study indicate that the professional legitimacy of influencers on LinkedIn may be assessed more precisely through the composition of commenters, expert validation, and discursive patterns found in comments. In this way, the audience is recognised as an active participant in the creation of influencer legitimacy, making professional legitimacy a jointly constructed outcome of influencer positioning and audience response.

Comments played a central role in this research as the most content-rich form of public interaction. Reinikainen et al. (2020) indicate that comments may influence the construction and assessment of influencer credibility. The importance of publicly available digital interactions in building trust has also been confirmed in other digital marketing contexts, where social media, online reviews, and comments have been shown to play a significant role in shaping user trust (Ostojić et al., 2025). The findings of our study extend this argument by showing that the number of comments does not necessarily provide an adequate assessment of professional identity and legitimacy. The professional relevance of commenters and the meanings conveyed by their comments are also highly significant.

In other words, the professional value of comments derives from the combination of their content and the professional status of the commenter. Comments confirming that the advice shared by the influencer has been applied, or will be applied, as well as comments validating the influencer's identity and expertise, carry greater weight and provide stronger evidence of professional validation than general affirmative reactions or brief comments without additional qualitative explanation.

The results clearly demonstrate that influencers with different levels of geographical reach generate different patterns of interaction. The analysed global subsample recorded the highest values across all PAQI components, indicating more pronounced publicly visible forms of professional and expert validation than those recorded in the other categories. Global influencers also achieved the highest comment-to-reaction ratio, at 33.79%, the highest average PAQI value, at 0.86, and the highest average share of expert commenters, at 63.13%. These findings indicate a high level of content visibility and strong forms of professional validation captured by the index.

By contrast, posts published by regional influencers generated a lower average number of comments, at 14.10 per post, but a high share of expert commenters, at 50.92%. This points to a high-quality professional audience and demonstrates that a limited volume of discussion does not necessarily imply a professionally irrelevant audience. Influencers operating at the national level in Serbia generated a greater volume of discussion but recorded a lower share of expert commenters, suggesting that they attract a broader and more diverse audience.

European influencers achieved a PAQI value of 0.66, which was close to the value recorded by national influencers from Serbia, at 0.67. However, these values resulted from different combinations of the individual index components. It is therefore insufficient to consider only the overall index value; the separate values of each component should also be examined.

These findings confirm that personal brand strength is not automatically associated with the highest possible number of reactions, but rather with the quality of the audience participating in the interaction. The social and professional composition of commenters, public support from professional peers, and discursive patterns of identification emerge as important indicators for assessing the social validation of influencers. This finding is consistent with the relational understanding of personal branding, according to which professional positioning is shaped not only through self-presentation but also through the evaluations and responses of other users (Labrecque et al., 2011).

The findings may have particular practical value for B2B marketing. Reputational signals generated through discussion and expert validation within professional digital communities may carry greater reputational value than traditional engagement metrics because they directly influence perceptions of influencer credibility and expertise.

For organizations and companies selecting professional influencers, consultants, experts, lecturers, or brand ambassadors, analysing the professional composition of the audience, the quality of comments, and the public support provided by other experts may offer a more credible and comprehensive basis for selection than simple metrics such as the number of reactions or comments. Such an approach makes it possible to assess both the quality of the influencer and their alignment with the objectives and expectations of a particular professional community, which is especially important in a B2B environment.

7. CONCLUSION

Through interaction with audiences and other professionals, influencers' professional legitimacy is continuously questioned, validated, and shaped, making it a dynamic construct, while professional identity receives public confirmation through processes of social validation. The results of the empirical analysis indicate that influencers' professional impact on LinkedIn is shaped through the combination of how influencers present themselves and how the professional community publicly responds to them and their content, including whether it challenges or validates their positioning. The analysis demonstrates that quantitative metrics alone are insufficient for assessing personal brand strength and that the quality of the audience and discussion plays a more significant role in evaluating professional influence. The conceptual model and content analysis applied in this study indicate that a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators is required to understand more precisely how influencers' professional identities are established and validated.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in connecting Social Identity Theory, personal branding, and social validation through a set of indicators designed for observation and analysis on professional social networking platforms. A particular theoretical contribution is reflected in the shift of analytical focus from influencers themselves to the professional audiences that follow and respond to their content. The audience is thus recognised as an active participant in the creation of professional legitimacy, while social validation is conceptualised as a relational process emerging through publicly visible interactions between influencers and professional communities.

The methodological contribution of the paper lies in the development of the Professional Audience

Quality Index, which integrates qualitative and quantitative interaction indicators, including the professional composition of the audience, the presence of discursive patterns of identification and advice application, and peer endorsement. The proposed index represents an analytical framework for assessing the quality of professional audiences on LinkedIn and is intended to complement rather than replace traditional engagement metrics.

The practical contribution of the paper lies in the design and development of a model that may be applied in B2B marketing, personal brand management, and digital reputation analysis. The findings indicate that when companies and organisations select collaborators, consultants, or brand ambassadors among professional influencers, they should not rely exclusively on the number of followers, reactions, or comments. Such an approach does not enable a sufficiently precise assessment of an influencer's relevance and credibility within the specific professional community in which an organisation seeks to exert influence.

The findings also demonstrate the broader social significance of professional communities. The social implications of the study lie in showing that professional influencers on LinkedIn should not be considered solely in terms of communication and market outcomes, but also through their role in shaping trends, facilitating knowledge exchange, creating professional norms, and influencing the behaviour of community members. Influencers whose content receives stronger validation within a community also bear greater responsibility for the accuracy, ethical quality, and social consequences of the messages they publish.

For this reason, it is necessary to develop users' critical digital and media literacy so that actors with high visibility and substantial audience engagement are not automatically equated with objective expertise and professional quality. In this respect, the PAQI may contribute to a more comprehensive and responsible assessment of digital influence by shifting attention from the influencer alone towards the audience, the

nature of public validation, and its potential effect on professional behaviour.

One limitation of the study is its relatively small and restricted sample. The analysis also included only publicly available interactions on LinkedIn and did not examine private communication between commenters and influencers. In addition, all PAQI components were assigned equal weight for the purpose of methodological simplification, an assumption that future studies may further test and refine.

Future research could include a larger number of influencers from different industries, conduct longitudinal analyses of interaction patterns, test alternative weighting models for individual index components, and compare professional communities across different social networking platforms. Such research would enable the further development and validation of the index as a tool for studying professional validation and digital reputation in contemporary online communities.

Overall, the findings indicate that influencers' professional impact on LinkedIn cannot be fully understood solely on the basis of engagement volume. Professional influence can be assessed more precisely through the simultaneous consideration of several factors, including visibility, the professional composition of the audience, and the meanings conveyed through public interactions in which professional legitimacy, personal brand strength, and expertise are continuously validated or challenged.

This perspective provides a basis for understanding professional influencer marketing as a process in which the audience is not a passive recipient of messages. Through social validation and public activity, the audience becomes an active participant in the construction of influencers' professional identities and digital reputations. In this sense, the PAQI represents an initial step towards the development of new approaches to measuring professional digital influence, in which the quality of public validation and the composition of professional audiences are treated as integral elements in understanding influencers' professional legitimacy.

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Apstrakt

Društveni identitet kao odraz osećaja pripadnosti profesionalnoj zajednici influensera na LinkedIn-u

Marija Milenković

Pojavom interneta i daljim razvojem digitalnih platformi i ekonomije pažnje, u 21. veku došlo je do pojave influensera, koji u digitalnom okruženju formiraju specifičnu profesionalnu zajednicu koja egzistira i funkcioniše na tromeđi marketinga, društvenih mreža i medija. Ovakvo pozicioniranje influensera dovodi do toga da se njihov društveni identitet može dalje posmatrati kao reflektovanje njihovog pripadanja određenoj profesionalnoj zajednici, ali i kao strateška odluka i resurs na putu izgradnje ličnog brenda u internet marketingu. Rad istražuje društveni identitet influensera na LinkedIn-u, analizirajući kako se on artikuliše kroz interakcione signale: reakcije, komentare, deljenja i obrasce javne podrške, kao indikatore snage ličnog brenda i legitimiteta u profesionalnoj zajednici. Poseban fokus je na njihovoj interpretaciji kao signala potvrde ili osporavanja profesionalnog pozicioniranja. Zasnovan na teoriji društvenog identiteta, ličnom brandingu i društvenoj validaciji, rad predlaže indikatorski okvir za procenu kvaliteta profe-

sionalne publike kroz strukturu osoba koje ostavljaju svoje komentare, odnosno njihovu stručnost, javnu podršku kolega iz struke (eng. *peer endorsement*) i diskurzivne obrasce, dopunjujući tradicionalne kvantitativne metrike angažmana. Empirijski deo istraživanja zasniva se na analizi sadržaja 240 objava dvanaest profesionalnih influensera različitog geografskog dometa (Srbija, region, Evropa i globalno) obuhvatajući ukupno 8,163 komentara. Rezultati ukazuju da stručna validacija u komentarima pruža potpuniji uvid u snagu profesionalnog identiteta od obima reakcija. Doprinosa rada ogleda se u razvoju kompozitnog indikatora za procenu kvaliteta profesionalne publike sa konkretnom primenom u istraživanjima influencer marketinga, B2B marketingu i upravljanju ličnim brendom.

Ključne reči: *LinkedIn, influencer marketing, lični branding, društveni identitet, profesionalni legitimitet*

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