

**The Persuasive Power of Influencers in Wildlife Conservation: Investigating
Congruence, Follower Count, and Facial Emotional Cues**

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Résumé : Cette recherche met en évidence le rôle central des signaux de crédibilité perçue des influenceurs pour favoriser la volonté de s'informer comme une étape précomportementale clé pour une cause liée à la conservation de la faune. La première expérimentation a montré que la congruence élevée — et dans une moindre mesure modérée — entre l'influenceur et la cause, mais non faible, combinée à un sourire intense et marqué par des larmes de joie plutôt qu'à un sourire légèrement intense, produisait les profils d'influenceurs les plus crédibles pour promouvoir des causes liées à la faune, quel que soit le nombre d'abonnés (micro- ou macro-influenceurs). L'analyse de médiation sérielle modérée a ensuite montré que, dans la plupart des cas, les larmes de joie amplifient les effets de la congruence influenceur-cause sur la volonté de s'informer via certaines dimensions de la crédibilité perçue et de l'attitude. Des implications clés pour la sélection d'influenceurs afin de soutenir la protection de la faune sont discutées.

Mots clés : *Influenceurs, Crédibilité, Congruence, Emotions, Intensité du sourire, Comportements prosociaux, Philanthropie*

Abstract : This research highlights the central role of influencers' perceived credibility signals in fostering willingness to seek information as a key pre-behavioral step for a wildlife conservation cause. The first experiment showed that high—and to a lesser extent moderate—influencer-cause congruence, but not low, combined with a strongly intense smile with tears of joy rather than a mild intense smile, produced the most credible influencer profiles in promoting wildlife causes, regardless of follower count (micro- or macro-influencers). Moderated serial mediation analysis further showed that, in most cases, tears of joy amplify the effects of influencer-cause fit on willingness to seek information through particular dimensions of perceived credibility and attitude. Key implications for selecting influencers to support wildlife protection are discussed.

Keywords: *Influencers, Credibility, Congruence, Emotions, Smile intensity Prosocial behaviors, Philanthropy*

Introduction. Organizations dedicated to wildlife protection increasingly need creative ways to raise public awareness. Engaging social media influencers be a promising avenue, given their effectiveness as agents of persuasion in prosocial contexts (Li et al., 2024). Literature shows that credible influencers typically have a smaller follower count and a high fit with an environmentally friendly cause or product (e.g., Pittman & Abell, 2021). However, few influencers are actively engaged in wildlife conservation. Furthermore, the evaluation of influencer's facial expressions could be a relevant credibility cue, since broad smiles are often associated with warmth and sincerity, but not necessarily with competence (Wang et al., 2017). This study focuses on influencer–cause fit (high, moderate, low), follower count (micro- and macro-influencers), and smile intensity (stronge (tears of joy), mild (slight smile)) to understand how these signals shape an influencer's ability to inspire trust, likability, and competence as credibility cues that encourage positive attitudes and information seeking for a wildlife conservation cause.

Literature Review. An increasing number of studies have explored the persuasive mechanisms of influencers to encourage prosocial behaviors (Li et al., 2024). Among these, credibility emerges as a central factor, as consumers often question whether endorsements stem from genuine altruism or self-serving motives (Rifon et al., 2004). Prosocial research has investigated various credibility cues, particularly the perceived fit between and the endorsed cause or product. For instance, Pittman and Abell (2021) demonstrated that greenfluencers with fewer followers—micro compared to macro influencers—were perceived as more credible and more likely to generate favorable brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Similarly, Boerman et al. (2022) found that a strong influencer–message fit enhanced perceived credibility and pro-environmental intentions. In rural China, Zhang et al. (2021) showed that even non-expert influencers who were trusted helped encourage the trial of a new green product. Based on above, this research selects congruence and follower count as key variables to assess the effectiveness of influencers for a wildlife cause. In addition, it introduces a moderate influencer–cause fit as a potential more effective alternative—particularly in an era where trust in experts is declining (Gerrath et al., 2024). Notably, a slightly incongruent fit has

been shown to enhance recall, attitude, and engagement (e.g., Jagre et al., 2001). Furthermore, Hudders et al. (2020) noted a lack of research on visual cues in influencer effectiveness. In this regard, Kim and Read (2022) found that an influencer's smile acts as a visual self-representation cue influencing perceived warmth. According to De Neys et al. (2017), people heavily rely on facial expressions to assess trustworthiness. Indeed, smiling signals warmth, openness, and friendliness, thereby enhance trust (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). However, it also reduces the influencer's perceived competence in high-risk consumption contexts (Wan et al., 2017). In the same vein, Kim and Read (2022) showed that influencers displaying high smile intensity—as compared to medium or low—resulted in more favorable attitudes and stronger purchase intentions. In parallel, research indicated that positive self-transcendent emotions—such as awe, gratitude, and compassion—are strong predictors of prosocial behaviors (Zelenski & Desrochers, 2021; Stellar, 2017). Among them, awe is particularly relevant in nature-related contexts (Bethelmy & Corraliza, 2019). This emotion is associated with cooperation and prosocial behaviors, because it evokes a sense of vastness, of something greater than oneself, increasing feelings of connectedness with others (Shiota et al., 2007). For instance, Ibanez and Rousseau (2017) found that awe increased monetary donations to environmental causes. Moreover, Schneider et al. (2002) demonstrated that only self-transcendent emotions—such as awe—were associated with sustainable behaviors, in contrast to self-oriented positive emotions like joy. Notably awe is often expressed through tears of joy (Wassiliwizky et al., 2017). These emotional tears typically arise during moments of intense positive emotion, often when people are deeply moved by nature (Zickfeld et al., 2020). As dimorphous expressions, tears of joy combine contradictory cues, such as crying and smiling, unlike monomorphous expressions like smiling (Aragón & Clark, 2017). Tears also serve as honest signals of emotional intensity and sincerity, enhancing perceptions of genuineness and trustworthiness (Vingerhoets, 2013). According to the emotional contagion theory (Schoenewolf, 1990), witnessing such positive emotions—especially when accompanied by tears of joy—could therefore increase observers' prosocial intentions. Lastly, Lou et al. (2024)' research identified the lack of knowledge as a key barrier to prosocial behaviors. Since prosocial knowledge is positively correlated with prosocial behavior (Martin-Raugh, 2016), this study proposes

to examine a pre-behavioral stage in the decision-making process: the willingness to seek information about a wildlife cause.

Study 1. This first study investigates which attributes and levels of analysis carry the most weight in shaping the influencer's perceived credibility for a wildlife cause. A full-profile conjoint analysis was conducted with 41 university students. The experimental design included 12 fictional influencer profiles, based on a factorial combination of three key variables: influencer–cause fit (high, moderate, low) $\times$ smile intensity (mildly intense smile vs. strongly intense smile with tears of joy) $\times$ follower count (micro-influencer: $n < 30,000$; macro-influencer: $n > 100,000$). Participants were asked to rank the profiles based on the influencer's perceived credibility. The results revealed that influencer–cause congruence had the greatest impact (56.46%), followed by facial expressions of positive emotions (37.51%) and follower count (6.03%) ($p < .001$). Both high and moderate congruence were rated more favorably than low congruence. Influencers displaying tears of joy and macro-influencers formed the most effective combinations for enhancing credibility. (See Table 1 in Appendix for the full ranking.)

Study 2. Study 2 examined the main and interaction effects of influencer–cause congruence and smile intensity on perceived credibility (expertise, trustworthiness, likability), attitudes, and willingness to seek information about a wildlife cause. A 3×2 factorial design was used, with 3 levels of influencer–cause fit (high, moderate, low) $\times$ 2 levels of smile intensity (mildly (slight smile)) vs. strongly (tears of joy)). Each profile featured a real partnership with a wildlife nonprofit organization—UQROP (Union Québécoise de Réhabilitation des Oiseaux de Proie). Congruence was manipulated through a brief description of the influencer's niche (wildlife protection (high fit), wildlife camping (moderate fit), and fashion and luxury accessories (low fit)). Smile intensity was manipulated by describing a video in which the influencer reacts nonverbally to the release of a rehabilitated snowy owl. Being moved to tears was associated with the strong intensity condition, and a slight smile was mentioned in the mildly intense condition. A total of 436 participants from Quebec took part in the online study. MANOVA results showed that perceived expertise and trustworthiness were greater in the high influencer-cause fit condition than the moderate or the low condition. They were also greater in the moderated fit condition versus the low condition. Contrasts

analysis further revealed that perceived likability, attitudes, and seeking information intentions were also significantly higher in the high and moderate fit conditions than the low one. Smile intensity had a significant effect on all outcomes except perceived expertise, with tears of joy eliciting more favorable impressions and greater behavioral intentions than a slight smile. Interaction effects revealed that influencers who displayed tears of joy were perceived as less expert. The opposite effect occurs in the moderated fit condition, where tears of joy were associated with higher levels of expertise. Moreover, perceived trustworthiness was significantly amplified with tears of joy in the moderated fit condition, but not in the high fit one. Furthermore, moderated serial mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2017) were conducted for each fit condition. In the high fit condition, a direct effect and indirect effect through likability on willingness to seek information was significant, yielding higher intentions in the strongly intense smile condition (partial mediation). The indirect effect through perceived expertise and attitude was also significant but negative (partial mediation). In contrast, both the direct and indirect effects through perceived trustworthiness and attitude were positive and significant (partial mediation). In the moderate fit condition, the total effect of smile intensity on willingness to seek information was fully mediated by trustworthiness (higher with tears of joy). A second mediation pathway via likability and attitude was also significant, with tears of joy, again leading to greater behavioral intentions (total mediation). In the low fit condition, only smile intensity influenced willingness to seek information through perceived likability, again in the high-intensity condition (total mediation). (See all detailed results in Appendix)

Conclusion. This research highlights the strategic role influencers can play in promoting wildlife conservation causes. Findings underscore the central importance of influencer–cause congruence—especially when moderately aligned—as well as the persuasive power of positive self-transcendent emotional expressions, particularly tears of joy, in enhancing credibility. These insights offer practical guidance for selecting ideal influencers by leveraging their credibility and emotional resonance with audiences. For instance, it is advisable to avoid influencers who exhibit strong ties to a cause and who highly express their emotions, as this may diminish their perceived expertise and reduce

audience' intentions to seek information about the cause. Future research should further investigate the role of self-transcendent emotional cues in encouraging the adoption of prosocial behaviors.

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Appendix

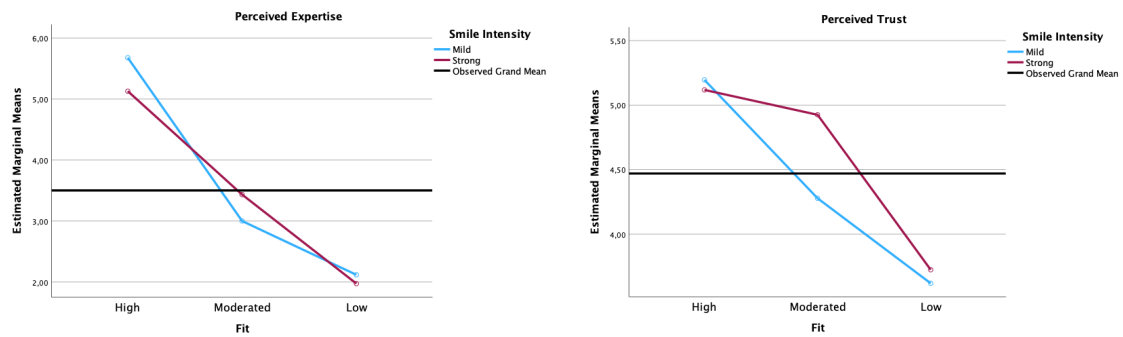
Table 1. Influencer's profile ranking (Study 1)

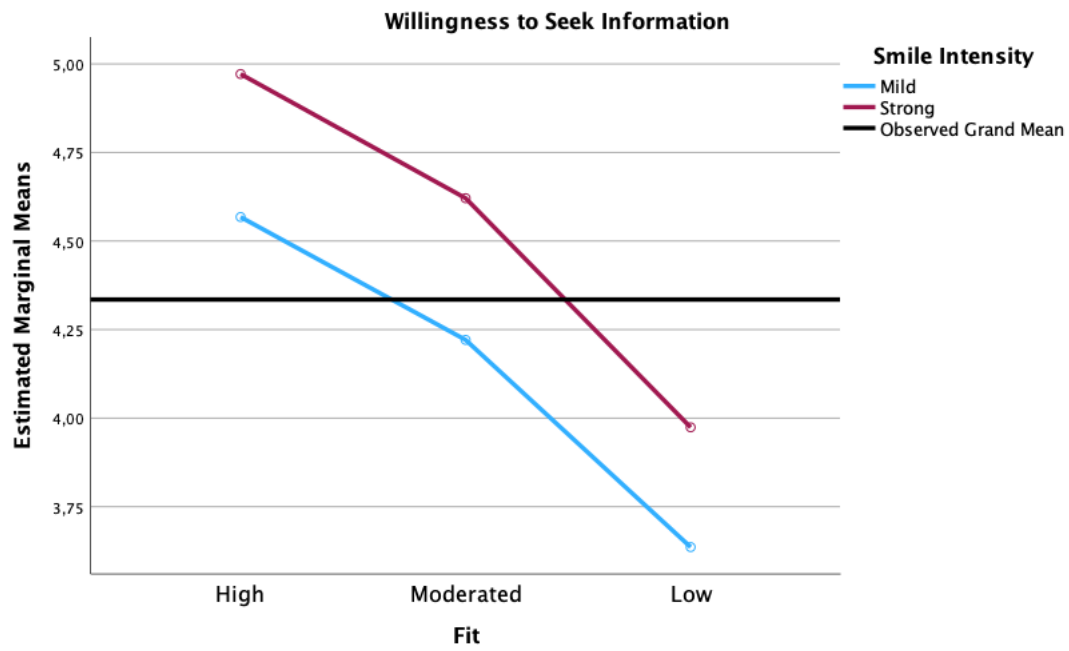
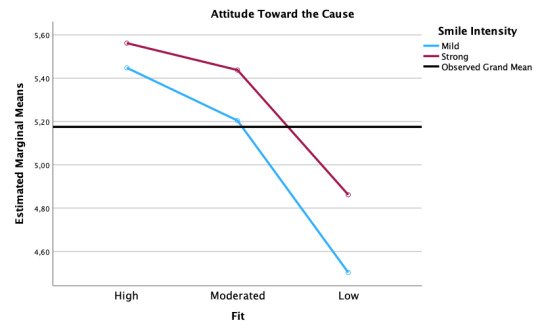
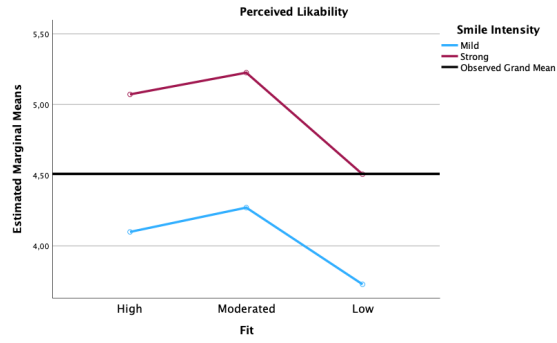
Ranking	Follower count	Smile intensity	Influencer-cause fit
1	Macro	Strongly intense	High
2	Micro	Strongly intense	High
3	Macro	Strongly intense	Moderate
4	Micro	Strongly intense	Moderate
5	Macro	Mildly intense	High
6	Micro	Mildly intense	High
7	Macro	Mildly intense	Moderate
8	Macro	Strongly intense	Low
9	Micro	Mildly intense	Moderate
10	Micro	Strongly intense	Low
11	Macro	Mildly intense	Low
12	Micro	Mildly intense	Low

Table 2. Main and interaction effects (Study 2)

Source		F	Sig.	η^2
Fit	Expertise	191.789	< .001	.471
	Trustworthiness	56.296	< .001	.208
	Likability	13.164	< .001	.058
	Attitude	22.639	< .001	.095
	Seeking info	16.516	< .001	.071
Smile intensity	Expertise	.389		
	Trustworthiness	3.948	.048	.009
	Likability	73.593	< .001	.146
	Attitude	5.193	.023	.012
	Seeking info	7.833	.005	.018
Fit × Smile	Expertise	4.332	.014	.020
	Trustworthiness	3.843	.022	0.18
	Likability	.341		
	Attitude	.447		
	Seeking info	.024		

Figures Fit × Smile intensity (Study 2)





Moderated Serial Mediation Analysis Results (Sudy 2)

The effects of influencer–cause fit (high, moderate, low) and smile intensity (mild vs. strong smile with tears of joy) on willingness to seek information about the cause, mediated by perceived credibility—expertise, trustworthiness, and likability—and attitudes toward the wildlife cause.

High fit influencer-cause & expertise

***** TOTAL EFFECT MODEL *****						
OUTCOME VARIABLE:						
Seeking						
Model Summary						
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2
	,1679	,0282	1,4233	3,8287	1,0000	132,0000
						p
						,0525
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4,5677	,1491	30,6298	,0000	4,2727	4,8627
Smile	,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****						
Total effect of X on Y						
	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
	,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119
Direct effect of X on Y						
	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
	,4073	,1845	2,2081	,0290	,0424	,7723
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
TOTAL	-,0036	,1182	-,2339	,2310		
Ind1	-,0673	,0608	-,2017	,0345		
Ind2	,1564	,0976	-,0291	,3557		
Ind3	-,0928	,0412	-,1869	-,0236		
Indirect effect key:						
Ind1 Smile	->	Expert	->	Seeking		
Ind2 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking		
Ind3 Smile	->	Expert	->	Attitude	->	Seeking

High fit influencer-cause & trustworthiness

Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	,1679	,0282	1,4233	3,8287	1,0000	132,0000	,0525
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	4,5677	,1491	30,6298	,0000	4,2727	4,8627	
Smile	,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119	
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****							
Total effect of X on Y							
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI		
,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119		
Direct effect of X on Y							
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI		
,3641	,1766	2,0615	,0413	,0147	,7135		
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:							
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
TOTAL	,0396	,1141	-,1794	,2660			
Ind1	-,0170	,0429	-,1119	,0680			
Ind2	,0771	,0788	-,0683	,2453			
Ind3	-,0205	,0451	-,1151	,0670			
Indirect effect key:							
Ind1 Smile	->	Trust	->	Seeking			
Ind2 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking			
Ind3 Smile	->	Trust	->	Attitude	->	Seeking	

High fit influencer-cause & likability

Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	,1679	,0282	1,4233	3,8287	1,0000	132,0000	,0525
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	4,5677	,1491	30,6298	,0000	4,2727	4,8627	
Smile	,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119	
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****							
Total effect of X on Y							
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI		
,4037	,2063	1,9567	,0525	-,0044	,8119		
Direct effect of X on Y							
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI		
,1585	,1956	,8101	,4193	-,2285	,5454		
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:							
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
TOTAL	,2453	,1538	-,0497	,5552			
Ind1	,0617	,0971	-,1298	,2577			
Ind2	,1765	,0961	,0027	,3792			
Ind3	,0071	,0140	-,0147	,0426			
Indirect effect key:							
Ind1 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking			
Ind2 Smile	->	Like	->	Seeking			
Ind3 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Like	->	Seeking	

Moderated Fit Influencer-Cause & trustworthiness

Model Summary						
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2
	,1312	,0172	2,3132	2,7667	1,0000	158,0000
						p
						,0982
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4,2208	,1700	24,8220	,0000	3,8850	4,5567
Smile	,4000	,2405	1,6633	,0982	-,0750	,8750
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****						
Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
,4000	,2405	1,6633	,0982	-,0750	,8750	
Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
,0112	,1892	,0590	,9530	-,3626	,3850	
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
TOTAL	,3888	,1690	,0735	,7358		
Ind1	,2303	,0997	,0716	,4603		
Ind2	-,0212	,0970	-,2115	,1722		
Ind3	,1797	,0677	,0631	,3288		
Indirect effect key:						
Ind1 Smile	->	Trust	->	Seeking		
Ind2 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking		
Ind3 Smile	->	Trust	->	Attitude	->	Seeking

Moderated Fit Influencer-Cause & Likability

Model Summary						
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2
	,1312	,0172	2,3132	2,7667	1,0000	158,0000
						p
						,0982
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4,2208	,1700	24,8220	,0000	3,8850	4,5567
Smile	,4000	,2405	1,6633	,0982	-,0750	,8750
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****						
Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
,4000	,2405	1,6633	,0982	-,0750	,8750	
Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
-,1614	,1975	-,8171	,4151	-,5515	,2287	
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
TOTAL	,5614	,1851	,2060	,9293		
Ind1	,3984	,1155	,1977	,6417		
Ind2	-,0983	,1036	-,3084	,0983		
Ind3	,2613	,0730	,1347	,4215		
Indirect effect key:						
Ind1 Smile	->	Like	->	Seeking		
Ind2 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking		
Ind3 Smile	->	Like	->	Attitude	->	Seeking

Low Fit Influencer-Cause & Likability

Model Summary						
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2
	,1140	,0130	2,1865	1,8430	1,0000	140,0000
						p
						,1768
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3,6359	,1834	19,8241	,0000	3,2733	3,9985
Smile	,3381	,2491	1,3576	,1768	-,1543	,8305
***** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****						
Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
,3381	,2491	1,3576	,1768	-,1543	,8305	
Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
-,1050	,2216	-,4739	,6363	-,5433	,3332	
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
TOTAL	,4432	,1647	,1320	,7933		
Ind1	,2608	,1159	,0629	,5157		
Ind2	,0319	,1074	-,1908	,2280		
Ind3	,1505	,0684	,0482	,3065		
Indirect effect key:						
Ind1 Smile	->	Like	->	Seeking		
Ind2 Smile	->	Attitude	->	Seeking		
Ind3 Smile	->	Like	->	Attitude	->	Seeking