ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE: EXAMINING THE ROLES AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE OF INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS AND UNCOVERING IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE AND THEORY

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This dissertation examines the public relations roles played by Instagram influencers. Specifically, I explore how social media publics (e.g., followers) perceive influencers. I do so by applying role theory as a primary theoretical lens and apply Cialdini's principles of persuasion (authority, consistency, scarcity, reciprocity, liking, social proof, and unity) to investigate the experiences and perspectives of social media followers directly. This dissertation addresses the following three research questions by exploring the social media influencer-follower storyline:
RQ1: How do social media influencers define 'social media influencer'?
RQ2: How do social media followers engage with social media influencers and what public relations roles do they see them fulfill?
RQ3: How do social media influencers–through persuasive principles–exert influence on different publics?
These questions contend with, respectively, firstly, how social media followers define a social media influencer, the second is concerned with the nature and frequency of social media followers engagement with social media influencers. The third and final research question answers what sources of influence used by social media influencers are described as persuasive and worthy of support by followers.

By answering these questions, the dissertation serves to fulfill the goals of capturing how publics perceive and define social media influencers; what unique roles social media influencers play from a public relations perspective or viewpoint; and finally, the extent and nature of the influence that social media influencers enact in the public space. Given these research questions, I used qualitative methods of inquiry. Specifically, I conducted an initial questionnaire, which was followed up with in-depth interviews and triangulated by a content analysis. The findings, in order of the aforementioned research questions, (1) illuminated how publics define influencers and engage with them on Instagram—as extensions of their social circle akin to family and friends, (2) demonstrated that social media influencers add to the social influence aspect by building a relationships with their publics, and in doing so, (3) showed how Instagram influencers play an important role in participants lives through the platform and engaging with on an almost daily basis. These specific findings are the ones that fulfill the goals of the research project; the rest of the several findings are by-products or offshoots and can serve as future research areas.

In the theoretical context, there have been attempts to define exactly what is meant by the term 'influencer', especially in a public relations context. This study fulfills the need of showing how social media influencers are perceived by their publics and how they are changing the landscape of public relations functions research and practice. As such, this work explicates the influential roles influencers play in public relations and in doing so contributes to public relations research and practice.

In the applied context, this study examines how social media influencers, with their communication, occupation of online spaces, and bonds with their social media users create relationships with publics. The discussion explores the ramifications of the relational power that is exerted by enacting the role of social media influencer in the public relations space.

Social media influencers are staking their place, and much of that role has been enacted through the Instagram platform. This study gets directly at the viewpoint of Instagram users, or in other words, the followers of Instagram influencers.

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To all the tears and sleepless nights that made this possible.

Dedication

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Instagram faces and influencers

This dissertation sets out to find out how publics perceive and define social media influencers, specifically Instagram influencers; what unique roles Instagram influencers play from a public relations perspective or viewpoint; and finally, the extent and nature of the influence that Instagram enact in the public space.

> "The Instagram face…one of the oddest legacies of our rapidly expiring decade: the gradual emergence, among professionally beautiful women, of a single, cyborgian face. It's a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella" (Tolentino, 2019, para 1).

Posting content and building up hefty social media followings to promote products and services, at times the influencers' own products and services, is continuing to grow and evolve as a profession (Wellman, Stoldt & Ekdale, 2020). Comments and insults about Instagram influencing not being a "real job" no longer stand, it would appear. The global revenue generated by social media influencers has risen to 21.1 billion dollars in 2023 (Geyser, 2023) and influencers can make $20,000 or more from one single partnered post (Hu, 2023). Studies on Instagram influencers can be found (Wellman et al, 2020; Russell & Itzler, 2020; Freberg et al, 2011), but there are gaps in the existing literature that need to be filled in order to keep up with the growing social appetite for influencer recommendations and content. For example, there have been attempts to define exactly what is meant by the term 'influencer' (Freberg et al, 2011), but there is a need to build on this and ask important questions about how social media influencers, specifically Instagram influencers, may be

changing the landscape of public relations without being acknowledged in research. Social media is being equated with Instagram in this context by and large because social media influencers are seen as Instagram influencers by social media users (Geyser, 2022).

Although the engagement and publicity that is generated by partnering with Instagram influencers can easily be calculated using metrics in software provided by Google and other similar technical resources, numbers alone do not tell the whole story. While it is true that quantitative measurements such as dollar spend versus return/success can be used to assess qualitative impact, "the value of mere quantitative metrics through subscribers, follower counts, likes, and comments are no longer truthful or sufficient indicators of engagement or impact" (Abidin, 2018, p. 96). The meaningfulness of Instagram influencers' relationships with their followers, along with the potential persuasiveness aspect of these relationships (Wellman et al, 2020), and how this meaningfulness and persuasiveness, in turn, impacts the social capital and standing that brands—increasingly utilizing the services and affiliations of social media influencers—needs to be assessed qualitatively in order to go beyond the numbers. It is important to see how influencers, with their word-of-mouth marketing, occupation of online spaces, and bonds with social media users ("followers"), shape followers' perceptions, and the ramifications of the power that is exerted by enacting the role of Instagram in the public relations space. Following the success of external shopping services like 'LIKEtoKNOW.it' usually abbreviated as LTK, which essentially allows influencers to link products and services on their online storefront

and earn money (Duford, 2023), Instagram integrated LTK sales into its platform, so that people on the app don't have to leave it when purchasing something (Dellatto, 2023). This means that when you see something linked on Instagram, you can buy it right there in the application itself. This made it easier to buy products through an influencer's recommendation and led to the going 'viral' and selling out through Instagram influencers, of many products, including a crossbody purse by Lululemon called the Everywhere Belt Bag, the Airwrap hair styler by Dyson, and the Always Pan by the brand Our Place, also made the list (Dellatto, 2023).

What do college students and other frequent users of Instagram perceive when following Instagram influencers, and how are they–as Instagram users and followers–impacted? This dissertation project will explore the intersection of role theory and social influence with Instagram influencers by looking at the relationships that followers form with the influencers. Essentially, influencers have not been studied to a large extent in the public relations context, particularly from an audience or publics perspective (Freberg et al, 2011) and this dissertation has done just that. The goal of this research is to determine the role of influencers in wielding influence, i.e. how research on social media influencers can be applied to the public relations context, specifically in the theoretical frameworks of role theory and social influence. While they may still be examined through the lens of traditional media (Abidin, 2018), the truth is that there is a need to shed light on the influence wielded by social media influencers, such as Abby Govindan, Tasha Green, Lubalin, Jack Morris, and Louise Roe (Woodrow, 2021). They may not be household names like traditional

celebrities, but it cannot be denied that there is an architecture forming entirely around the influencer industry, allowing the public perspective to be shaped in entirely new ways: for content to be created and disseminated in new ways, and the recommendation and promotion of products and services to reach pre-existing publics in the form of these Instagram influencers' followers in these same ways (Abidin, 2018).

Throughout the course of this dissertation work, I did have to temper my expectations. Initially, I wanted to explore the aftermath of social media influencer crises, and how they reflect on organizations. However, the more I delved into this area of scholarship, the more I realized that there is a certain amount of base work that needs to be done to firmly cement the idea of the social media influencer as a public relations actor before we can delve into that scandal work, exploring the aftermath of a breach of trust. That is not to say that this dissertation work did not uncover a great deal of interesting, surprising, and novel information that can allow us to do just that in the future. This dissertation provides the language that we can use in order to describe the role and influence of Instagram influencers in peoples' lives (i.e,. in the lives of social media users/publics).

Preview

I'm genuinely interested and have always been interested in the growth of the Instagram model/lifestyle brand/people who are famous for just being famous "movement". "Instafamous" is not a term that was coined until very recently but that has already become part of the vernacular, particularly among young adults

(Kozinets, 2020). There does not seem to be a lot of research carried out in this area however, and applying PR theories here would really unearth interesting papers and potential research areas.

Instagram as a platform first came onto the scene in 2010, a free mobile application centered around sharing images (Jacks, 2023). Once paid advertising was added to the platform, users with large followings quickly began to earn money and the idea of the Instagram influencer was born (Jacks, 2023). The rationale for using Instagram as a the platform of choice for this research is very simply because the idea of influencing is seen as synonymous with Instagram (Jacks, 2023). Being free and widely accessible meant that I could safely assume that most of my participants would be regular Instagram users, which turned out to be true. Also because of the fact that Instagram influencers have public profiles, I was able to analyze the comments during the content analysis in an organic way, without having to go through a screening process to follow them first.

With the interest in Instagram influencers burgeoning, I interviewed one of these influencers as early as 2019 for a separate project, and asked them about public relations scandals as they relate to social media influencers (P. DeSorbo, personal communication, May 17, 2019). This interview was part of a project called 'Influential on Instagram: What Happens When the Rose Colored Filters Come Off?' (IRB code 1431224-2) and is not directly in the scope of work done for this dissertation but shows the length of time influencing has been at the forefront of my research agenda. While the Paige DeSorbo interview (P. DeSorbo, personal

communication, May 17, 2019) was not strictly for this dissertation, like I said before, it shows how long Instagram influencers have been the focus of my research. Even though she has increased her follower count since the time of our interview, she still had a highly significant following at the time, and I was interested to hear what she had to say about the role she felt she played in her Instagram followers' lives. She was adamant that any brand endorsements she took on, she would make sure that she stood behind it one hundred percent.

The way she defined a public is: "the term public to me means anyone has the right for anyone to be watching them at any time and be judged by anyone, if you don't want if you wouldn't want your grandma to be mad about you for something, I always say don't do it in public, right?" (P. DeSorbo, personal communication, May 17, 2019). When asked how she would want to be approached for a product recommendation post, she made it clear that she would not endorse anything that she had not tried for at least a few weeks and actually wanted to endorse, in case the negative consequences that followed breached her followers' faith in her. She told me she would rather lose a few thousand dollars than miss out on hundreds of thousands of dollars that she could potentially make in the long run by keeping her followers' trust (P. DeSorbo, personal communication, May 17, 2019). She kept repeating the phrase, "doing your due diligence" (P. DeSorbo, personal communication, May 17, 2019). The example we spoke about was a potential skincare line and her fear was "all of a sudden they all start breaking out in hives" (P. DeSorbo, personal communication, May 17, 2019)–a fair fear.

I have chosen to employ the following theories: role theory–which crosses over into sociology and psychology, and Robert Cialdini's updated theory of social influence which includes seven disparate principles that social media influencers can use to sway their followers (Cialdini, 2021). The research questions are previewed below:

RQ1: How do social media followers define 'social media influencer'?

RQ2: How do social media followers engage with social media influencers and what roles do they see them fulfill?

RQ3: How do social media influencers–through persuasive principles–exert influence on different publics?

Chapter 2: Literature Review & Research Questions: Role Theory & Social Influence

Literature Review

The following literature review examines the existing research on social media influencers. After providing an overview of social media influencers and influencing, and introducing social media marketing, I will explicate the theoretical frames that will form the structure of the proposed examination of Instagram influencers in the following order: relationships, trust, authenticity, role theory and then Cialdini's principles of social influence.

Social Media Influencing and Marketing

The idea of using social media to further persuasion and brand promotion goals has become more common in recent years to the point that "social media has irrefutably fused with the basic needs of contemporary life" (Abidin, 2018, p. 100). This shift has made it so that it is now impossible to have a fully rounded, comprehensive public relations strategy/communications that does not take a social media presence into account. Still, the role of influencing through social media platforms still remains largely unexplored in the public relations context (Freberg et al, 2011). For example, in 2017, ThirdLove-a popular lingerie company often lauded for its inclusivity and youth appeal—spent about 80 percent of its marketing dollars on Facebook and Instagram, which evidently is representative of most direct-to-consumer brands like ThirdLove (Ingrassia, 2021). Indeed, Instagram has

been defined as “the social media app of choice for Millennials, who often use the site to post photos of their favorite products” (Ingrassia, 2021, p. 40). However, now Instagram is not the only name of the game—influencers have joined the fray as well.

The concept of social media influencers, as a whole, is on the rise (Hu, Min, Han & Liu, 2020). The pandemic has accelerated the popularity of influencer marketing by increasing the call and demand for content by everyday, relatable influencers (Insider Intelligence, 2021). This proliferation may be due to the fact that the pandemic has resulted in meant people spending more time online (Bryant, 2020), which then translates into more time being spent interacting with Instagram influencers and more time seeking help to enhance their daily lives under quarantine—a type of content readily provided by influencers spending a large part of their time indoors as well (Insider Intelligence, 2021).

Types of Influencers. The types of influencers have branched out to meet every interest and niche-market imaginable along with those celebrities that have huge followings such as Kim Kardashian West and Kylie Jenner (Hund, 2019), brands are increasingly tapping other key influencer types, including micro- and nano-influencers, kid-fluencers, gaming influencers, and virtual (computer-generated) influencers" (Insider Intelligence, 2021, para. 3). While “macro-influencers" is a term most often used to refer to more traditional celebrities such as Hollywood actresses and actors, singers, etc.; micro and nano influencers are those with follower counts of 70,000 or less (Sudnick, 2020) and are the ones most often tapped into as a resource

for marketing and promotion purposes. They can range from lifestyle and fashion pages to fitness brands to friends of more traditional celebrities (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Virtual influencers are CGI engineered rather than being real people. They take on human names and personalities, and can partner with brands and organizations like real people (Mosley, 2021). Kid-fluencers are "children who have been posted online on different social media platforms generating large numbers of viewers and followers, often earning money for sponsored content" (Cordeiro, 2021, para. 4) while gaming influencers are paid to post recordings of their screens while playing video games and provide reviews of these games for their followers (Tap-Influence, 2021). However, for this project we are largely interested in the most commonly utilized type by brands: micro-or nano-influencers.

Parasocial Relationships. A "parasocial interaction, defined as the one-way knowing of another person who does not know the fan in return" (Stever, 2010, p. 2) is relevant to the study of Instagram interactions, as they allows scope for followers to develop "depth of feeling for…a person, one not seen on a regular basis and whose presence is only felt through their work or words" (Stever, 2010, p. 4). The case for followers perceiving Instagram influencers as trusted people that they know can be supported using parasocial relationship theory, initially developed in response to television but applicable to Instagram and the social media personality today (Ward, 2016; Kim et al, 2017) in that they take the form of "one-sided relationships…fans form with celebrities they like" (Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p. 690). We trust unpaid, organic word-of-mouth marketing (Trusov et al, 2009) but might have been more

likely to distrust celebrities that are paid to endorse products in traditional media like television advertisements. Parasocial relationships, created and fostered on social media platforms like Instagram, may make it possible for us to view them as trusted friends and void that initial distrust that we may have felt otherwise. Carr's (2018) says:

> These relationships...can take many forms, from simple attachment and favoritism to more extreme levels of delusion, emulation, worship, and fandom, but are prevalent to some degree within 76.4% of the population...This definition has been elaborated upon to include the behavior of "respond[ing] to a media figure as if he/she/it were a real person (p. 33)

This gives me the foundational basis to ask whether a social media user could feel as betrayed by Kendall Jenner or a similar Instagram personality as they would a close acquaintance or a high school peer.

Horton and Wohl's (1956) original encapsulation of parasocial theory, even though it discusses the demands placed by publics on parasocial relationships with television characters rather than actual persons who are considered social media influencers today, is helpful to my research in many ways. One way in particular it is relevant is when it comes to establishing that once a spectator does not feel they have a shared understanding with the character, they are likely to remove themselves from the intimate relationship or at least express anger, detachment, among other negative reactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Chung and Cho (2017) used quantitative methods to conclude that when celebrities' interactions with their publics, specifically on social media, are mediated by celebrity self-disclosure and parasocial relationships, that they are more likely to

perceive them and their brand endorsements as authentic. They directly draw on parasocial theory, claiming that "Celebrities' perceived openness and willingness to be vulnerable enhance consumers' feeling of intimacy and friendship, which results in the formation of parasocial relationships with them" (p. 489).

Stever (2010) built upon Horton and Wohl's seminal 1956 work on parasocial relationships, and positions influencers and their audiences as personas and spectators, to conduct a study spanning twenty years and published in 2010, in order to understand why fan communities form parasocial relationships with celebrities, and what kind of needs they are trying to fulfill with these relationships. Though her study was conducted and published before the advent of Instagram, the fan motivations she outlines can be applied to parasocial relationships in general – including those formed and enacted via Instagram. To a large degree, Stever (2010) found that across ages and lifestyles, fans craved "attachment and a sense of intimacy" (p. 2) with a celebrity to fill a void in their personal lives. Once the initial attachment is formed, that honeymoon phase ends and a "real knowing" comes about (Stever, 2010) – this is what cements the relationship as parasocial yet intimate, at least as far as fan perceptions are concerned. Stever does not address, however, what happens when the celebrity acts in a way that goes against the fan's "real knowing" (Stever, 2010, p. 4) of them–what happens when they act in a way that the fan did not desire or anticipate?

Overall, Chung and Cho (2017) found that the parasocial relationships formed between celebrities and fans through social media leads to feelings of trust and

therefore, influence in regards to a purchasing decision on behalf of the consumer in the quest to be more like their favorite celebrities and influencers (Sudnick, 2020).

Intimacy is a big part of the reason followers can be susceptible to Instagram influencers and their promotion of products, because it is possible for influencers to be seen as friends or at least as more personal than huge brands are. Enrique Bonsón and Melinda Ratkai (2013) wrote a professional and research-centric article to propose metrics (popularity, commitment, and virality) that organizations can use to assess how their stakeholders and publics are engaging with their Facebook page (i.e. how popular they are, how committed their stakeholders are to them), etc. They also conducted a content analysis to identify how trusted a brand is, and find that, "as a business grows in size and complexity, its knowledge of its customers decreases" (Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013, p. 793). I build upon Bonsón and Ratkai's (2013) analysis to gain some insight as to what happens when influencers are not considered as trusted within the parasocial relationship. Praprotnik (2016) describes, among other features of this new digital media landscape, a new kind of intimacy, collaboration, and inclusion that is allowed to exist between those manufacturing multimedia production (i.e., the organizations and to some extent, the social media influencers in the case of my research, and those consuming it). "Digitalization has managed to reframe the main focus within media production: in many media organizations it is not so relevant to produce complex news stories and to verify the facts and sources for their stories, but to disseminate new media material before others will do the same" (Praprotnik, 2016, p. 91). He attributes this partially to the way that social media users can now

reach out directly to interact with influencers and can actually create content themselves in the role of "prosumers" (Praprotnik, 2016, p. 85).

When someone is viewed as having a transactional mindset" (Sun et al, 2017, p. 335) or when there is money behind something we inherently distrust it. Sun and colleagues examined the effect, using a field study, of a brand offering monetary rewards for the submission of user reviews, and found that the volume and length of reviews saw a significant decrease. They attribute this in some cases to the reviewing process taking on a "transactional" quality rather than organic or authentic due to the addition of a monetary incentive and thereby, leading users to contribute less and lower quality reviews just to get the money. This is akin to the way that a celebrity you do not have an intimate parasocial relationship with may be viewed as "transactional" rather than authentic if their monetary incentive becomes known to you. Sun and colleagues (2017) work helps me lay the foundation not only to claim this but also that people see the backing of a bogus product or event as a low effort bid to make fast money on the part of the influencers, which they would obviously see as a betrayal of the parasocial relationship. I am extending upon Sun and colleagues (2017) explanation as I seek to understand whether social media users think that paid reviews are less trustworthy, and if so, if this same explanation can be applied to people seeing their favorite social media influencers as having been in it only for the money and not to actually be their "friend".

There is also much research on the importance of, in social media, placed on the need "to create and maintain trusting relationships with its audience, which is the

primary mission of public relations professionals" (Charest et a, 2016, p. 532). Charest et al (2016) advocate for creating a "community around a common project based on the nature and the objectives of the organization, for example...promoting a particular lifestyle, etc." (Charest et al., 2016, p. 531) and thereby, help me cement the place of intimacy, identification, community-feeling and thereby, parasocial relationships in the theoretical advancement as well as the application of influencer-follower research.

Publics of Influencers. This research is relying on a traditional definition of publics of influencers, i.e., "they are affected by the same problem or issue, and behave similarly toward a problem" (Aldoory & Sha, 2007, p. 340)–the problem in this case being when their trust in the influencer is seen as unfounded.

Accountability. Acharya (2015) helps pin down a formal definition of accountability. In his 2015 work, he conducts a thorough applied review of articles that study journalistic media accountability in a scientific way, and helps parse out how it has been studied on various platforms including digital media ones. This article not only helps begin to define the concept of media accountability, which is something that is important to consider when looking at breaches of public trust and a concept I hope to further using my research, but also differentiates between the concepts of accountability as something enforced by publics and responsibility as something which is self-assumed—accountability "involves the performance of the professional/moral obligations of...media" even serving as an "umbrella term for all of the ways for enforcing the moral obligations" that a media outlet needs to fulfill"

(Acharya, 2015, p. 82). His paper posits that while individual or influencer "responsibility is a duty to discharge functional and moral obligations...accountability is the readiness to give an explanation or justification to concerned stakeholders for one's acts, judgment or intentions (Acharya, 2015, p. 82).

In order to identify how social media influencers can gain or lose their followers' trust, it is important to define first what trust is for the purposes of this research. According to Sommerfeldt (2013), "trust as a social norm is essential to reciprocity and social support—trust begets trust...With trust, risks are deemed acceptable based on the premise that others will not let us down" (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 285). This point suggests first and foremost that trust is founded upon a public's belief that whomever they have placed their trust in will not betray that specific trust. The fulfillment of followers' trust by Instagram influencers can be seen as the latter's follow-through on the former's expectations of transparency and authenticity in the products they endorse and the lives they portray on social media as social media influencers. This finding is especially pertinent in light of the fact that within an online encounters, it is difficult to know whom to trust because it is open access followers need to trust Instagram influencers to be authentic and true to their promises and endorsements.

I also want to define what influencers actually are in the context of parasocial relationships. The most direct and succinct definition of social media influencers was offered by Kim et al: "special individuals who can create valuable content and/or have high reputations in specific fields" (Kim et al., 2017, p. 257). The history and

monetary importance of the social media influencers that are becoming so valuable to advertisers today as well as to the social media publics I hope to study has begun to be documented in practice (Mediakix, 2018). The trends highlighted in the article help make a case for the growing ubiquity of the term "influencer marketing" as well as the rapidly flourishing industry that they represent. There are two important qualities that define the macro-or-nano type of influencer that make them particularly useful to brands hoping to connect with publics: trust and authenticity.

Credibility and Trust. Credibility and trust are two related public relations terms that work in tandem with authenticity to build and sustain relationships (Huang, 2008). Credibility can be a powerful tool for marketers to gain customers' trust, which is crucial for the success of mobile commerce (Almossawi, 2014). Advertising messages that satisfy consumer need for credibility will likely be positively perceived (Waldt et al., 2009). Influencers have to have credibility to be successful and effective tools or outposts of public relations (Bria, 2013). Trust within an exchange dynamic or relationship (Rawlins, 2007) is considered as a necessary precursor for any successful exchange, including the ones between influencers and their followers! Trust is key to ensuring that the specter of risk is minimized even in the case of high-risk actions and to generating outcomes maximizing efficiency and productivity (Huang, 2008, p. 298). Morgan and Hunt (1994) posit that trust exists only when parties have faith in each other not to take advantage of them and instead to work on making the results of their exchange as efficient and productive as possible. In other words, they can trust that their chances are good and do not think they will be

betrayed by the other party, and risk will always be mitigated or minimized (Huang, 2008).

Research has shown that endorsement by a positively perceived celebrity can help to put fears to rest and minimize any threat of risk for consumers (Proctor & Kitchen, 2018), and can greatly help sell the product that is being endorsed. Conversely, when the celebrity is not liked and not well-perceived, that makes it more likely that consumers will place less trust in the product and its manufacturer (Proctor & Kitchen, 2018). Studies that specifically look into the effect celebrity endorsement and the trust it engenders have been carried out extensively in the context of public relations, using theories ranging from source credibility, source attractiveness, and meaning transfer, i.e. the association of values between brands and celebrity spokespeople (Proctor & Kitchen, 2018). However, even though it's about celebrities, it can be adapted to social media influencers, and indeed needs to be in order to do more specific and in-depth research on Instagram influencers.

A multidimensional, all-encompassing definition of trust is:

> Trust is one party's willingness—shown by intention and behavior—to be vulnerable to another party based on confidence developed cognitively and affectively that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, and (e) open. (Rawlins, 2007)

Part of the reason that social media influencers are perceived to be worthy of trust is because they tailor their messages to a specific audience, focusing on a genre or type when it comes to their Instagram personas. As we know, personalized messages are usually perceived more positively than mass-market messages by

consumers (Almossawi, 2014). Given that their profiles feel targeted or personalized to the user, it makes people more inclined to trust them.

When there is enough interaction, social media influencers can count as or be considered as part of an inner or personal circle, and their recommendations can be seen as a kind of word-of-mouth advertising (Almossawi, 2014; Bria, 2013). There is faith that these influencers are akin to their trusted friends, that they would not lead them astray (Sudnick, 2020). This faith, or aura, of trustworthiness carries far enough that social media influencers can often, in addition to promoting or partnering with existing brands, create their own lines that they endorse to their followers (Sudnick, 2020).

In public relations, trust is prized above all else when it comes to creating long lasting relationships over short-term advantages that may be more profitable (Hon & Grunig, 1999). At the same time, it is seen as something relatively fragile, that needs to be actively honed and worked on consistently, and sometimes media can be seen as a threat to building trust by public relations practitioners (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Trust is how social media influencers as outposts of public relations can help build trust: “Those who crave authenticity are the real winners of today’s content revolution. Poll after poll after poll shows that authentic content is the most compelling in terms of eliciting trust. (Ladan, 2023).

Authenticity. Authenticity is at the heart of relationship building (Ladan, 2023; Rawlins, 2007; Hon & Grunig, 1999). As such, followers that encounter and engage with influencers rely on “gut instinct” and their perception of the influencer

when it comes to evaluating influencers as authentic or not (Hund, 2019). The concept of authenticity, in public relations, is largely raised around issues of reputation and crisis management (Sisson & Bowen, 2017); the more authentic seeming the efforts-along with the practitioners behind the efforts to manage reputational problems, the more success they generally tend to have. It also comes into play when researching leadership styles, the more authenticity communicated by leaders, the more effective their style usually is (Frunză, 2017). In general, authenticity in the public relations sense has to do with the publics' perception of entities such as organizations as capable of following through on promises, of being honest, and therefore, successful corporations that actually cared about and were concerned with public welfare (Bowen, 2016). Being authentic is often equated to being real and genuine (Bowen, 2016), and in the same vein, when social media influencers are seen as authentic, they are also seen as being endearing, trustworthy, worth rooting for (Sudnick, 2020).

When compared to traditional celebrities, influencers may be perceived as more authentic (Abidin, 2018, pp. 4-5). They certainly seem more approachable, as they are a "constantly accessible and consistent mode of entertainment that is available for both "casual observation" and "appointment viewing"" (Abidin, 2018, p. 8). A good example is the beauty brand, Glossier's use of social media influencers to connect with their consumers (e.g.mr publics) or in fact, to create a brand to begin with (Ingrassia, 2021). A bond is defined as something personal, and therefore needs to be established at a personal level (Ingrassia, 2021). The brand used Emily

Weiss—the founder of the brand with a significant social media following-to collect insights from customers before deciding on brand packaging (Ingrassia, 2021). She posted different shades of pink on her Instagram page and asked followers to evaluate the options and decide which they liked best: Glossier then selected the soft pink color that represents them now based on follower feedback (Ingrassia, 2021).

Weiss also used social media to interact with and solicit feedback from customers about the changes they wanted to see made to the product range, and social media influencer and brand representative Devin McGhee critiqued Glossier and made it so that they felt persuaded to expand their product range to include darker skin shades and cater to a wider range of makeup users (Ingrassia, 2021). Just like that, influencers often encourage viewers to leave comments specifying what kind of comment they would like to see more of (Charnas, n.d.; Ingrassia, 2021). They then use that feedback to cater to their followers tastes and preferences. Fashion influencer Arielle Charnas frequently uses her Instagram story feature to ask followers to weigh in whether or not they want to see more of a certain kind of post or to have them decide, via polls, which pair of shoes to pair with outfits, etc. (Charnas, n.d.). Fitness influencer, Hopescope, uses the comment section on her posts to source followers' opinions on which athleticwear brands she should review; when enough followers ask for a specific brand she then picks them to feature content on (Hopescope, n.d.). "Further, the heightened enrollment of "regular people" into mass-mediated visibility during the twenty-first century—through vehicles like reality television, tabloid

culture, and early blogs—helped centralize the notion of authenticity (or "realness") within positive industrial evaluations of content" (Hund, 2019, pp. 21-22)

Noting criticisms of public relations, the author dismisses these, saying that the media often portray public relations as spin, hype, and propaganda but this is an outdated view and no longer appropriate to or reflective of contemporary practice (Chia, 2009, p. 4). Public relations practitioners are now expected to, and held to, tell the truth, rather than deceive the public or put wool over their eyes (Ladan, 2023).

The way Chung and Cho (2017) grappled with the issues of authenticity is important to this research:

> Contrary to the commonly held belief that popularity on social media (e.g., a large number of followers and friends) leads to endorser effectiveness, this study found that interacting with celebrities on social media can have adverse effects on celebrity endorsement if it is not mediated by positive experiences, such as self-disclosure and parasocial relationships (p. 490)

Their research showed that source trustworthiness was positively related to brand credibility fostered through self-disclosure and a creation of intimacy, and through that impacted consumers' eventual purchase intention.

Influencing. As outlined in the introduction, there is a need to examine the influencer industry in its own right. The following section outlines what we already know regarding social media influencing, and reveals, where in the industry, specifically when it comes to public relations literature, this research project can help us shed light.

There has been some research on what social media influencing essentially is, particularly in the fields of advertising and internet studies. Digital influencers include bloggers, vloggers, social media stars, internet celebrities, and so on (Hu et al., 2020). Conceptualizations tend to focus on popularity and prevalence of this work, for example, "influencing is a massive industry, one that almost feels too big, too ingrained as an advertising mechanism to just go away" (Bryant, 2020, para. 13). Compared with celebrities, social media influencers on Instagram have a great and powerful impact on the purchase behaviors of female consumers aged between 18 and 30 years, mostly because the influencers are considered to be more socially aligned with these consumers (Hu et al, 2020, p. 4).

It would seem as though influencing, as a concept, though it may have been coined as such fairly recently, but has been around for some time (Foreman, 1998). Georgiana Spencer, Duchess of Devonshire, was a figure of such prominence in Europe in the eighteenth century that it was said of her, "whatever she wore became instantly fashionable." (Foreman, 1998, p. 36). In a way, she constituted one of the first influencers, as recognized by the Western public, as her celebrity rose, "for the first time national figures emerged, Georgiana among them, which the whole country

read about discussed, and with whom they could feel some sort of connection" (Foreman, 1998, p. 37). Newspapers and media outlets used the mention of her name and standing to increase their business, editors noticed that reports about her boosted their sales and that she "brought glamour and style to a paper…*The Morning Post* reported Spencer's progress to a nation whose appetite for news about her was constantly growing" (Foreman, 1998, p. 37). She, along with her husband, were part of a set of select public figures called "the ton", which meant they decided what was in style or not, whether plays were worth seeing, etc. and they thoroughly enjoyed their position at the head of taste-making and fashion (Foreman, 1998). This authority and influence does not mean their prominence and position came without pitfalls, however, Spencer's mother once wrote to her, "You live so constantly in public you cannot live for your own soul" (Foreman, 1998, p. 101). It seems, however, that this was a price she was willing to pay for the sake of her influence: the public loved and revered her opinion so much so that "whenever the Duchess of Devonshire visits the capital, a Standard may be expected to be given to the Fashion" (Foreman, 1998, p. 95). Given this example of historical influencing, we see that being an influencer is not a novel or new idea, but was not considered a real job until now. There are facets of being an 'influencer' that have carried over the way the term is understood today as well (Abidin, 2018). It is apparent that one characteristic of influencers are that they are tastemakers or shapers, that transcend normal social boundaries to set new trends or fashions, and elicit some level of media frenzy. However, in addition to this, Abidin's (2018) work tells us that they also are pretty much constantly accessible or

at least expected to be, that as compared to more traditional celebrities like actresses and musicians, they are generally seen as more authentic and everyday, as "unlike traditional celebrities, influencers depend on a constant stream of smaller sponsored posts, appearances, and endorsements for income" (Abidin, 2018, p. 94), and finally that they have the ability to elevate brands that are seen as "everyday", such as McDonalds and Pizza Hut, while retaining relatability (Abidin, 2018).

> Everydayness is seen as accessibility and authenticity;
>
> "Internet celebrity that is "everyday" curates the usually mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life with such candor and insight (as well as with much regularity and consistency) that a sustained social relationship based on a sense of community and trust is fostered as "social capital" (Abidin, 2018, p. 32-33).

Influencers that are seen as authentic and relatable certainly have a greater promise of success with young adults; as Bryant (2020) tells us, "The more authentic, the more highly compensated, the more followers probably wonder what these people are actually like" (Bryant, 2020, para. 4). This stamp of authenticity is lent by the illusion or impression that influencers create their own content based on their personal likes, dislikes, and tastes rather than going through a third-party to curate them. Due to this perceived transparency, they "have been a source of ire long before the pandemic, rightly or wrongly…(they) are usually women, usually young, and have usually built their business on their own persona, which requires a sort of self-aggrandizement to work" (Bryant, 2020, para. 11).

The self-aggrandizement aspect means that they have to build up a sense of power and significance in order to impact and sway the opinions of their followers.

This power over and significance to existing publics (made up of followers of these social media influencers) can then perhaps be utilized by organizations in order to enhance their own relationship (i.e. the association followers have with the advice, presentation, and personal brand of influencers) (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), with these followers or publics.

Brands such as Fabletics and I Saw It First, have capitalized on influencer marketing by creating direct collaborations with them and marketing the products in these capsule collections via the endorsing influencer's social media as well as their own. Fabletics has chosen to create collections styled after and in collaboration with influencers such as Liza Koshy and Lauren Ireland (Fabletics, n.d.). I Saw It First not only partners with popular reality shows such as Love Island, and provides dresses for the people starring in these shows to wear on television, but they also follow a similar model to Fabletics where they partner with release collections with influencers such as Chloe Frater, Olivia Atwood, and Jack Fowler (I Saw It First, n.d.). The success of influencer-backed collections versus regular (non-influencer backed) collections has not yet been studied in formal research, public relations or otherwise (Sudnick 2020). The proposed research can help us shed light on the role influencers can play in the success of persuading and influencing publics by comparing how products'/collections' association with social media influencers enhances business and sales. Fabletics and other brands that rely on influencers would, in this instance, constitute case studies.

ROLE THEORY

Although role theory has foundations in sociology, it has been applied to public relations scholarship and practice (see Şeşen, 2015; Neill & Moody, 2015; Lee et al, 2015). In the context of public relations, organizations are expected to act according to their roles or places in society (Şeşen, 2015). The enactment of public relations roles has been studied largely in terms of hierarchical comparisons and contrasting the distribution of roles between men and women (Neill & Moody, 2015). Role theory is a "perspective in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of everyday activity to be the acting out of socially defined categories (e.g., mother, manager, teacher)" (Şeşen, 2015, p. 139). Essentially, this theoretical framework explains how individuals within a social network behave according to expectations, and how they project expectations or assumptions of behavior onto others within those networks. As such the theory posits that behavior can be predicted based on context, social position, and particular situation (Hindin, 2007).

As previously noted, role theory has also been explored in public relations literature to examine what is expected of public relations practitioners, not only in the context of United States (Penning & Sweetser, 2015), but also Thailand (Eckachai, 1995), Singapore (Leo & Sriramesh, 2009), China (Chen & Culbertson, 1996), and the Netherlands (Von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016). This is important work since it underscored the varied cultural expectations for roles. It has also been used to guide the examination of the perceived hierarchy of roles that exist in public relations practice (Penning & Sweetser, 2015). Past research found that roles like

communication manager were idealized over for example, those of communication technicians (Sullivan, Dozier & Hellweg, 1984). In general, roles that were seen as associated with higher status–ranked in order from high to low perceived status: communication manager, communication liaison, media relations specialist, and communication technician, were more sought after by practitioners (Sullivan, Dozier & Hellweg, 1984). The roles that public relations practitioners usually are called upon to play were also examined to see what kind of overlapping values they generally shared with journalists (Belz et al, 1989). Neill and Lee (2016) conducted a study to answer the question of the distinct social media roles enacted by public relations practitioners and found the following: policing; social media technician; listening and analytics; online media relations; policy maker; employee recruiter; and internal social media manager (Neill & Lee, 2016).

The Role of Influencers and Public Relations. Silicon Valley, in the 2000s, started making it easier for consumers to search for things; and then,

> "the rise of social media opened an even bigger spigot of opinions, as brands could tap directly into networks of like-minded consumers. Some of that promotion grew organically, as happy customers posted of themselves using the products-Dollar Shave Club razors, Warby Parker eyeglasses, Hubble contact lenses, Glossier cosmetics-endorsing them for free. Other companies recruited and paid "influencers" who enjoyed large social media followings" (Ingrassia, 2021, p. 71).

Nontraditional social media marketing has caused quite a few changes in the landscape of public relations and marketing over the past two decades (Abidin, 2018; Hu et al., 2020). It made all the difference in the brand Dollar Shave Club's bid to overthrow Gillette–a much more powerful and well-established rival brand. They

found that the most successful tool at winning start-up funding from investors was their YouTube video, content that was relatively inexpensive to create but produced a high return on investment (Ingrassia, 2021). Forerunner Ventures, Kirsten Greene's venture capital firm, says they finance entrepreneurs with fresh ideas (Ingrassia, 2021) stating their mission as: "We partner with those who challenge industry norms, those who upend entire categories" (p. Ingrassia, 2021, p. 24). Arguably, Instagram influencers have upended the category or the very idea of what it means to be influential, to be big, to have a job, to advertise.

Public relations studies have employed role theory to define and place practitioner roles, specifically to link the skills and expertise required for the roles with the enactment of them in a practical setting. For example, the Excellence Study (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) touched on role theory to examine the relationship between operations research techniques and the enacted role of manager in the professional setting. As such, the enactment of organizational roles is already present in the current literature. Role theory may be a starting point for describing the key activities and different roles of public relations practitioners in society (Şeşen, 2015, p. 141). This study, however, seeks to employ role theory to explore the relationship between the attributes of Instagram influencers and their importance in followers' lives with their enacted influence, i.e. using role theory to understand the influence of Instagram influencers, and in that way bringing role theory firmly into the sphere of social media and public relations. Public relations has yet to consider what the roles

of social media influencers essentially are in the context of their followers', or publics' lives.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

I will also explore the idea of social influence (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) as a conceptual lens through which to understand social media influencing. By applying, Cialdini's (2021) seven principles of persuasion: authority, consistency, scarcity, reciprocity, liking, social proof, and unity, I will be able to look at the relationships between Instagram influencers and their followers to see how the former are perceived by their publics, and how they persuade those publics to make purchase and lifestyle decisions in their favor. These principles are not generally applied in research contexts, they are usually used as professional resources to improve persuasive skills in the workplace, mainly corporate settings (Schenker, 2022). This study, however, is unique in that it uses these principles for the first time to research how Instagram influencers shape the experiences and decisions of their followers, which is relevant in both academic and applied contexts.

According to Yu and Sussman (2020), the power of digital devices such as smartphones is unlike any level we have seen or experienced before, and can even be called addicting. Hand in hand with this, we have seen in our lifetimes a change in the ways people–particularly adolescents–are persuaded (Cialdini, 2021, p. 441). Some basics are similar: "If a chick makes the cheep-cheep noise, its mother will care for it, if not, the mother will ignore or sometimes kill it" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 2). This is the

innate human cue or signal that causes us to want to protect, covet, control, own and/or regulate something that is worth having.

Reciprocity. The reciprocation principle tells us that being thankful equals being obligated (Cialdini, 2021, p. 27). “A promotor who provides free samples can release the natural indebting force inherent in a gift, while innocently appearing to have only the intent to inform” (Cialdini, 2021, p. 27). Sale codes and promotional codes equal gifts or free samples in this context as Cialdini posits that once you have helped someone or benefitted them, they will be more likely to help you in return or provide you with some sort of benefit. Schenker (2022) uses the example of how when a friend invites you to a party, you feel you owe them a favor; instead of parties, influencers host ‘lives’ on their Instagram profiles, inviting their followers to speak to them directly and address the people commenting on the ‘live’ session. The idea is that a social obligation is created. In the case of organizations, when they are offering free advice to improve potential customers’ lives in the form of blogs and articles, it makes it more likely for those potential customers to become actual customers (Schenker, 2022).

Authority. The authority principle indicates that we all want third-party endorsement before making decisions, they want to know if a product has been reviewed well and recommended by a trusted individual or group before spending hard-earned money on it: “When you buy products online, for either yourself or your business, reviews probably weigh heavily in your decision-making. We check to see other buyers’ opinions on Amazon, opt for the five-star option rather than the one

with only four and a half stars, or book the Airbnb with the most enthusiastic former guests" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 13). According to research done at Cornell by Zhang and Verma (2017) consumers should beware if a review does not contain detail because in this case we cannot tell if the reviewer has actually experienced the product or service and found it satisfactory, or if they are just writing something generic. The lesson here is to make the reviews as personal as possible, to get vulnerable in the face of an audience. The other red flag for unreliable reviews is cited to be an over-inclusion or overuse of first-person pronouns. However, this second one is disproven, or at least highly in contrast, with the answers provided by the participants of both the qualitative questionnaires and interviews. This principle has been shown to be so compelling in that people have been found to obey and follow authority figures even when it comes to acts they find uncharacteristic or weird. A good example is the company ShoeDazzle and their decision to bring on Kim Kardashian as a co-founder purely due to the fact that she was seen as an authority or an expert on shoes while the actual founders of the company Brian Lee and Robert Shapiro were not (Schenker, 2022). In the case of Instagram and social media influencers, a blue check-mark by their name usually signifies that they are verified, often along with a high follower count. Both high follower count and account verification indicate that the influencer behind the account is authentic and notable (Atisfyre, 2022).

Liking. Liking is another of Cialdini's principles for social persuasion, which can be housed under, or at least to some extent, explained by parasocial relationship theory. The principle suggests that people prefer to say yes to those they like or have

personal information about (Cialdini, 2021). Brands have usually employed or capitalized on the liking principle by including biographical information about their employees on their websites, along with fun facts like them being dog-lovers for example–this increase in likeability eventually led to an increase in the conversion of site visitors to customers (Schenker, 2022). In that same manner, social media influencers sharing details about their personal lives and families on Instagram would mean that the liking principle is triggered there as well.

When it comes to social media influencers, parasocial theory is important to consider. The perception of influencers as trusted friends can be explained using para-social relationship theory, initially developed in response to television but applicable to Instagram and the social media personality today. In the way we may distrust paid reviews on Amazon, we may have been more likely to distrust celebrities that are paid to endorse products in traditional media like television advertisements but parasocial relationships, created and fostered on Instagram, may make it possible for us to view them as trusted friends and void that initial distrust that we may have felt otherwise. Carr's (2018) article in which he says, "These relationships...can take many forms, from simple attachment and favoritism to more extreme levels of delusion, emulation, worship, and fandom, but are prevalent to some degree within 76.4% of the population...This definition has been elaborated upon to include the behavior of "respond[ing] to a media figure as if he/she/it were a real person" (p. 33). This gives me the foundational basis to make the claim that a social media user could feel as betrayed by Kendall Jenner as they would by Sally who sits next to them in

math class all throughout high school. Horton and Wohl's original encapsulation of parasocial theory, even though it discusses the demands placed by publics on parasocial relationships with television characters rather than actual persons who are considered social media influencers today, is helpful to my research in many ways. It is helpful particularly when it comes to establishing that once a spectator does not feel they have a shared understanding with the character, they are likely to remove themselves from the intimate relationship or at least express anger, detachment, among other negative reactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 221).

There is much research on how publics' parasocial relationships with television characters affects brand placement. Much of this research also draws on balance theory to explain why advertisers may want to use universally loved television characters to promote their products but gap when it comes to Instagram, and the violation of those relationships. Russell and Stern's 2006 study provides support for using beloved media personas that are aligned with a certain product in order to best promote it. Their model brings about "a richer understanding of product placement effects, describing the importance of a character's effect on viewers' attitudes toward placed products, particularly when characters' attitudes toward products are positive" (p. 15). Their integration of the balance model when looking at character-product associations can help me decide why organizations decide to use certain influencers for certain products, and why in turn, publics may feel more betrayed by those influencers because they think that those influencers are closely aligned with and therefore actually use the product, rather than just perceiving it as a

source of income. As influential as Russell and Stern's (2006) work was, there has not yet been a study inspired by it that does this so far.

The way Chung and Cho (2017) grappled with the issues of authenticity in relationships is important to my research, "Contrary to the commonly held belief that popularity on social media (e.g., a large number of followers and friends) leads to endorser effectiveness, this study found that interacting with celebrities on social media can have adverse effects on celebrity endorsement if it is not mediated by positive experiences, such as self-disclosure and parasocial relationships" (p. 490). They showed that source trustworthiness was positively related to brand credibility fostered through self-disclosure and a creation of intimacy, and through that impacted consumers' eventual purchase intention.

Bonsón and Ratkai's (2013) content analysis of stakeholders' comments on Facebook assessing "mood" based on how many were positive, negative, and neutral, is similar to what I would want to do for influencers' Instagram profiles to help answer the previewed research questions. I also hope to use their work to explain how Instagram influencers are seen as friends or at least as more personal and immediately related to publics than huge organizations are. When someone is viewed as having a "transactional" mindset" (Sun et al, 2017, p. 335) or when there is money behind something we inherently distrust it. Sun and colleagues (2017) help me lay the foundation not only to claim this but also that people see the backing of a bogus product or event as a low effort bid to make fast money on the part of the influencers-which they would obviously see as a betrayal of the parasocial

relationship. I wish to extend upon Sun et al's (2017) explanation and see whether social media users think that paid reviews are less trustworthy, and if so, if this same explanation can be applied to people seeing their favorite social media influencers as having been in it only for the money and not to actually be their "friend".

There is also much research that I came across on the importance of, in social media, "to create and maintain trusting relationships with its audience, which is the primary mission of public relations professionals" (Charest et al., 2016, p. 532). Charest and colleagues (2016) advocate for creating a "community around a common project based on the nature and objectives of the persuasion, for example...promoting a particular lifestyle, etc." (p. 531). However, there is again, no formal research that I came across looking at what happens when these trusting relationships are violated, especially when this prescribed community has been built.

Unity. Cialdini's (2021) newest added principle is that of unity i.e., "The experience of acting together in unison or coordination is a…fundamental factor leading to a source of unity with others" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 436). Generally, "successful social influence is often pivotally grounded in "we" relationships" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 364); this principle has been observed across multiple settings and contexts including business, politics, sports, and relationships–both personal and romantic.

The last context especially, that of relationships, is mirrored in what is described as f-commerce which means the use of online friend groups for style advice and purchase inspiration (Cialdini, 2021). The way that influencers embody this is

that they provide promotional codes that could help followers save money on the products or shipping, along with providing reviews on what they consider worth their followers' money. The kind of influencers that embody this the most are accounts such as @things.i.bought.and.liked who is an Instagram personality simply posting links to products they have purchased and providing feedback on whether they think it is worth buying or not. However, this is a pretty standard feature of most influencer accounts–they post reviews of products along with brand-specific promotional codes to help their followers save. Often, these promotional codes are personalized or specific to the influencer, for example, an influencer named Alix Earle provided their followers with the code ALIX for a discount at a boutique called White Fox (Alix Ashley Earle, 2022).

In other contexts such as business, familiarity breeds a sense of unity. Cialdini (2021) talks about a person excelling financially because "a large percentage of his customers come to him because they know and trust him to be one of them" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 367). The "'we' based choices" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 369) and "identity-merged" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 370) communities that can form on Instagram between influencers seem to mirror those found in business settings.

Social Proof. Cialdini's social proof principle suggests that people follow by example and tend toward conformity to a popular style or modus operandi in a community. Particularly in the case of uncertainty, people tend to look to the actions and behaviors of others to determine their own (Cialdini, 2021). Popularity increases demand. The McDonald's McFlurry example is a prolific one, "When customers in

one set of McDonald's were told, "How about a dessert? The McFlurry is our visitors' favorite," McFlurry sales jumped 55 percent" (Cialdini, 2021, p. 128). When a social media influencer says something is their favorite or preferred item, consumers are wont to request or purchase more of it. This same principle was shown recently when sales of the Dyson AirWrap hair styling tool skyrocketed and the product was sold out completely over the 2022-2023 holiday season due to the multitude of influencers showcasing it in their posts and on their pages (Dellato, 2023).

When we see an action as being carried out by a number of others, especially those within the same community, we view that action as suitable and recommendable; organizations capitalize on this principle by letting us know when a product is selling fast and because we see that others obviously view the product in a favorable light, they do not need to do much else to convince us that the product is worthwhile (Cialdini, 2021). Modcloth is a clothing brand that shows, for each item on their website, how many people have liked or 'hearted' it (Schenker, 2022); in the same way, when shopping on Instagram, it shows who among your friends or following is looking at or buying the same products, or interacting with the same profiles. Social media platforms like Instagram have made it easier for people to engender trust among their audiences:

> People can voice their opinions about anything and everything—from their cult favorite lipstick to serious calls for public policy and reforms—with their online audiences" (Kelleher, 2020, p. 276)

And this trust is a basic and necessary antecedent to creating social capital, or leading by example (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006). Part of how it is created is setting a norm or a standard–what social media users present as normative behavior or influence which encompasses "influence based on how others act, influence based on what others condone, and influence based on our own internal standards and sanctions for good conduct" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 162).

Consistency. Often people prefer to be consistent with the things that they have previously either said or done (Cialdini, 2021). An example of this being implemented is when publics are offered things like free marketing courses or signing up for their newsletter; if it is some sort of public commitment it is more likely that you will then see yourself as a customer or a patron of a brand and will purchase a product or service from them (Schenker, 2022). Once a social signal is sent out, people are likely to stay consistent with it and publicly show their commitment–the most basic example Schenker (2022) uses is the Pledge of Allegiance.

Scarcity. Cialdini's scarcity principle means generally, we want more of the things and experiences we can have less of (Cialdini, 2021). This is a common tactic used by travel companies, telling customers how many of a particular hotel room style are still available and showcasing them to be in high demand or in limited edition (Schenker, 2022). Often, especially when influencers launch their own brands, they will include in the announcement the number of units available for the products, so that their followers and potential customers know that the quantities are not unlimited and they will have to act fast in order to snag them.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a "photo sharing app, that is particularly enticing to narcissists, who can utilize "digital filters and image enhancers" to control their image for followers to "like" and emulate" (Sudnick, 2020, p. 13).

Instagram Analysis. Before delving into the results of the three-pronged study, it is important to understand the main features of Instagram that allow social media users and influencers to interact. They are as follows:

Instagram feature	**Definition and function**
Reels	"Built as a rival to TikTok, Reels is Instagram's dedicated video platform, letting users upload videos up to 90 seconds long in length. Once you record a video, you can edit it and add music, text, and special effects. Other users can like or comment on your Reels videos, so they can be a fun way to attract new followers." (Delfino & Antonelli, 2022)
Stories	"Instagram stories are temporary stories that stay on your profile for 24 hours…Stories can be great ways to engage even further with your audience. Because they appear at the very top of the Instagram feed, users may be more likely to see your stories than your actual feed posts." (Geyser, 2022)
Messaging	"Send photos, videos, and messages" directly (Instagram Features, n.d.)
Live	"This creates a live video broadcast on your Instagram account that your followers can tune into and watch. They can also leave comments, giving you a

	great opportunity to interact with your audience in real time" (Geyser, 2022)
Posts	"This is a "regular Instagram feed post. This could be either an image or a video" (Geyser, 2022)
Profiles	"Your profile page is a hub for all your photos and videos where you can keep track of who you're following and who's following you" (Delfino & Antonelli, 2022); "our profile picture is the icon that appears with your username all over the platform, while your bio is a space to offer a brief description of yourself or your brand. You can also add a link to your website, if applicable" (Delfino & Antonelli, 2022)

The Instagram algorithm takes into account what posts you linger on or that you like, and by doing so it learns your interests and tastes. This is how it is able to suggest personalized and targeted ads that could fulfill those interests and tastes.

There were so many instances while interviewing participants for this project that they would mention someone, say, an Instagram personality that they followed, and/or were aware of, and then I would exclaim I know exactly who we were talking about! Alice, the subject of one of my most fruitful interviews, had just started talking about the influencer she had in mind and all she had to say was that she was a mom of twins and that's how she became Insta-famous and I knew she was referring to Maia Knight.

It is also important to define some of the key emojis that are used in the various comments and other instances of internet language (Emojipedia, n.d.) I saw

during the course of the study. They are all taken directly from Emojipedia and I have included exemplars that I came across on Instagram as well as creating some of my own:

Emoji	**Emojipedia definition**	**Exemplars (first taken directly from Instagram; second one created by researcher)**
🔥	Commonly used for various metaphorical expressions related to fire, including the slang *hot* ("attractive") and *lit* ("excellent").	"So inspiring 🔥🙌 @rebeccalouisefitness" "Girl, this outfit is 🔥!!!"
❤️	A classic red love heart emoji, used for expressions of love and romance. This is the most popular heart emoji.	"My oldest is 26 and still sleeps with me when she comes home. After all these years of my girls being gone I still don't sleep well without them home. Once they're home, a peace comes over me and I sleep so good! Cherish these times! ❤️" "Lots of ❤️ to you and the kids!"
😍	A yellow face with an open smile, sometimes showing teeth, and red, cartoon-styled hearts for eyes. Often conveys enthusiastic feelings of love, infatuation, and adoration, e.g., *I love/am in love with this person or thing.*	"I love all the dirty looks from other girls. They are mad that you're so hot 😍" "So gorgeous in that gown! 😍"
🥰	A yellow face with smiling eyes, a closed smile, rosy cheeks, and several hearts floating around its head. Expresses a range of happy, affectionate feelings, especially being in love.	"Beautiful 🥰🥰🥰" "Oh my gosh, you look 🥰!"

💯	This 100 emoji is commonly used as a shorthand for *100%*, with the usage meaning "keep it real" or a similar sentiment. A 100 emoji can be used to express pride or general acceptance of an idea.	"💯ain't no body got time for that! When someone is talking and it's negative I imagine myself and them in a protective bubble of light and don't allow their stuff to even penetrate into my energy. So helpful. You rock Rebecca" "Totally agree! 💯"
🙌	Two hands raised in the air, celebrating success or another joyous event.	"Stunning 🙌🙌" "I hope I get a family as cute as yours! 🙌"
😘	A yellow face winking with puckered lips blowing a kiss, depicted as a small, red heart. May represent a kiss goodbye or good night and convey feelings of love and affection more generally.	"😘😘😘 you look amazing and so happy! I miss you and our chats we would have about life and all the things!!" "Love you babe! 😘"
👏	Two hands clapping emoji, which when used multiple times can be used as a round of applause.	"Joe give credit to yarde he put up an amazing fight 👏" "Didn't see that coming! Good job 👏"
😂	A yellow face with a big grin, uplifted eyebrows, and smiling eyes, each shedding a tear from laughing so hard. Widely used to show something is funny or pleasing.	"Stop making me hate the grocery store steak I just bought 😂" "Girl, you are too funny 😂!"

🙏	Two hands placed firmly together, meaning *please* or *thank you* in Japanese culture. A common alternative use for this emoji is for prayer, using the same gesture as praying hands. It can also represent a respectful greeting or show of adoration in Southeast Asian religions and cultures, such as the Hindu *namaste* or Buddhist *añjali mudra*.	"Does anyone know what second earrings those are? The little hoops she always wears??? I can't find them! Please 🙏" "Can I look like this please🙏???"

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions that this dissertation project will address are as follows:

RQ1: How do social media influencers define 'social media influencer'?

RQ2: How do social media followers engage with social media influencers and what public relations roles do they see them fulfill?

RQ3: How do social media influencers–through persuasive principles–exert influence on different publics?

These questions deal with the following respectively, firstly, how social media followers define a social media influencer, the second is concerned with the nature and frequency of social media followers engagement with social media influencers to get at the role played by the latter in the former's lives. The third research question answers what sources of influence used by social media influencers are described as persuasive and worthy of support by followers.

The second research question in particular, harnesses role theory to gauge the importance of Instagram influencers in their followers' lives. As that might not give us the whole picture, the third research question launches into the particular set of

principles used by them to create this importance–in this way we get a much deeper understanding.

These research questions allow this project to offer a unique perspective that has not been seen before, a look at the role and persuasive capabilities of Instagram influencers directly from the viewpoint of the followers that make up the influencers' audience. Conversely, existing literature in the area of social media influencers tends to look at it more from the organizational perspective.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Data collection. Hesse-Biber (2017) invites us to do qualitative research as a way to open up perspectives, start conversations, and deepen and contextualize our understanding of how things work (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Indeed, qualitative research is able to uncover meanings and provide us with thick descriptions that facilitate understanding (Hesse-Biber, 2017, Geertz, 2005). As such, this project attempting to get at the role of social media influencers in relation to their publics, would be best served by the following trio of qualitative methods: a qualitative questionnaire to begin with, followed up by in-depth interviews of participants particularly those that express enthusiasm in continuing the conversation, and then finally a content analysis conducted by the researcher to synthesize the findings from the first two methods. Using three methods would also ensure triangulation (i.e., the maximization of this proposed project's credibility and comprehensiveness) (Annells, 2006).

Recruitment

There are multiple reasons that bolster the case for using college-students for this project. As of June 2023, there were over 173 million Instagram users in the United States alone, and a majority of this number was women (NapoleonCat, n.d.). Among these users of the mobile application, 18- to 23-year-olds were found to have the highest usage frequency, with 18-24 year olds taking up 25.6% and 25-34 year olds taking up 27.5%, for a total of 53.1% which constitutes a majority of the people polled (Chen, 2017). In fact, there is a joke that, while not a standalone indicator of

youth culture, does indicate how much it has permeated the social lives of young people at the time this dissertation is being written: it reads, “How do you weigh a millennial? In Instagrams.”

The use of Instagram between the years 2013 and 2021 has been steadily increasing, today around seven in ten Americans use social media for news sharing, entertainment, and personal connection purposes (Pew, 2021). Of all the demographics that have been surveyed–including age, gender, and level of education completed, 71% of young adults (those between the ages of 18 and 29) reported using Instagram as a primary social media platform (Pew, 2021). Of all demographics surveyed–age, gender, and level education–71% of young adults (i.e. those between the ages of 18 and 29) reported using Instagram. Over the years, social media platforms such as Instagram have become important for college students to use for the purposes of building and maintaining their identities (Pew, 2021). They report checking Instagram at least five times during the day, and many said they use it right after waking up and right before going to bed as well (Pew, 2021). I have often observed myself doing the same exact thing.

Generally, young adults have tended to want social media marketing that is not obvious and does not resemble traditional advertisements (Chen, 2017). Instagram, specifically designed for use with a smart mobile device (Chen, 2017), ideally poised to do that by building relationships and allowing for a sense of intimacy between influencer and follower. This is especially the case if they identify with the influencer; according to young consumers, celebrity endorsement on

Instagram is more appropriate for gaining attention and building brand awareness than for bringing about attitudinal and cognitive changes (Chen, 2017).

College students not only form the bulk of social media users–particularly Instagram–but they also provided a convenient sample in terms of accessibility, which for the sake of keeping the project inexpensive and practical, was helpful to say the least. The SONA system set up at the University of Maryland facilitated the recruitment of participants for the qualitative questionnaire and the in-depth interview portions of the study.

The following section outlines how these three methods were implemented, how ethics were ensured during this implementation, and what they each contributed to the final project. The most compelling ethical questions here were: "how does a researcher conduct ethical research, and how does a researcher distinguish between public (i.e., usable) information and private information?" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 93), and I will ensure I address those in the following section as well.

Qualitative Questionnaire. Utilizing a qualitative questionnaire (see Appendix A) made sense here given the goal of gaining an understanding of how young people, the primary users of social media platforms such as Instagram (NapoleonCat, n.d.), communicate with, and interact with social media influencers—many of whom they would have never met in person. This method allowed the investigation of a large group of voices or cases (Hesse-Biber, 2017), and thereby facilitated the uncovering of a high number of themes which can then be streamlined and/or combined. During the qualitative questionnaire for social media

followers, participants were given the chance to share their unique and individual experiences/relationships with social media and the people they follow on there. Eckerdal and Hagström (2017) note that qualitative questionnaires, in contrast with quantitative ones, were found to give participants latitude to paint a picture with their words, about varied aspects of their life that all contribute to their connection with social media influencers (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). After all, "the answers to qualitative questionnaires consist of memories, opinions and experiences" (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017, para. 1) (see Appendix A).

An obvious limitation with qualitative questionnaires is the possible and likely verbosity of answers that participants can provide. While more care is required in transcribing these qualitative responses (Hesse-Biber, 2017), they do elicit the kind of in-depth responses that allow us to draw more detailed and nuanced conclusions than would have been accessible otherwise. The goals of questions asked in qualitative questionnaires include: assessing partnerships, gauging trust, and sourcing suggestions for improving relationships and strategies (Hamzeh et al., 2018). Although using qualitative questionnaires can have some drawbacks, for example, avoidance of questions by participants, personal biases clouding answers, and the possibilities of low response rates (Hesse-Biber, 2017), the advantages outweigh these by far, for example, the scope for generating and collecting a great deal of data from a large pool of participants using minimal resources, the practicality of participation and administration, and the ability of participants to answer questions via typing rather than verbally–encouraging greater transparency (Hesse-Biber,

2017). This project also attempted to go into more depth with questionnaire participants who indicated a high level of interest in the topic and the completion of its research goals, along with participants who indicated a high level of social media usage/interaction with social media influencers. These selected participants were invited to participate in a follow-up in-depth interview (also conducted virtually) in order to gain deeper insight to support the project's findings. The other participants were recruited via a second SONA study.

Number of respondents/participants	Number that agreed to be interviewed	Number that responded to the follow up	Number that was recruited through fresh SONA study
251	13	4	247

The qualitative questionnaire, by capturing the experience of Instagram users in their own words, uninhibited by word limits, helped answer the first and second research question.

Ethics. All the required IRB documents were submitted and the IRB review of the project was officially approved 2022, April 5. The IRB approval was the first step to ensuring that the data collection process would be ethical and one that met all university and academic standards. A total of 251 qualitative questionnaires were completed by the middle of May 2022. I then used NVivo to analyze the results (Gupta et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2021). The interviews then took place over a period of eight months. I collected interviews the entire month of May and then had

to take a hiatus over the summer since SONA does not attract many participants during the summer months. Once the fall semester started, I made sure the study was live on the SONA platform and I completed the remaining interviews in November, 2022. The interview process was made more difficult by the frequency of no-shows–seventeen to be exact. I used a combination of NVivo and manual analysis here and the total time of the interview recordings was 6 hours, 56 minutes, 17 seconds, not including the time it took to transcribe and double-check the text of the transcriptions, while it took double the interview time to conduct them when accounting for sending over consent forms, etc. There were 24 total interviews conducted, and the interview transcripts totaled 174 single-spaced pages. For the content analysis, I was able to choose five social media influencers that I was introduced to via the interviews and that represented various areas of interest expressed by participants, namely: (1) fitness and nutrition; (2) streetwear and sneakers; (3) mom-life; (4) popular culture and sports media; and then finally (5) fashion, beauty and/or lifestyle. I will now more fully explain the processes for each of the other two data collection methods besides the questionnaire.

The ethical framework and philosophy guiding and informing my work throughout is one of participant agency. I did not intend on asking anything that could make them uncomfortable and let them know right from the start that the interview or questionnaire can be terminated at any point of participants' choosing (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Throughout, participation is completely voluntary (Sarangi, 2015). By structuring the methodology the way I have, I minimized ethical risks here by

answering the following questions positively, posed by Hesse-Biber (2017), "is there minimal risk of harm?; are the integrity and autonomy for research participants adequately secured?; is the method adequate?; is the knowledge produced relevant enough?" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 95).

Hesse-Biber (2017) provided a way for the researcher to summarize the main themes by counting the number of times words focusing on weight and appearance were used, and then by supposably comparing these counts with other participants. In a similar way, I hoped to glean themes from the qualitative questionnaire responses based on how focused these responses are, and their narratives are on social media influencers, influence and Instagram relationships. This type of frequency count is an important indicator, even in qualitative work (Hesse-Biber, 2017), and I have used frequency counts to make inferences about, and compare and contrast, my participants' relationships with social media and perceptions of influence.

Interviews. In-depth interviews require active asking and listening, and are highly appropriate in the cases that a participant has expressed a particular interest or involvement in a topic or issue of some sort that the researcher wants detailed information on (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Since the qualitative questionnaires were completed online, the in-depth interviews were also conducted in an online medium to keep the exchanges of information as similar as possible. In addition, the interviews being conducted online afforded me the huge benefits of convenience, security, and the ability to transcribe them immediately. In terms of ethics, the participants were made fully aware of what they are consenting to (i.e., having their

answers used in a published dissertation, as well as their rights to terminate the interview or stop responding at any point) (Sarangi, 2015); they will also reviewed a consent form prior to the interviews that outlines their role in the research and the rationale and motivations of the researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2017) and then filled out a Qualtrics poll indicating that they had read the consent form presented to them and wished to proceed with the interview.

Although there was an interview protocol/structure I followed, I informed interviewees of their rights and told them to feel free to ask me questions during the process in order to gain as much of their perspective as possible and to make sure there is co-created meaning (Hesse-Biber, 2017), and to steer the interview at a pace and order that participants felt comfortable with.

I incentivized taking part in the in-depth interviews by offering a $20 VISA gift card and automatic entrance in a raffle to win a pair of Apple AirPods. All twenty-four participants received gift cards. I used a randomizing service (Random Lists, n.d.) to pick a raffle winner and they were sent their prize directly from the Department of Communication's business office. This kind of practice–offering cash or gift cards to research participants–is becoming more and more common (Head, 2009). There, of course, can be dangers of causing discomfort to, compromising the anonymity of, and of placing undue influence on participants; however, the pitfalls or the issues surrounding payment of individuals for participating in interviews centers largely on highly vulnerable populations, for example, the unhoused (Surmiak, 2020; Williams & Walter, 2015). For researchers who do decide to pay participants, the

advice is to set the compensation amount at a level that would not be coercive or life-changing, and while this amount is not quantified, for each individual researcher to make decisions based on practicality and available funds (Head, 2009). With the $20 limit, I was trying not to exceed a reasonable amount of money, and by offering the fairly superfluous, or non-need-item gift of Apple headphones as a raffle item, I hoped to make the incentive as least coercive as possible (see Appendix B for in-depth interview protocol).

	Date(and time) and order of interview	**Pseudonyms**
1	5/2/22, 5 pm (1)	Ginny
2	5/29/22, 1:00 pm (12)	Luna
3	5/6/22, 5 pm (2)	Ron
4	5/6/22, 7:15 pm (3)	Hermione
5	5/7/22, 3 pm (4)	Harry
6	5/7/22, 4:05 pm (5)	Dean
7	5/7/22, 5:10 pm (6)	Molly
8	5/8/22, 3:05 pm (7)	Fred
9	5/9/22, 7:10 pm (8)	Angelina

10	5/12/22, 1:30 pm (9)	Cho
11	5/13/22, 3:05 pm (10)	Katie
12	5/18/22, 2:00 pm (11)	Alicia
13	9/16/23. 1:05 pm (13)	Minerva
14	10/14/22 (14)	Lily
15	10/14/22 (15)	Dolores
16	10/18/22, 1:00 pm (16)	Lavender
17	10/18/22, 3:30 pm (17)	Parvati
18	10/27/22, 1:00 pm (19)	Seamus
19	10/21/22, 2:15 pm (18)	Fleur
20	10/27/22, 2:00 pm (20)	Alice
21	11/11/22, 2:00 pm (21)	Rita
22	11/15/22, 2:05 pm (22)	Hannah
23	11/15/22, 3:00 pm (23)	Padma
24	11/18/22, 11:00 am (24)	Peter

The interviews gave us even deeper insight than the qualitative questionnaires, by allowing Instagram users to explain in their own words what influencers on the application signified to them and to recount instances where they had been persuaded or influenced directly as a result of Instagram influencing. In this way, the interviews helped answer the second and third research questions, and to some extent the first as well.

Content Analysis. The process of content analysis for the last month (looking to see if they mirror the findings of the interviews and the qualitative questionnaires); the five following influencers were chosen for the content analysis since they were ones commonly cited during the in-depth interviews and include foci and interests that pertain to various followers–not just from one category. I included the top ten comments on all Instagram posts that were published between January 25, 2023 to February 25, 2023–an entire month. I made sure these were all comments from "regular" Instagram users (i.e. not other influencers), by excluding verified accounts and ones with significant followings themselves, i.e. those with multiple thousand followers that include the K symbol (signifying 10,000 or more followers). I also excluded spam posts that appeared to be automated or published by fringe pages plugging their own wares and websites. The breakdown of the Instagram profiles investigated using the content analysis are shown in the table below.

Name	Instagram handle	Number of posts in content analysis	Category

Alix Ashley Earle	@alixearle	13	Lifestyle; fashion; beauty
Dani Austin Ramirez	@daniaustin	5	Lifestyle; parenting; mom-life
Joe Rogan	@joerogan	31	Popular culture; sports media
Your workout & mindset girl	@rebeccalouisefitness	20	Fitness; nutrition
Joe La Puma	@jlp	2	Streetwear; sneakers

The content analysis served to ratify the findings of the first two methods and allowed us to see just how big a role Instagram influencers can play in their followers' lives and to see how those followers engage and interact with influencers. In this way, it helped answer the second and third research questions.

Data Analysis

I relied on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps, or phases to thematic analysis in order to complete the data analysis phase of this research. The steps are as follows: familiarizing yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and finally, producing the report.

The first phase provides the foundation for the rest of the analytic process and requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, carry out repeated reading of it to find patterns, which is a task time consuming but one that is worth it for the depth of the data gleaned. The first phase involves transcribing verbal data from interviews, television shows, speeches, etc. in order to get the transcription ready for

thematic analysis. There are no set guidelines to create this transcript, but they do caution that when data has been already transcribed for the researcher, as it will be in the case of the qualitative questionnaire answers, it becomes crucial to spend more time than you normally would rereading and familiarizing yourself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After you get to know the data and come up with a rough list of what stands out and what is interesting and/or is relevant in your data, that is when the second phase comes into play. This essentially involves organizing the data into groups in some sort of meaningful way; themes are broader while codes are narrower as units of analysis. Coding can be done manually or with a specially engineered software such as NVivo but the rules either way are the same: contextualize codes, generate as many codes as possible (you can always cut later), remember that extracts can be coded into multiple themes. The coding is theory-driven which means that there are specific research questions that the project will be broached with and these questions aid in the coding.

The third phase is searching for themes and this is facilitated by the gathering and coding of the data. After phase two is complete, the researcher will have a list of all the codes generated. These will then be organized in theme piles or categories: candidate/main themes, sub-themes, miscellaneous, and some that may need to be done away with.

During the fourth phase the researcher will define and streamline their themes after reviewing them; the questions they need to ask themselves here is if the themes

make sense in terms of the data gathered, and if it is possible that there are any themes that were missed. At this point, the researcher should begin to see some sort of light on the horizon in that the themes should be coming together to tell some sort of story.

Phase five lays out some rules for naming themes: they should be descriptive and brief, no longer than a couple of sentences. By this point, the researcher will have a thematic map that will allow them to analyze themes and thereby, deeply analyze the data housed in the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of making sure to note and highlight what is interesting about the content in terms of the themes! The researcher should interrogate the data in terms of what sticks out and what story each theme implies or tells us.

The sixth and final phase can only take place once all the themes are fully fleshed out so that the researcher can do a final analysis report about what they learned from the data, and therefore can convey why the analysis is valid and important. This phase involves embedding your extracts and findings within a compelling narrative; the researcher should keep in the mind that at the end of the day they are telling the story they heard from the data.

Once the data was gathered, this is how data analysis for the proposed research project was conducted, using the above template/structure:

Phase 1: I reread the questionnaire answers multiple times at intervals, transcribing the answers from the questionnaire as well as the data collected from the interviews. I then input the observations from my content analysis.

Phase 2: Using my five research questions, I created codes using NVivo.

Phase 3: I sorted or organized these codes into themes.

Phase 4: I streamlined the themes found in Phase 3 and started to uncover the story that was beginning to form.

Phase 5: I looked at what sticks out from the data in terms of each streamlined theme.

Phase 6: Finally, I combined the themes resulting from all three methods to see what characteristics they share, how do they clarify and/or challenge each other? What story is the data telling? The story I am attempting to tell here is the one of what college students and other frequent users of Instagram perceive when they engage with social media influencers, and how are they impacted. Using my own observations and immersing myself in the world of Instagram users, further than I am already immersed, allowed me to contextualize and better analyze the data I gathered from other participants–in this case, the college students that I interviewed and who participated in my qualitative questionnaire.

Braun and Clarke (2006) warn us to be careful not just to describe, but to see what the data is saying, what the argument is that can be made on the basis of the project's findings. The data from all three research methods was stored and organized separately in order to prevent cross-contamination. Since the data is being used to write a dissertation research project, the identity of the participants will be protected to the maximum extent possible. No real names will be used and the researcher will not share participant information with anyone; the only exception is that some identifying information may be shared with representatives of the University of

Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if the participant or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. Risks of confidentiality loss will also be made as unlikely as possible by storing all electronic data, including but not limited to in a password protected computer and hardcopy data in a locked cabinet.

As explored in this dissertation, Instagram is becoming more and more indispensable as a social media outlet and as part of a strategic approach to communication. The practical implications of this proposed study are boundless; and there is a need for this research to be brought into the arena of applied public relations.

Transcription Process. I carried out repeated readings of the data I had collected; I also made sure to take copious handwritten notes along with creating digital versions of interview transcripts, qualitative questionnaire answers, and the content analysis script. By interacting with the text consistently and multiple times in this way, I was able to parse out a "deep understanding by interpreting the meanings of interactions, actions, and objects" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 23) that I came across during my investigations involving participants and also on the process I was able to conduct by observing followers' comments on social media influencers' Instagram posts. I was able to focus on the subjective experience, small-scale interactions, seeking understanding, and meaning-making (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

The process of reading and interpreting transcripts was subjective, even more so than I had envisioned it would be, Hesse-Biber (2017) tells us how "tentative words like "you know" might be discarded in transcribing one's data, but in fact are

the very moments where “standard” vocabulary is inadequate and where a participant tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 309). I found more than a hundred instances of the phrase “you know” in the interview transcripts, indicating that perhaps there needs to be new language to make room in the current ‘lingo’ and literature to describe the phenomena of social media influencers accurately and effectively.

Phase 1: I reread the questionnaire answers multiple times at intervals, transcribed the answers from the questionnaire as well as the data collected from the interviews. I then conducted a content analysis and transcribed the comments I found.

Phase 2: Using my research questions, I created codes using NVivo. The top codes and child codes are as follows:

Codes	**Child codes**					
Role	Reciprocity	Marketing	Definition	Daily Use	Apathy	Accountability
Liking	Trust	Entertainment				
Unity						
Consistency						
Authority	Reputation					
Scarcity						
Social Proof						

Phase 3: I then sorted the codes above into themes. codes int

Phase 4: Then, I streamlined the themes found in Phase 3 to start to uncover the story beginning to form.

Phase 5: I looked at what stuck out from the data in terms of each streamlined theme.

Phase 6: Finally, I combined the themes resulting from all three methods to see what characteristics they share, how do they clarify and/or challenge each other? What story is the data telling?

Building Themes

I read each interview transcript ten times. The real names of interviewees were not included for privacy reasons. It was an iterative process; I was analyzing data and writing at the same time. I followed an iterative process during the construction of this project. I went back and forth when it came to choosing data to analyze from my data collection, and then also doing initial analyses of the chosen data. Essentially, this helped me decide on and narrow down themes. I continued this process until a point of saturation had been reached. NVivo was used to harvest themes, as with the qualitative questionnaire.

Essentially what I was doing throughout this entire process is trying to piece together a big idea from reading all the data I collected. During the process of studying and building scholar profiles, it was easy for me to see the one that I fit into most neatly; the profile of an interpretive scholar: one that sees larger meaning formed through the study of people's communication and believe that "the only way to understand social reality and human behavior is from the perspective of those enmeshed within it…our understanding of the social world is situated in reflecting on

our everyday lives and existence" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 23). People assign social meaning to their interactions and that is how social meaning, of concepts like influence, is created (Hesse-Biber, 2017). I wanted to make sure that I read and reread the qualitative questionnaire answers, interview transcripts, and content analysis in order to make sense of the ways influencers were perceived by participants and what the former's ostensible roles were in the latter's lives. "The interpretive position assumes the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions, and thus social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning-making activities" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 6), and this is the scholarly category that I find myself fitting into. I knew that without examining human interaction and communication on social media between followers and influencers and using that examination to extract conclusions, I would not have been able to answer the research questions I had.

> Transcribing data is interactive and engages the researcher in the process of deep listening, analysis, and interpretation. Transcription is not a passive act but instead provides the researcher with a valuable opportunity to actively engage with his or her research material from the beginning of data collection. (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 309)

According to Hesse-Biber (2017), the way to identify interpretive scholars is that they "would stress the importance of the researcher's point of view and the researcher's influence on the transcription process itself" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 309). The process is not transparent.

Ethics, Reflexivity, and Positionality

In this case Instagram posts and profiles were my best sources; as we know "perhaps the best advice is to let the research problem or hypothesis serve as a guide to appropriate sources" (Singleton & Straits, 2018, p. 396).

Researcher Reflexivity. As with all qualitative work, reflexivity is important to include here. Reflexivity is essentially the researcher's process of critically reflecting on their own roles and experiences that may impact the research process and eventual generation of knowledge; it is so important that it has been called the heartbeat of the qualitative research process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). In the following statement, I will consider my role in this research project. As an avid and daily user of Instagram myself, I have an intimate knowledge of how this world works. According to the statistics I have been able to glean from my personal Instagram analytics page, I have been a user of the platform since September 20 of 2011, which means I have been using this application for over ten years at the time of this research proposal. My top fifteen advertisement interests are recognized by their algorithm, as of October 22, 2021, are as follows: (1) online shopping, (2) shopping, (3) beauty salons, (4) luxury goods, (5) shopping and fashion, (6) clothing, (7) jewelry, (8) shoes, (9) footwear, (10) tattoos, (11) physical fitness, (12) family, (13) shopping malls, (14) fashion accessories, and (15) beauty.

In terms of interests, these match up and align quite closely with those expressed by others in the criteria I fall into-young (Abidin, 2018), female, and heavy users of Instagram-which are, beauty products, apparel and fashion, foods and

beverages, travel, and cosmetic enhancement (Abidin, 2018). I check my Instagram frequently throughout the day and have traits in common with the population I am going to study via the questionnaire and interviews, and it only makes sense to also include my own perspective through observing social media usage and expression of relationships on Instagram, and using those observations to contextualize and even, evaluate, my findings. I am uniquely positioned in that I speak the same language as my participants, so to say, in terms of Instagram prowess and usage.

In order for this research project to be ethical, I referred not only to the stipulations laid out by the Institutional Review Board but also ones that are specific to the platform I used to conduct the content analysis and large parts of the study. Instagram (n.d.) has published a set of community guidelines. In short, they urge that Instagram remain an authentic and safe community arena for individual and personal expression, an arena characterized by mutual respect and catering to the law. In the longer version of the guidelines, they put forth the following stipulations:

1. "Share only photos and videos that you've taken or have the right to share" (Instagram, n.d.). This one has to do with posting only content that you have rights to and ownership of.
2. "Post photos and videos that are appropriate for a diverse audience" (Instagram, n.d.). This one mostly prohibits images depicting nudity unless it is in photos of existing paintings and sculptures.

3. “Foster meaningful and genuine interactions” (Instagram, n.d.). This asks members of the community not to harass others with business offers, and not to purchase likes, followers, or shares but to gain them organically.
4. “Follow the law” (Instagram, n.d.). Essentially, this prohibits solicitation, posts supporting or including depicting hate groups and violence, and the use of Instagram to sell regulated goods.
5. “Respect other members of the Instagram community” (Instagram, n.d.). This one warns against content targeting or threatening any individual or group, containing harassment, or encouraging violence in any way.
6. “Maintain our supportive environment by not glorifying self-injury” (Instagram, n.d.). This prohibits the urging of others to do self-harm or self-injury.
7. “Be thoughtful when posting newsworthy events” (Instagram, n.d.). Here, they check and warn against the posting of graphic images that may disturb children or other vulnerable groups.

Only behavior that reflects the guidelines above will be included in the final data analysis. If participants express that they have used Instagram in an unlawful way or have plagiarized content, etc., that data will be excluded.

As for the content analysis aspect of the research, I observed and collected the language of comments on social media influencers’ posts and profiles on the Instagram platform. Instagram stands out from similar social media platforms in that it has seen consistent growth and popularity being named “iPhone App of the Year”

by Apple as early as 2011 (Chen, 2017). By 2018, Instagram had already reached one billion monthly active users and the application is one of the most popular social platform globally (Statista, 2021). Simply put, it is the one that attracts influencer marketing the most: the "free mobile photo-sharing application Instagram allows users to snap and edit photos, as well as connect with an online photo-sharing community—friends, family, or complete strangers—across various social networks like Facebook and Twitter" (Chen, 2017, p. 22). Also, unlike platforms like Facebook, it is common for people to keep public Instagram profiles, thus enabling users to "follow," view, like, and comment on photos of people they don't know personally" (Chen, 2017, p. 23). Only public profiles were observed; so while the "lines between public and private information can become easily blurred…using data from these sites can raise issues of privacy and informed consent" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, pp. 93-4), the key word here is "can" and not "will", and I did everything to ensure that it will not and did not.

Chapter 4: Results

The data clearly lead us to the understanding that Instagram users' perceptions of social media influencers are colored through the lens of mainly authority, liking, social proof and role, along with unity and consistency. Based on the responses from the qualitative questionnaire, the participants do not generally tend to ask clarifying questions of social media influencers as followers. The information volunteered in qualitative questionnaires by participants/informants was significant to them (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). What the interviews and questionnaires combined told me is undeniably true, at least of the sample that I queried. The findings were then largely corroborated by the content analysis. The interviews were highly fruitful since although I was familiar with many of the referenced Instagram influencers due to the Instagram algorithm, some of the names that the participants discussed during the course of interviewing were ones I had not heard of before. I listed commonly referenced Instagram influencers that emerged from the interviews as well as their subject matter below:

Name and Instagram handle	**Category**
Hannah Meloche @hannahmeloche	Lifestyle; fashion
Lexi Hidalgo @lexxhidalgo	Lifestyle; fitness
Alix Ashley Earle @alix_earle	Lifestyle; fashion

Dani Austin Ramirez @daniaustin	Lifestyle; parenting
Sarah Tucker @sarahgtucker	Lifestyle; parenting
Maia Knight @maiaknight	Lifestyle; parenting
Rebecca Louise @rebeccalouisefitness	Fitness; nutrition
Bella Hadid @bellahadid	Fashion
Bethany Mota @bethanynoelm	Fashion; lifestyle
Maggie Macdonald @maggiemacdonald	Lifestyle; fashion
Thomas Rhett Akins @thomasrhettakins	Lifestyle; music
@prettyboyfredo	Lifestyle
Tomi Obebe @goodtomicha	Lifestyle; beauty
Joe Rogan @joerogan	Sports; lifestyle
Marques Brownlee @MKBHD	Technology
things.i.bought.and.liked @things.i.bought.and.liked	Fashion; beauty; lifestyle
Joe La Puma @jlp	Fashion; lifestyle
Jackie Aina @jackieaina	Fashion; beauty

“Nikki Shanel” @coco.shanellllll	Lifestyle
Jessie Paege @jessiepaege	Fitness; mental health
Deja Foxx @dejafoxx	Fashion

There were also participants that had very niche interests such as golfing and sneakers–specifically for resale. I was expecting the interests to revolve mostly around fashion and lifestyle, but this process showed me that there are Instagram influencers for everything encompassing all interests (e.g. golf, technology).

Across the board, interview participants indicated that they used Instagram on a daily basis. Even though 11 reported that they used TikTok more, which does complicate this study a little as social media is such a rapidly changing landscape, the daily Instagram use that all participants reported ranged between one hour to four hours a day. The interviews actually provided the names of the five social media influencers that I looked at for the content analysis.

	Social Proof	**Authority**	**Liking**	**Unity**	**Consistency**	**Role**	**Reciprocity**	**Scarcity**
Qualitative Questionnaire	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interviews	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Content Analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		

Above are the themes that emerged from questionnaire answers along with the interviews and the content analysis: Social Proof; Liking; Authority; Consistency;

Unity; Role; Reciprocity; and Scarcity. These themes are further broken down into our three research questions, not in order.

RQ2: How do social media followers engage with social media influencers and what roles do they see them fulfill?

The answers coded to role and social proof are housed under the results for the second research question. The roles played by Instagram influencers in the lives of their followers are taking on the role of an expert, building relationships with them, and thereby, making a definitive impact on followers' lives.

Role. This refers to how social media influencers directly impact their followers; there were a total of 206 references to the role that influencers play in participants' lives in the qualitative questionnaire answers, and not all of them were positive. Based on the interviews, the way the role of a social media influencer was defined as a "person of influence" (Ron) on Instagram. The functions of influencers, according to the 24 interviewees, included the following: enhancing brand recognition–"awareness of brands rises from influencers" (Alicia); posting about their families and realities–"I think she started posting like she started like teasing that she was going to release a brand and everybody was kind of guessing what it was and she had went through like a whole hair loss journey. And so this new product that she released was like a hair oil meant for like, your hair and like regrowth and stuff. So she started like talking about it on her platform as a way for other people who are struggling with hair loss to like, use her product" (Padma), and showcasing relatively unvarnished depictions of their personal lives–"Too much editing makes it

inauthentic" (Dolores). One of my interviewees, Lavender, expressed a wish to see candid daily life rather than celebrity posts, wanting social media influencers to show raw parts of themselves both emotionally and physically. Another interviewee, Ron, talked about how brands can use influencers to uphold values, specifically referring to how LeBron James is "part of Nike" (Ron) and because they knew LeBron, wanted to buy Nike branded shoes all the more. Fleur remembered the same in regards to another influencer that was associated with a beer and tequila company.

One particular interviewee, Alice, had suffered a concussion so we had to modify the pace of the interview a little bit, but it was pretty fruitful as their job was to handle social media marketing for a regional football team, eventually hoping to work for the National Football League. Their perspective was unique in some ways, but largely very similar to the rest of my interviewees; they discussed how they saw an Instagram advertisement for a Versace robe, and told me "I could have bought it (for) myself but…I ended up getting it for my mom but it was funny because like I had this idea off seeing it on Instagram like on a [sic] ad, like and anytime if you are watching stories for a really long time...it'll be like stuff of little things that you like that you may have looked at, or they like might recommend for you" (Alice). The role that is played in users' social media lives by these influencers is ideally inspirational and influential rather than all sponsored (Dolores).

The content analysis suggested the role of an influencer in their dedicated or long-term followers' lives was that of a friend, even a confidant. There were many commenters that looked to their followed influencers as anchors in a sense, telling

them through Instagram comments, “I had this girl at my school who was being rude and negative to me then she ask me to be friends and I said no cause I,m [sic] not putting myself in that environment and I move on” (Your workout & mindset girl, n.d.). From the point of view of a social media user, influencers are seen as aspirational and worthy of admiration, inciting of ambition, with commenters telling Instagram influencers “You're a ray of sunshine 😍😍😍🔥🔥🔥☀️☀️☀️” (Your workout & mindset girl, n.d.) and “Girl you can literally wear anything you want for Mardi Gras!” (Alix Earle, n.d.). Along with this, the influencer is a familiar enough presence that they feel comfortable enough to give advice to them, but someone they feel comfortable enough to give advice to, for example, “Keep promoting that delicious meat !!! #noveganshere” (Joe Rogan, n.d.) and “My oldest is 26 and still sleeps with me when she comes home. After all these years of my girls being gone I still don’t sleep well without them home. Once they’re home, a peace comes over me and I sleep so good! Cherish these times! ❤” (Dani Austin, n.d.)

A top level code that themes corresponded to was ‘role’ and the child codes were as follows: Reciprocity; Marketing; Definition; Daily use; Apathy, and Accountability, with Reciprocity being the most significant one. I spotted a scaffolding role of influencers (in order of increasing role size) the three approaches I took: qualitative questionnaire; in-depth interviews; and content analysis.

Reciprocity. Often participants indicated following and interacting with social media personalities because they like seeing their content, whether it is aesthetically pleasing, interesting, funny, authentic, or all four. Influencers put out amusing and/or

trustworthy content, and they are rewarded or compensated for that content with follows and interactions on their Instagram posts, with one questionnaire participant noting this as a common feature of "successful" and the "most trustworthy" recommendations.

The interviewees discussed the value of influencers inviting and incorporating honest feedback from their followers. In the case of influencers offering their followers discount or promotional codes for free shipping or for a certain percent off the price, the interviews tell us that followers are compelled to return the favor: "So if they post like clothes, especially clothing, or makeup, or beauty products, especially if they give like a promo code, I am very tempted to buy it and a lot of times I do" (Rita). A specialized perk, like a promo code, means that followers feel obligated or incentivized. Another way the reciprocity principle played out is seeing influencers get involved in charity and non-profit work enhances the likelihood of followers engaging with them; Fleur let me know "when they do a lot to give back to the community, it makes them more authentic. So like, I'm really big on like philanthropy and volunteer work. So like when they like, have posts about them doing that in a way that's not like staged and posed, it's more so like they truly enjoy it or something that they've been involved in prior to becoming famous" (Fleur).

Marketing. Another child code under Role is Marketing, or influencer recommendation. There were few instances relayed in the questionnaire answers of participants buying things based on influencer recommendation. However, these instances were not uniform and were relatively infrequent, the role of the influencers'

recommendation seemed lukewarm at times and a little downplayed but participants did note that “Certain clothing brands or hair and makeup companies can appear more trustworthy when an influencer I like is associated with it”. Even though there were participants that indicated that social mediaInstagram influencer marketing worked on them, and that they based some purchase decisions on it, most of the influence reflected in the questionnaire answers was not in the realm of marketing but rather in the realm of the aforementioned social proof, with participants explaining, “I think that the social media influencers mainly provide book recommendations and funny content. Besides that, they don't have a large role in my life.”

Definition. If we were to form a definition of a social media influencer based on the answers solely of the qualitative questionnaire it would involve, based on the majority of the answers, the major traits of having an active, attractive and authoritative social media presence and thereby, be able to wield influence. Participants indicated that the role of a social media influencer is to “makes [sic] a living out of promoting products or behaviors while a celebrity makes a living out of a certain talent or skill”, to be “active on social media and uses their base to influence others.” They noted that a celebrity, on the other hand, was defined as someone famous but not necessarily having to rely on social media for influence.

Participants in the interviews and commenters in the content analysis indicated that finding an influencer entertaining and visually appealing was a matter of great importance.

Daily use. Here is where I was able to capture the size or, rather, the scope of the role that social media influencers played in participants' lives. In answer to the question, 'How often would you say you use Instagram? Pick the option that is closest/most accurate', an overwhelming 161 out of 251 participants answered 'Several times a day' and 27 answered 'Once a day'. In total 78.88% of qualitative questionnaire participants indicated that they used Instagram on a daily basis, with 10 participants saying that would characterize their use of Instagram as 'Obsessively'. 29 others answered 'A few times a week/when I have free time', 6 said 'Once a month', 5 said 'Once a week', and only 13 out of all 251 questionnaire participants said they did not use Instagram.

Instagram use	**Percentage of participants**
Obsessively	3.98%
Several times a day	64.14%
Once a day	10.76%
Total that use it daily	78.88%
A few times a week/when I have free time	11.55%
Once a week	2%
Once a month	2.39%
'I do not use Instagram'	5.18%

Apathy. There were some participants indicating that even though they used Instagram, they had little to no room in their lives for social media influencers. One participant said that when it comes to social media influencers on Instagram, "I personally just find them annoying and superficial. They play little to no role in my life." Another participant responded to the same question, asking about the influencers play in participants' lives, with "Not a big role truthfully. When I was younger I did really enjoy the social media influences but now that I have gotten older truthfully i do not care as much." Another participant expressed skepticism in reference to buying products off of Instagram in general, "Never, I think that they are generally scams".

In total there were 145 'no' responses when answering the question 'Have you bought products from an organization on the basis of them being sponsored or promoted by a social media personality?' There were 106 'yes' responses. More than half is 'no's' - almost 58% of the participants so the answer is not as conclusive as we would like, at least based on the results of the questionnaire.

However, even though there were quite a few answers indicating apathy, there did seem to be an indication from the questionnaire answers that if followers are entertained and amused by social media influencers, or if they receive direct replies and attention from them as if they would from a personal friend or acquaintance, they are more likely to click on their links and interact with their profiles. In answer to my question, "Have you bought products from an organization on the basis of them being sponsored or promoted by a social media personality?", a participant said they

interacted with an influencer named Dagnel the most “because he responds to comments on his streams and I find it very entertaining and funny”. Another participant shared the same sentiment, saying:

> “I bougth [sic] David Dobrick merch (a sweatshirt) because I was a huge fan, wanted to support him, and wanted other people to know I loved him. I bought makeup from Jeffree Star Cosmetics for my friend once because we had a short lived obsession with him”.

The inclination to buy a product or service is increased when a social media influencer they are already following and like in some capacity endorse it. One respondent said, “I love Ana Stowell and I will buy things if she endorses them” while another participant said “An influencer that I like made her own clothing brand and I have bought multiple things from it”.

Accountability. The issue of accountability did come up in the questionnaire responses overall but there were not many allusions to the idea of accountability. One questionnaire participant noted: “if I hear word about an organization doing something wrong (such as overworking employees), I would hope that influencers associated with them would address their stance.” Some respondents seemed to think that influencers are immune to controversy and scandal, “A celebrity has a wider impact on a greater amount of people compared to a social media influencer. Also, a lot of the time, many social media influencers can be bad influences and face no repercussions, whereas celebrities will face repercussions”. On the other hand, other participants thought that influencers untainted by bad publicity would be valuable assets to brands working with them, “I am not entirely sure but an influencer with no controversy surrounding them would definitely support an organization's prospects.”

Social Proof. The most prominent theme emerged from the qualitative questionnaire results was social proof, as in the indication that participants were influenced by social media personalities due to looking at them as exemplars of actions and thoughts. There were 337 references to social proof in total that I marked using NVivo. In addition, the participants alluded to copying or somehow embodying the actions of the influencers they looked up to. For example, one of the participants remarked in answer to a question asking them to elaborate on why they had bought certain products on the basis of them being sponsored or promoted by a social media personality, "I bought the product because I thought it looked so good on Kenna and I wanted to be like her (at the time). The decision was fairly heavily based on Kenna because she had such good style and I wanted to replicate that". The social media influencer in this case, Kenna, is looked to as an ideal or something to work toward in terms of style, and the reasoning for this participant buying the product is wanting to look like the influencer, in other words, social proof.

The takeaway here is that social media influencers do provide an exemplar for social media users to an extent, but it is not usually the influencer that is a sole factor in their purchase decisions, they want to have it backed up by recommendations by friends or family, and/or previous knowledge of and intimacy with the brand. Participants said things like, "I don't know about organizations but I do have friends that buy from certain brands that I am unsure about their trustworthiness but when I see an influencer I like also buying from that brand when I know of it already, it may

push me closer to using it". Another participant echoed this sentiment as they wrote, "Amberlynn's lifestyle is entertaining and very different from most other social media influencers. I like Studytee because of her neat notes, it helps me gain inspiration for my own". This is in line with trends we have seen in the past year or so, where an influencer's endorsement of or displayed trust in a product like 'Studytee' causes it to sell out across the nation (Dellato, 2023).

Social media influencers are used for screening products and services: an interviewee told me "Like, I wouldn't be the first person to just buy it if I saw a link come up" (Hannah) but they would be more likely to purchase if filtered through an influencer's recommendation. Quite a few interviewees mentioned buying things based off of an Instagram account called @things.i.bought.and.liked, one that is included in the table above and features actual purchases and their pros and cons. Interview participants seemed to see these influencers as aspirational and as Lavender told me, on a whole different level than that of peers. Rita referred to a social media influencer named Lexi Hidalgo, recounting "She was wearing this outfit from Aerie, and it was like literally, blue yoga pants. And everyone in the comments was like, oh my god, like, where's this from? I need this outfit. And literally, I went on the website, and it was already out of stock. But I checked that website like, for a couple of weeks until eventually it was back in stock and then I bought them. Like right when it is back in stock. I bought them" (Rita). Seeing the product on an influencer they followed rather than on the company website made them want to buy it all the

more, to the point where they checked the website daily waiting for the company to restock.

A notable theme that emerged through the content analysis–as well as from the questionnaire and interviews–was that of social proof or inspiration–'inspo' in internet speak. There were quite a few comments indicating that commenters were looking to these influencers for the specific decisions they were making in order to follow in their footsteps. The clearest examples were from the comments found on Dani Austin and Alix Earle's pages: the former posted a video of herself on February 2, 2023 jumping into an icy pool eliciting the comment, "I want to ice plung [sic]!" (Dani Austin, n.d.); the latter attracted comments that indicated followers were looking to her and her alone to lead by example, for example on the Mardi Gras post mentioned earlier, a user left a comment saying "you make the rules babes" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). Most of the comments indicating the social proof principle were found in response to Alix Earle's posts. In response to a February 7, 2023 post of the influencer wearing a bikini in the snow at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, a user commented "Alix Earle wore a bikini in 5 degree weather so I wore a bikini in 5 degree weather" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). She posted another one on January 26, 2023 depicting her walking a red carpet, and someone commented "Not me with a Rowe appointment even tho [sic] I don't look like Alix" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). A great deal of her commenters are actually trying to live vicariously through her; the same post from January 26, 2023, one of the photos shows the influencer posing with a famous actor named Channing Tatum. The comments compare him almost unfavorably with the

influencer, including things like “Why does Channing look nervous to meet her 😂😍” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.), “Ok but u met channing tatum????” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.), “channing tatum is so lucky to meet THE alix earle” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.), and “Not you just casually posing with CHANNING FKN TATUM” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.).

There are also a few posted comments indicating the same kind of desire to follow an example on the posts of the other three Instagram influencers. The fitness influencer responds to commenters the most; she posted a picture of herself and her partner on February 14, 2023 i.e. Valentine’s Day, and a user commented “I love that about you guys!! You can go from glam to days unshowered and love both equally as much!!!! I have loved following your journey over the last year and a half!!! Whats [sic] your next adventure?? Another summit? Hiking the Appalachian trail perhaps? Mountain climbing?? A book?” (Your mindset and workout girl, n.d.). Another post of hers from the same day shows her exercising and another commenter says, “I am definitely going to do this workout. Thanks!!” (Your mindset and workout girl, n.d.). There is some indication that these influencers’ followers want to be able to emulate their lifestyle in some way, shape or form. For Joe La Puma, after he posted a picture of himself with an upcoming guest on his podcast on February 20, 2023, a follower commented a wishful “bruh i just wanna be able to afford to buy all the homies sick kicks” (Joe La Puma, n.d.). When it comes to Joe Rogan, after he posted a photograph of cooked ribs on February 5, 2023, a follower responded with the following comment, “You know what’s cool? You do stuff normal non famous people do. And it

seems like you take legit happiness in it. I suspect you have the means to have someone else cook your meals every night. But you don't. You enjoy life like all the humans around you. And I appreciate that" (Joe Rogan, n.d.). All this shows us how much a social media example can do in terms of inspiring similar behaviors–both purchase and otherwise.

RQ1: How do social media followers define 'social media influencer'?

The combination of authority and liking serve to answer the first research question.

Authority. There were a great deal of indications of participants looking to influencers as authority figures or experts in terms of reputation and inspiration. I coded 84 references to be exact. Qualitative questionnaire participants said they place trust in influencers' opinions. Answers included, "@jackieaina has promoted ELF cosmetics and NYX cosmetics in the past and I trust her opinions so I purchased products from those brands", "I bought the product because I thought it looked so good on Kenna and I wanted to be like her (at the time). The decision was fairly heavily based on Kenna because she had such good style and I wanted to replicate that", "they are motivating for my personal goals", "I bought the product because I trust the influencer and she uses it. It was really only based on her", and "I think people put a lot of trust in things that are recommended by social media influencers. For instance, Skims, Kim Kardashian's brand, has been highly recommend [sic] by influencers. I have not seen one bad thing about Skims so far". Social media influencers seem to be looked to as expert or well-versed in the products they are promoting, ideally.

However, there were also instances where participants indicated that they did not see influencers as much of a trusted source, saying “I try not to let people who I do not know play a major part in my life. If I see someone who is famous for something that I know I could do as well, I don't give them very much credibility”, and “Generally I don't think they are trustworthy, I think they are scams and I think that the social media influencers are just making money and even they don't use it”.

This theme was coded for answers indicating inspiration, adulation, acceptance of advice, and the presence of credibility. Themes arose doubting loyalty in the case of a major breach of trust. A lot of participants mentioned that they would be turned away or turned off in the case of influencers committing acts that went against their morality. It seemed that unfollowing would only be done due to something very extreme or resulting in a dramatic reputational loss.

In order to maximize the success of product endorsements, celebrities and influencers alike must match up or align their public persona with their espoused values, in order to augment their authority. Only then can they be seen as “opinion leaders” (i.e., an expert or sources of authority on the product or the subject of the product, whether it is fashion, lifestyle, or something else) (Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014, p. 37). Interviewees let me know that they would jump ship if an influencer did something that went against their personal morals. One of the specific losses in trust that were mentioned included Logan Paul when he showed a dead body online (Tarun, 2021). This was something that was widely circulated through the news but also was unquestionably a morally objectionable action, and brought down universal

censure on Logan Paul. Quite a few interview respondents talked about this incident and condemned it, citing it as one of the biggest controversies in the context of social media influencing and being in the public eye.

A beer brand, Bud Light recently became involved in a controversial episode. They sent products to a transgender influencer named Dylan Mulvaney in April of this year and the influencer then featured the product on their Instagram, in the traditionally accepted template of an Instagram brand partnership. They also captioned their post of the public relations package Bud Light had sent them with the hashtag #budlightpartner. This caused so much fallout, particularly with politically conservative consumers who found the influencer's lifestyle morally objectionable, that the effects were being felt months after Mulvaney's Instagram post was published in terms of sales and public backlash (Mayer, 2023).

The brand Tarte Cosmetics has a full-scale influencer program and they often sponsor multiple social media influencers going on trips to events and holiday locations in an attempt to increase brand awareness (Flora, 2023). One such trip that was blamed for making the brand seem unrelatable and out-of-touch due to its high cost was a recent one to Dubai where multiple social media influencers flew business-class on Emirates Airlines and stayed in luxury hotels (Spruch-Feiner, 2023). Hot on the heels of that trip was a domestic trip, to Miami for which Tarte Cosmetics was blamed for treating influencers of color in a poor and unfair manner compared to white influencers. The controversy gained so much momentum and attention that both the influencers that continued to partner with it were condemned

for being associated with the brand and for making people of color feel inferior (Flora, 2023). Tarte Cosmetics has defended extravagant expenditures on social media influencer marketing by saying that this kind of thing has always been going on in the fashion and beauty world, with big brands like Chanel paying for models and editors to travel for business reasons in the past but that it was not as publicly apparent before as it is now when it is showcased on social media (Spruch-Feiner, 2023). Nevertheless, to ensure that their brand and its associates did not continue to suffer in the aftermath of the exclusionary controversies, Tarte Cosmetics did say they will be pausing and revamping their influencer program as well bringing a diversity specialist on board to prevent future issues (Flora, 2023).

The interviews contained the most overt examples of instances where social media users would unfollow a social media influencer or begin to look upon them unfavorably in the case of a breach of trust. There were many references to morality, implying that there would have to be an extreme example of immoral behavior to disillusion them when it came to regarding social media influencers. Harry, one of the earliest interviewees, let me know they would unfollow a social media personality, "Probably if they did something, like, morally wrong, like committed like a horrendous crime or something like that" (Harry)–a horrendous crime like the one committed by the Shein brand. This same participant, Harry, also mentioned losing trust in a specific social media influencer i.e.. Logan Paul, but did not really elaborate on the specifics of the case as it was big news when it broke. Parvati lost trust in J.K.

Rowling, saying that even though they had loved her before, after seeing how "horrible" (Parvati) she was on social media, they felt completely disillusioned.

It does seem that while they may be put off relatively easily, the behavior must be quite extreme to elicit an actual unfollow response from social media users when it comes to influencers. When asked, Fleur said it would have to be "awful, triggering things" (Fleur), though they did not specify what those things would be. Another participant, Cho told me they unfollowed someone because, "I think he was like, I mean there's just bunch of stuff I think he was talking to like minors or something or just being like off, and then also Nikita Dragun I unfollowed her because she's just like, she was doing, she was just saying weird statements about like black women and stuff and I was like, 'that's really weird' and she would like wear braids and like excuse it, so it just doesn't align with me so I unfollowed" (Cho). These are both serious transgressions. Rita did let me know that a breach of trust in their eyes, would be the influencers' involvement in something that would essentially cause a question mark about their character, as they would not want to support someone who is a bad or a mean person. This sentiment was echoed by Alice, they told me that if an influencer were to "post something just out of pocket I'm talking about if something traumatic happened, and they were going around, like, like just disrespecting the matter like for an example, um, the Roe versus Wade" (Alice) that they would be thoroughly disillusioned. The overturning of the Roe versus Wade ruling, having to do with abortion rights, is a huge and highly contentious national issue (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022) and to weigh in on it, especially against the view your followers'

leanings, is a risky move and in social media world, equals a big breach of the trust that has been placed on you as an Instagram influencer.

Often, an influencers' past social media posts come back to haunt them and drag down their public persona, Katie for example, mentioned the oft-occurring situation of influencers' past slur usage coming to light–whether it is through Instagram, Twitter, or even some other social media platform. Katie said to me, when an influencer's past includes using slurs, and is compounded "when they don't respond, it's kind of like, I think it can rub people the wrong way" (Katie). This means that if an influencers' past tweets are brought up and they are hateful and use slurs or offensive language, those influencers must address the issue and apologize right away. Sometimes, however, there are influencers who will stick to their guns and refuse to apologize, and this is what Katie is referring to–when they choose not apologize the hit to their reputation is all the worse (BBC, 2022; Hills, 2020) and can make them look even more objectionable to their followers. We can see that a breach of morals, one that is overt and is not followed by a sincere apology from the influencer, is something that breaks trust between influencer and follower, and we need to pay attention to this.

Ron told me that they only follow and continue interacting with social media influencers if they showcase credibility (Ron) and thereby, their authority. Lack of filtering appears to be important to social media users, Ginny trusts the authority of an influencer because "She's authentic, because she's living her own story and telling that story to other people without filtering, at least without filtering the part that

would make her human" (Ginny). Alicia cited, as a reason to follow someone, "I feel like they had to be pretty like, impactful for me to actually follow them and want to see like, everything that they post, right" (Alicia). Credibility but not always necessarily approachability, which is in contrast with what we learn from the content analysis in the upcoming section; Padma told me that when it comes to influencers they tend to look up to them, saying that she tends to "Put them on a pedestal…I would love one day for them to be my friend but you know, like right now they're just like influencing me and they're like, I kind of went in my head would think like, oh, being friends with them is isn't attainable, right?" (Padma). Credibility and a good reputation apparently go a long way, if social media users feel that influencers have expertise or create fashions within a field or subject, rather than just selling out, they are more likely to follow through on a purchase. Ginny, for example, talked about how, in their "original survey, my idea, like my definition of a social media influencer was someone that can set trends" (Ginny). This is enhanced when it does not feel like the influencers are in it just for the money; the opposite is true when followers feel that an influencer's recommendation is purely a money grab, saying, when it seems like they do not really like the product they feel compelled to do research on other forums from actual customers to make final decisions about purchasing (Harry).

It stands to reason, that unlike social media influencers, followers are not sponsored by brands and are not sent free items to review. Harry let me know that even though they wanted to grow their sneaker collection, and followed influencer Joe La Puma for sneaker recommendations, price was a major issue. They told me, "I

haven't bought anything yet based off their recommendation because I'm in college and I don't have the money to grow my sneaker collection." (Harry). However, the recommendations were trusted as coming from a credible and authoritative source.

The findings of the interviews and questionnaires, that influencers are a source of authority when it comes to information are not only confirmed by the content analysis, the authority of some influencers can be valued even more greatly than it seemed from our previous analysis. The Instagram comments I was able to analyze indicated that the users of those accounts sought information or even expertise from the influencers. On one of Joe Rogan's posts, dated February 25, 2023 and depicting a picture of a bison bone, a user commented, "If you don't know what this is I highly recommend you watch his podcast with a high thc pre roll if you did you would know what this is I learn more about things on his podcast than fkin college" (Joe Rogan, n.d.). In many of Alix Earle's posts, commenters want to know specific details of her clothing items, they often ask for the exact product links. For example, on one of her posts captioned "boat days = best days" posted on February 21, 2023, the top comments are overwhelmingly from those seeking more information about the origins of her clothing items. Comments include: "Where is the swimmy from", "Where is suit from thi", "Love this bikini 👙", "Where's the set from?!", "Where's that 👙from?!?! 🫠🤩", and "Girl where's the swimsuit from" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). She is clearly seen as a credible source of this information.

The same is true for the fitness influencer, Rebecca Louise. The captions of her posts generally contain advice, recipes, and encouragement to followers to

schedule a call with her for a customized nutrition plan. Her account handle includes the word “fitness”, and her followers perceive her to be an expert in this area. One of her posts dated February 17, 2023 elicited a comment asking, “Is it ok to take all vitamins at once ? Im asking cuz I'm struggling with that” (Your workout and mindset girl, n.d.).

In a post dated 2023 February 15 2023, Alix Earle, the influencer who falls squarely in the beauty and fashion interest category, Alix Earle, posted a series of photos – also known as a carousel (Zote, 2022) – including ones depicting her walking the red carpet. The comments were largely in support, somewhat in an adoring even adulating manner, of the Instagram personality. They included “Queen are you wearing a crown” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.) and “If “mom I’ve made it” was a person 💅✨💕” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). Alix was depicted in one of the photographs in the ‘carousel’ wearing a hat with a fast food restaurant–specifically Raising Cane’s–logo emblazoned across it, and a commenter posted “I want a canes hat @raisingcanes” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.) actually tagging the fast food brand in their comment so it would be available for them to see as well. There were very few unfavorable comments, and it seemed that followers looked up to Alix, with one asking “please post advice on how to pass all classes while maintaining a banging social life” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). The comment that encapsulated the spirit of adulation the most was a comment telling her, “I want to be you when I grow up. I’m not kidding” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). These sentiments are all in praise of the influencer, letting her know how much they admire her achievements. One of the

comments left on a post of hers was a simple goat emoji, “🐐” (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.) meaning Greatest of All Time (Elsa, 2022).

Liking. This theme refers to the overwhelming evidence throughout the qualitative questionnaire responses that participants preferred social media influencers that they had a liking and admiration for. In total I coded 57 references to this theme for the questionnaire, relating to participants liking influencers as trusted sources of information and entertainment. They said, among other things, that they followed influencers, (1) “because I like their dance moves”, (2) “I already know that I like the work that they do, so I'm more interested to know about them as individuals”, (3) “I like their taste”, (4) “they're funny and have similar interests”, (5) “I think Cody Ko…does a good job at engaging his specific audience and playing into the things both him and the audience enjoy”, (6) “she provides a very good influence to people, she tries to brighten everyones day but also shows the reality of being in your 20s”, (7) “An influencer that I like made her own clothing brand and I have bought multiple things from it”, and (8) “I bought this product because I really liked how they looked with the make up on”. The way one participant phrased it: “I haven't yet but the urge or the temptation to buy is higher when I see that a social media personality I like is promoting or sponsoring the product”. As Buccholz (2022) makes clear, people tend to trust the recommendations and judgements of their social circle when it comes to deciding what to purchase. As social media influencers share more of their lives with the public and appear in a friendly and approachable light to them, the more they seem like acquaintances, and the more likely people are to view them

as part of their social circle (Buccholz, 2022) and trust them when it comes to purchase recommendations.

The aspects of aesthetics and vulnerability with sharing personal lives were emphasized the most during the interviews I conducted. So many interviewees cited beautiful images and aesthetically pleasing profile as a reason why they followed and engaged with social media influencers. “Cute” was a word used multiple times to describe profiles that they followed, for example, Ginny told me: “Oh, yeah. I really liked Jessie Paege. They're an ed recovery advocate, and they like they took up like this PR with cocokind, that's like I think I think please don't quote me on this, is like a cleanser company and like, lotion stuff. And she did a really good ad, she made a really cute Reel, she posted cute pictures, and at that time, I needed like, a new cleanser. I was like, okay, let's try that. I would think my need for the cleanser also played a part into it but Jessie definitely made it more interesting” (Ginny). There were frequent mentions of participants being enticed or attracted to social media influencers’ profiles mostly because of aesthetic qualities they wanted to emulate: “their profile's like a magazine that's very aesthetically pleasing” (Hannah). The halo effect means physical attractiveness causes people to be seen as more kind, more sociable, more intelligent, and more trustworthy (Batres & Shiramizu, 2022) and the same applies to their aesthetically attractive profiles pages. Minerva, another interviewee, talked about the varied color use in posts by a social media influence, saying “It was really like, another thing about his posts are they're very colorful,

whatever he makes, it's not, it's like always good presentation and always really colorful, so I remember like that's what I look at the most" (Minerva).

Many interviewees also indicated that they want to see the realities of influencers' lives in order to be swayed by their opinions. Rita, for example, talked about a desire for day-in-the-life videos, which are usually made up of snippets of a social media user's existence, all spliced together to show what their typical day looks like. They not only seem to want a glimpse into their day to day, but also into the personal details of their emotional and physical lives, going as far as wanting insight into their "struggles, whether it's like a physical insecurity or…a mental health that they're having" (Rita). Sharing these personal details that you would normally reserve for close friends and family makes the influencer "a lot more relatable" in Rita's words. That effect is enhanced when the style interests or aesthetic values of the influencer are similar to that of the follower, as Alicia noted.

The content analysis showed that there were many instances of the 'sticky' or 'pinned' comments expressing adulation or praising the influencer on their Instagram posts, indicating the liking principle. One of the comments on Alix Earle's February 15 post also included references to aesthetic adulation, with the follower saying "Not the backdrop looking like a sparkling tiara/halo👑" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). This crosses over to liking principle. There are many instances that I came across during my content analysis where commenters alluded specifically to the influencers' looks or surroundings and described them as being attractive. One of Alix Earle's posts published on February 20, 2023 for the Mardi Gras festival elicited the following "I

love all the dirty looks from other girls. They are mad that you're so hot 😍" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). Part of the liking principle also suggests that the more personal a connection a social media user feels to an influencer the more influential they may find them. In a post dated February 8, 2023, Dani Austin, the mom-life influencer posted a professionally taken picture of her two children with the caption "Stella & Stratton, can you stay this age forever? 🥲🥹" (Dani Austin Ramirez, n.d.). Users flooded her post comments with things like, "Your babies are just so stinking cute!!", "You both have a twin wow", "Love these precious vintage photo. Photographer did such a great job. ❤", "Freakin adorable!! Ugh their smiles melt me!!🥰", and finally, "Priceless!!...The picture with you mom and your children! You will cherish this for decades and decades! Absolutely makes me cry wishing I had taken the time to have a professional photograph taken with my mom and my 2 little ones…she is deceased and if only I could have Ben [sic] as smart as you!". The final comment especially encapsulates the spirit of followers seeing themselves having a direct line of communication with the influencer. Some of the other comments responding to her posts imply that her followers feel comfortable enough to offer her advice. A post on February 16, 2023 captioned "my little snow bunnies 😊" (Dani Austin, n.d.) depicting a picture of the influencer with her child on a mountain in Utah, people commented things of a personal nature and offered up recommendations. They commented, "Stratton is like, "I'm a cool@dude" [sic] Stella is like "it's cold, get me outta here" lol" (Dani Austin, n.d.) along with "Has anyone mentioned that Stella needs a helmet?" (Dani Austin, n.d.). This same level of comfort is displayed in some

of the comments left on Joe Rogan's posts. Commenters leave suggestions for how to improve his podcast and feel secure enough to offer their honest opinions and feedback, telling him in response to a February 12, 2023 post depicting a photograph of the influencer with a group, "Everyone knows is your buddy.. but... please no more shaub..." (Joe Rogan, n.d.), "Please leave Schab at home next time ☝" (Joe Rogan, n.d.), "This team would be perfect if you got rid of Schwab", (Joe Rogan, n.d.) "Bryan Callen deserves an apology, every time he said something you bullied him. I don't care if Bryan has allegations against him, if you invite him on the show give him the same respect you'd give anyone else", (Joe Rogan, n.d.) "and "How is Schaub still around haha Rogan can clown him all he wants he still sticks round for the clout haha" (Joe Rogan, n.d.). Even though some of the comments contain negative feedback, the commenters feel that they have enough of a relationship with the influencer to share their thoughts in this manner and medium.

Even with the fitness influencer, followers seem to feel enough of a personal connection to be able to ask inquisitive questions such as "Why do you need so much supplements when you eat a big variety of food, at least it looks like from the pictures? Who made you believe that you don't eat good enough and you need the supplements? 🤔 (industry?!)" (Your workout and mindset girl, n.d.) and "Hi Rebecca, what's your goal? You said that your legs never seen [sic] like this. What do you mean with this?" (Your workout and mindset girl, n.d.). These comments were in response to a post dated February 17, 2023 depicting videos of the influencer along with clips of vegetables, vitamin supplements and various foods with a long caption

ending in “Take action to get RESULTS! 🔥” (Your workout and mindset girl, n.d.). Some of the comments even offer compliments or personal comments that would not be out of place coming from a friend or acquaintance, such as “😘😘😘 you look amazing and so happy! I miss you and our chats we would have about life and all the things!!” (Your workout and mindset girl, n.d.).

RQ3: How do social media influencers–through persuasive principles–exert influence on different publics?

The authority and liking above are not only applicable to the first research question but apply strongly to the third research question as well. In addition to authority and liking, the third research question generated the two themes below, of unity and consistency:

Unity. The feeling or relationship of kinship is important to the followers, and it is clear that when the participants feel a kinship, whether it is through class, religion, or something else, it appears they are more likely to identify with and therefore, engage with those influencers. There were only 14 references I coded as unity in the qualitative questionnaire; answers that indicated participants felt swayed or influenced most by the unity principle were among the most emphatic and unambiguous. Participants were explicitly clear that they followed and engaged with social media influencers because they felt an affinity with them. Some of the answers were, “She shares my faith/religion so I enjoy seeing how she lives in the spotlight while promoting a lifestyle for girls in our church”, “We share similar desires”, and “I

intereact [sic] iwth [sic] a lot because I agree with things theya re [sic] passiotnate [sic] about".

One of the qualitative questionnaire participants talked about the given, or automatic connection between influencers and followers, saying, "Social Media Influencers [sic], because they gain popularity through social media alone, normally are more closely connected to the public. It is easier for an audience to connect and relate to them through similarity in personality, interests, etc." Another said, "I'm more inspired to be like them since they are in the same standing as me and I can see what I can become through hard work typically".

Conversely, the most mentions of shared identity and attempts to find a sense of unity with social media influencers came up–and often–in the interviews that were conducted as part of this project. My interviewee, Molly, described how they tended to gravitate to people they shared ethnic origins with, saying they would follow "Probably um, someone who's more POC, someone who is definitely like more aware like if it comes to like beauty they're more aware that there's other skin tones. It comes to fashion, they're more aware of like, different price budgets. They're not like going for something that's super expensive. They're staying down to earth relatable" (Molly). POC means person of color, and having such an essential/rudimentary trait in common with an influencer means a social media user can identify with them all the more.

On the flip side, my interviewee, Cho was strongly impacted by the unity principle, unfollowing an influencer because of feeling that the influencer was trying

to appropriate their culture, telling me they unfollowed Nikita Dragun for wearing braids and at the same time, making off-putting comments about black women. Padma let me know that they followed social media influencers whose style and lifestyle is relatable and accessible to them, essentially when they have the impression that they are in the same boat as you. When influencers align with a part of their culture or identity, followers are more likely to be persuaded by them, but would be put off in the case that their content disrespects or goes against that same culture or identity.

The last theme that sprung out from the content analysis data is that of unity. In other words, the feeling of being in the same boat as an influencer. In response to a post on January 24, 2023 captioned partially “When we hang around or listen to negative people it brings our own mood down and sends signals to your brain that behaving like that is ok…It’s not ok. Someone ask [sic] me on the call on 6 week inner transformation call what I do with negative people…I said I ignore them! 🔥 I don’t listen to them, give them my time or want to hear their story of why they life is so tough!” (Your mindset girl, n.d.), followers left a plethora of comments expressing how their views aligned with the ones expressed by Rebecca Louise. Comments included, “Ahh correct! You said "you don't like how these people are? So leave them" and that hit me! Why use energy for someone, who is not our person and doesn't appreciate us! If you are positive, you want to be around other positive people! 🔥✨🧡” (Your mindset girl, n.d.), “I had this girl at my school who was being rude and negative to me then she ask me to be friends and I said no cause I,m

[sic] not putting myself in that environment and I move on" (Your mindset girl, n.d.), and a very complimentary comment reading "💯 ain't no body got time for that! When someone is talking and it's negative I imagine myself and them in a protective bubble of light and don't allow their stuff to even penetrate into my energy. So helpful. You rock Rebecca" (Your mindset girl, n.d.). Alix Earle makes her sorority life a focal point of her Instagram presence and in a post dated January 29, 2023 posted a picture of herself in a wedding dress (Alix Earle, n.d.). People seemed confused but a few of them seemed to recognize a long-standing tradition, commenting things like "dying at all the ppl who don't understand frat marriage culture and think you're actually a bride 🤣" (Alix Earle, n.d.). On Dani Austin's posts, followers sharing a home state with her are intent on allying themselves to her using that commonality; she posted a video on February 1, 2023 and a follower commented "No one retires and moves north! This is proof, us Texas people don't know what to do 😂" (Dani Austin Ramirez, n.d.). Joe Rogan's followers seem to be mostly male-identifying—in response to a cooking video posted by the influencer on January 30, 2023, a user left the following comment, ""I just like that there are still men out there who are unashamed to enjoy and eat meat that they shot earlier that day. Warms the heart a little. ❤️ 🍖" (Joe Rogan, n.d.).

However, there were some comments that showcased the unity principle – but how it could potentially alienate some followers – if they felt that they did not share much in common with the influencers. In response to a post detailing what she eats in a day published on February 7, 2023 a user rebuked her saying, "There's no way I'm

going to swallow so many pills a day. I thought taking your daily vitamins and proper food would be enough" (Your mindset girl, n.d.). Another social media user commented on Alix Earle's February 16, 2023 post depicting the influencer walking across the street in New York City saying, "i have to follow you for the contest on your tiktok but let it be known that seeing you on my feed makes me absolutely hate myself" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.). This highlights the way that social media users may look at influencers in an aspirational way, which in turn makes them feel that their own lives are mundane or less important.

Consistency. Say, if participants have followed social media influencers for a long time or have previously bought items and seen favorable results, they expressed that they were much more likely to purchase items through their recommendations. There were six references coded to this theme in the qualitative questionnaire answers but the indicators of it were strong. One participant talked about an influencer she had followed for a significantly long time, saying, "Isimeme is someone I started watching in highschool. She has helped me learn things about myself I didn't see as a priority in the past: platonic and romantic relationship. She has also taught me self love and given college advice." A long term relationship of following influencers is not discounted by followers, with people on social media rating themselves more likely to buy things using influencer codes or from Instagram influencer collections and collaborations they have previously shopped from based on their posts. In the case of an influencer that a user has been following for a long time, indicating that they are interested in the content being posted, it is a safe bet that they will buy the

products endorsed by the influencer, with one participant going as far as to say, “The decision to purchase was 100% based on the influencer recommendation”.

The idea of consistency came up to a substantial degree while I was conducting interviews. One interviewee in particular, Rita, prized it above all else, saying that when a social media influencer showcased consistent use of a product, it translated as a lot more authentic than if they just posted a one-time advertisement for that same product. They told me that is a matter of quality over quantity, saying:

> “if you just have a lot of partnerships, where everyone posts about it one time and it's like, a very explicit ad, I have a lot less faith in that than like, a couple of partnerships where the person is consistently posting about the brand, and buying multiple products, rather than just like saying, oh I got this one thing, but I feel like one thing is not very representative of a brand. Like I want to see that you like a lot of things that they offer. So like, I would say consistency. And then like so for the influencer consistency of like, using the products, buying the products. And then from the organization perspective, I'd say quality over quantity like do they build lasting, strong personal relationships?” (Rita)

Alicia, talking about the influencer Dani Austin, said “there's a couple brands that I can tell that she works with a lot and when she posts on her story, it's always like, very visibly that she's partnering with them, because it'll be like, oh, use code, DANI20 or DANI15 to you know, like, get a percentage back, she works a lot with DIME cosmetics as well as Tarte. And there's a couple that she works with, those are like the top two that I feel like I usually see her work the most with, like, most consistently with, but I think she also she orders a lot from like, Free People and like Amazon, stuff like that, but I'm not necessarily sure if she's sponsored by them” (Alicia). Dani Austin was cited as an influencer whose recommendations they looked to consistently.

Takeaways. The qualitative questionnaire answers overall told us that social media influencers functioned to ratify purchaser's decisions rather than inspiring them. The engagement with them also varies between superficial and more personal—liking the look of makeup or clothes on a social media influencer versus identifying with them regarding things like race and religion. The main themes found using the qualitative questionnaire were Social Proof, Authority, and the Daily Use aspect of Role.

There are negligible references to the scarcity theme in the qualitative questionnaire answers, I only coded three answers that indicated or contained any hints of wanting to follow influencers because they felt like they were a scarce commodity or resource. The scarcity principle does not seem to apply to social media influencers and how they wield and enact influence, at least when it comes to the in-depth interviews I conducted. This is mirrored in the findings from the questionnaire and the content analysis.

From the interviews, the most emerging/recurrent themes here were Authority, Social Proof, Liking, Unity, and under Role–Apathy, Reciprocity, and Daily Use. Scarcity and Consistency were not really emerging themes from what I saw and heard and experienced during the interviews. The strongest theme that arose out of the interviews was that of Social Proof.

Interview participants seemed overall more enthusiastic and insistent about the role that social media influencers played in their lives than those who answered the qualitative questionnaire. We must take into account that the interviewees are

people that saw the title of the SONA study and obviously were interested in social media and influencers in general, while qualitative questionnaire participants were not screened in that manner.

This is the role that social media influencers play, as we can tell so far from the analysis of the qualitative questionnaire answers and the interview transcripts. Influencers have the privilege of having a built-in audience in terms of their followers, so when it comes to word-of-mouth advertising, all they have to do is post it on their main profile or their stories (Almossawi, 2014). They are able to use existing followers that already trust them to bring up a product or service in the manner that a family member, friend, or acquaintance would do, and in doing so, capitalize on the in-built trust.

They are not always trusted completely or unconditionally by any means but they do help a great deal and that is shown by the dollars generated by them for the economy. They leave a long-lasting impression on potential consumers; in interviewee Katie's example, an influencer wearing a purse stayed with them to such a degree that she described it as being "on her mind", and in interviewee Rita's example, they let me know if the influencer posts "clothing, or makeup, or beauty products, especially if they give like a promo code, I am very tempted to buy it and a lot of times I do" (Rita).

Findings from the qualitative questionnaire and the interviews needed to be ratified and supported. Therefore, I used a triangulated methodology including content analysis as my third method interspersed with the interviews and

questionnaire. The conclusions from my content analysis will be used to reinforce my previous findings. To get the process of the content analysis started, I asked myself, 'I visit and scroll on Instagram all day long but what makes me stop and what makes me think twice?' I also typed out the comments in order to synthesize and analyze them as deeply as possible.

Going by the content analysis, the role that I would be able to infer social media influencers playing in people's lives would be multifaceted and huge, even while this conclusion is tempered slightly by our findings from the first two methods.

The way that Instagram orders comments is a method called 'sticking' which essentially means they pull and stick comments, regardless of the chronology of when the comments were posted but in accordance with an algorithm that shows users comments that they would probably be interested in based on their existing likes and follows, at the bottom of photos (Read, 2018). For the content analysis, I looked at the top ten 'sticky' comments for each of the five aforementioned influencers, and the main themes that emerged from the content analysis were Role, Authority, Social Proof, Liking, and Unity.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Overall Conclusion

> "*an alien invasion could happen today and brands would be like "sis!! you know what's REALLY out of this world? This sale! Use code UFO for 30% off"* (S, 2020)

Summary of Findings.

The role established is that publics certainly seem to be listening to social media influencers even if they don't always trust them and follow their institutions, and if public relations is all about publics and finding out how best to reach them, then social media influencers definitely deserve a place in public relations literature. Even when the price of the promoted product or service is prohibitive or is out of the price range, it is still seen overall as aspirational, something that would improve their lives were they to possess it. The biggest conduit of Instagram influencer influence is, across the board, social proof, followed swiftly by role and authority.

Research Questions

The important findings mirror what was found in the results in terms of theme, and are again organized in terms of the three research questions, which turn by turn, tell us how social media followers define the role of social media influencers, then tells us the nature and frequency of social media followers engagement with social media influencers, and finally, answers what sources of influence used by Instagram influencers are described as persuasive by followers.

RQ1: How do social media influencers define 'social media influencer'? From our study, we have gleaned that a social media influencer in the public relations context is someone who to publics represents a trusted source or authority in a given venue (e.g., fashion, fitness, etc.). Most questionnaire participants were quick to differentiate a social media influencer from a traditional celebrity, but were clear that it was, as we said in the introduction, a real profession. This dissertation tells us that from the perspective of Instagram users, influencers are those who can leverage parasocial relationships with their followers to build trust and come across as authentic, even when advertising products that they have been paid to promote. The new information that this dissertation provides us with, pertaining directly to this, is that these parasocial relationships have to be underscored by authority in order for the influencer to influence. Cialdini's authority principle is borne out; Instagram influencers have to be sources of authority in order to fulfill their role. The authority principle combined with the liking principle—showcasing the reality of their experience but somewhat filtered through the aesthetic lens of Instagram influencers, almost elevated in order to be something to strive for. Instagram influencers are defined by followers as those that manage to combine the authority/expertise and liking/attractiveness principle in order to showcase their lives and through that, become part of their followers' personal lives and act as inspiration for them, both in terms of what to purchase and general lifestyle advice. This is the definition of Instagram influencers that becomes apparent directly through this research.

Negative comments and negative publicity do seem to have an effect on followers' perceptions of Instagram influencers but only in cases that their trust was severely breached. It is not likely or common that these severe breaches occur and the influential capability of Instagram influencers remains largely intact most of the time. Often, when Instagram influencers take the time to apologize or to explain themselves in a video or post, the damage is easily reversed.

RQ2: How do social media followers engage with social media influencers and what roles do they see them fulfill? Followers felt that Instagram influencers played a unifying role in terms of what we previously referred to as f-commerce; because of the trusting relationships between Instagram followers and influencers the former is able to look upon the latter's recommendations as they would recommendations from their friend groups. This essentially means that as far as recommendations go, followers are perceiving their friends and their chosen Instagram influencers as one and the same. That is a powerful finding and can be used by public relations to better understand the relationship between a social media audience or public and the influencers that they are persuaded and impacted by.

The way that so many different types of followers, even confined to those who largely use Instagram, are able to appear in relatable yet authoritative roles is due to our finding that expertise of Instagram influencers is not confined to one particular genre of interest. There are a variety of interests that Instagram influencers cater to as we have seen, including but not limited to fitness, fashion, sports, mental health, parenting, technology, etc. If there is a niche interest that a follower has there is an

extremely good chance that they come across an Instagram influencer sharing that very same interest. The need to see exemplars of behavior, which is the followers' need for social proof, is met by Instagram influencers in multiple contexts. Instagram influencers provide a myriad of social proof—from fashion to fitness to living life in general—there does not even have to be a specific topic. Followers, when they admire an Instagram influencer see them as forms of social proof upon which to model their day to day lives. The idea of replication crops up again and again in the results, and absolutely cannot be ignored. Public relations practitioners can harness this finding to improve messaging and widen their reach.

Additional recommendations from actual family and friends could bolster this effect, but it is strong on its very own, with followers being willing to place their faith in products and services just on the basis of seeing them used and worn by Instagram influencers. "Inspiration" (or "inspo") is not a term that is usually invoked lightly. These products and services also do not have to be one-of-a-kind or limited edition or particularly unique in order to act as "inspo". We learned that even a pair of blue yoga pants or a hairstyling tool from an online retailer can sell out on the basis of Instagram influencer recommendation alone. Comments on influencer posts often contained the sentiment found in the following, "Alix Earle wore a bikini in 5 degree weather so I wore a bikini in 5 degree weather" (Alix Ashley Earle, n.d.), i.e. an Instagram influencer's actions and purchases are enough for the follower to replicate those actions and purchases.

Followers also felt that Instagram influencers played the role of making them aware of the products and services available, even in cases that they could not afford them. Even aside from products, Instagram influencers are seen as creators of awareness and knowledge—for example about doing well in school, boxing as a hobby, recipes, fitness routines, and nutrition tips, to name a few—followers find the information they share useful and continue to follow them. This effect is enhanced when there are shared characteristics between followers and influencers.

Neill and Lee (2016) outlined seven roles that overlap between the practice of public relations and social media: social media technician, social listening and analytics, online media relations, policy maker, employee recruiter, internal social media manager, and policing. We can add another: "influencer". They create awareness and in the same way that bloggers were evaluated for their utility, influencers can be judged in terms of quality of content and effect on a brand and its search engine rankings (Gillin, 2008).

RQ3: How do social media influencers–through persuasive principles–exert influence on different publics? The qualities and actions of Instagram influencers that are described as persuasive to their followers are a combination of firstly, being entertaining and also accessible. The liking principle showed how important it is for followers to enjoy the content that Instagram influencers share with them—whether it is aesthetically appealing or entertaining or relatable and so on. The sheer number of times the word "cute" was mentioned by participants along with references to Instagram influencers' physical attractiveness in comments made by followers is

proof of the influential power of aesthetically pleasing content. This effect is enhanced the more the tastes of followers and influencers match up. Public relations can potentially challenge this finding as not everyone has tastes that line up with "cute" content, but from what we have seen there is a variety of Instagram influencers to meet all kinds of taste and preferences that an audience may have.

Followers want to be able to communicate directly with Instagram influencers, whether it is to ask for advice, to offer it, to share their feelings, or just to let them know how much they enjoy influencers' content. While it is clear that followers do not think they are owed direct communication (in terms of direct messaging) from Instagram influencers, they do however wish to have a way to contact them, even if it is one-sided communication. In fact, followers do not expect that their comments will not be individually answered by influencers but post them in hopes that they will at least be seen by them and their other Instagram followers.

Secondly, followers find themselves persuaded the most when Instagram influencers are trusted and inspirational–either overall or in terms of a specific outfit; the former actually is more prevalent after analyzing our results. Followers expect authentic depictions of influencer lives, obviously aspirational but not completely out of touch or impossible to relate to. If one or two significant traits are shared by followers with their chosen Instagram influencers, e.g. being a mother, being in a similar age bracket, being a student, etc., they are more inclined to trust them and their recommendations. Therefore the unity principle comes into play here too.

There does also need to be an aspirational or authoritative quality however, if Instagram influencers seem too accessible or too easily recreated in terms of lifestyle and following, their influence does not seem to carry as much weight. Followers want to aspire to look and live like Instagram influencers; in a world where they have Rowe (a luxury clothing brand) appointments, hike famous trails like the Appalachian, try trendy wellness techniques like cold plunges, meet Channing Tatum (a popular American celebrity) quote, and buy all the pricy sneaker ("kicks") collaborations released by celebrities. When the lifestyle is aspirational, followers appear to want to get it for themselves somehow—whether it is through emulating an Instagram influencer's general aesthetic, daily activities, or simply by purchasing the things they own and use. This aspirational lifestyle gives them the foundation on which they can base their authority and essentially, make rules that their followers are eager to act on. A balance between being accessible and being aspirational appears to be the ideal for Instagram influencers to showcase, in order to be motivational from the perspective of their followers.

Thirdly, loyalty and consistency with a brand—whether it is the influencers' own or one that pays them to promote—goes a long way with followers. When followers see a consistent presence of a product in Instagram influencer's contents, when the values the Instagram influencer espouses seem consistent, and when the influencer does not seem swayed by multiple brands or merely the prospect of financial gain, they are more likely to see them as persuasive and influential.

To summarize the findings above, followers are influenced by these seven characteristics of Instagram influencers: (1) exertion of authority through authenticity, expertise and trustworthiness, (2) ability to play a motivational role in their lives, (3) provision of social proof and communication tailored to follower interests as would be expected from friends and family, (4) attractiveness, likeability, and the ability to invoke inspiration from followers, (5) their display of shared characteristics or experiences that allows followers to relate to them, unite with them, and also to inspire them, (6) loyalty to brands and values, (7) behaving in a rewarding way toward followers, through depicting truth, providing promo codes, or including links to products they are promoting so that their aesthetic can be replicated to some extent.

The unique impact of this dissertation project is in being able to tell us how and why Instagram influencers are able to impact different publics. We are able to see not only how social media influencers influence followers but gain insight into the consequences of that influence. Publics certainly seem to be listening to social media influencers. This influence effect can be hindered here though in the cases that they do not necessarily trust them. Some of the results from the study, in particular from the qualitative questionnaire are somewhat inconclusive, but the listening aspect is largely unwavering. Even when the price of the promoted product or service is prohibitive or is out of the price range, it is still seen overall as aspirational, something that would improve their lives were they to possess it. Since public relations is all about publics and finding out how best to reach them, then social media influencers definitely deserve a place in public relations literature and practice.

Theoretical Implications.

It is hard to keep up with this world of social media influencing, as every day something new happens in this world/landscape. Andrew Tate, Scandoval on Vanderpump Rules (Warren & Dahir, 2023; McCluskey, 2023). This is an ever changing landscape, TikTok has taken over and a lot of new things have happened including: de-influencing (Moore, 2023), new scandals emerging all the time, and new features being unveiled quite often. Things already changed while I was working on doing research for this dissertation in terms of the influencer landscape, and they will certainly change while I am working on writing it.

Ultimately, public relations literature on media and internet is woefully outdated (Grunig, 2009) when it comes to the role of social media, we need a new framework or foundational work to lay the groundwork for how impactful social media and social media influencers are going to be. At the time the seminal paper called ‘Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalisation’ was written, social media was ‘new’ and it was being grappled with as a new concept (Grunig, 2009). We have since greatly moved on from that, and we need to fully address the social media influencer phenomenon as a paradigm shift in the thinking of both practitioners and researchers.

With $21.1 billion at stake (Geyser, 2023), this kind of research is becoming more valuable to public relations practitioners for certain, but it also has significant theoretical potential to expand current public relations literature. First, in a definitional way—even though surface level research on what social media

influencers are abounds across disciplines, the research on influencer quality and the quality of their following is severely lacking. Secondly, brands who want to spend the aforementioned billions on influencers going forward need a consistent and theoretically backed blueprint to support their decisions to stakeholders and other publics. How will they know which influencer is good to partner with and which one is not unless there is some sort of comprehensive guide in place? This organizational perspective can be the next one addressed now that we have explored the public perspective. Thirdly, this kind of knowledge empowers academic public relations programs in that it can make research more applicable to real world issues. Through conducting studies like this, we can provide public relations graduates with valuable information on social media influencers, information relevant and important to the brands hoping to hire social media influencers—the very same brands that public relations graduates would potentially want to be employed by.

The essential purpose of this research is the furtherance of knowledge. The goal of my dissertation is to get at the role that social media and social media personalities play in people's daily lives, and there is very little language in the current public relations landscape to address that. However, there should be, and we need to make room for it. They are here to stay. To explain the impact of social media, both conventional and long-standing public relations theories have been used but they alone were not enough; we had to borrow from several other areas of study including but not limited to marketing, social psychology, advertising, business communications, etc. (Freberg, 2019) It has gotten to the point where “social media

research has extended past discipline and professional boundaries for research and practice, which has allowed more opportunities for transdisciplinary research and collaborative projects" (Freberg, 2019, p. 100). A group of surveyed public relations practitioners studied by the University of Southern California said they dedicated 83% or upward of their time to social media and that it had become integral to their daily task (Wright & Hinson, 2014, 2015). Social media is changing the landscape of public relations and is exposing the gaps (Macnamara, 2010; Saravanakumar & Suganthalakshmi, 2012) in current public relations literature, and public relations as a discipline needs to adapt both in terms of theory and application. We do not yet have the language in public relations to satisfactorily address the phenomena and influential power of social media influencers.

Practical Implications.

A myriad of potential practical implications exists for this research for Instagram influencers and their potential to persuade publics. We have seen that social media influencers are seen in the light of opinion leaders and tastemakers due to the trustworthiness they exude (Sudnick, 2020). Since a social media influencer is seen as a credible source of information, that credibility could logically carry over to the brands they partner with.

I can clearly recall recent instances where I was influenced directly through an Instagram influencer. I was scrolling through my Instagram late in 2022 and even though I did not follow her, a user named Maura Kent (Maura Kent, n.d.) and her post came up on my feed. In it, she was wearing a bright green strapless dress and had

captioned it “The perfect wedding guest dress” (All The Dresses, n.d., Maura Kent, n.d.). She said the link to purchase the dress was in her Instagram bio. Needless to say I immediately went to her profile, read her bio, found the dress on an Australian apparel vendor’s website, and unfortunately found it was out of stock. If it was not, however, I would definitely have bought it since it was in my budget. Another time in 2022, an Instagram influencer I do follow (Simone Alyssa, n.d.) who posts pictures of herself in affordable clothing finds, posted multiple pictures of herself wearing a workout set and she shared the link to purchase it on Amazon. I went and bought it right away in two separate colors. Recommendations by Instagram influencers can, and usually do, mean big money.

It is true that “since the 1990s, research on influence by both academics and marketing professionals has gained a popular audience as entrepreneurs and businesses have found practical value in it” (Hund, 2019, p. 19). The key word is ‘practical’ here. This dissertation has direct practical implications for brands that are hiring and partnering with social media influencers, and their publics that need to be informed about what could impact their perceptions and crises in the aftermath of social media influencer related crises.

This dissertation can also have applications for organizational knowledge of talent/employee retention, perhaps by looking at parallels between how often social media influencers post and how often organizations reach out to their employees. This research has implications for organizational research but also for learning about the burgeoning new industry of “influencers” and “social media personalities” and

understanding these professions, thereby uncovering a hitherto unexplored area of influencers as a function or an arm of a public relations department or division.

> In order to grow, PR needs to face not only its past but also its complex present. (Brunner, 2019, p. 1.)

A high-ranking professional told Hund in an interview that "traditional PR was a dying breed" (Hund, 2019, p. 25) and while I do not agree, I do think that her research and mine combine to at least show us that traditional public relations needs to expand or embrace new concepts to stay relevant.

Limitations and Future Research.

Even though there are clear limitations to this existing study, there are also clear practical findings, and there are some limitations to this study. The fashion and beauty community on Instagram is heavily focused around female membership with 56.5% of Instagram users in 2022 being female (NapoleonCat, n.d.). As with users of Instagram, female public relations practitioners also skew heavily toward women (Neill and Lee, 2016). Also, for this project, I was not able to capture user demographics. Although case studies are not being used in this proposed project, I hope to use them in the future to supplement findings.

Future researchers could seek funding to circumvent the limitations of this current study. The larger and more varied the pool of social media followers included in this study, the more all-encompassing and widely observable the resulting blueprint will be. The results were interesting to say the least. I mostly interviewed women/college students just because of how the study was set up and I hope to

further this study in the future by looking at other communities on Instagram–perhaps older and post-college–along with influencers in the aftermath of scandals. Social media has the power to "truly revolutionalise public relations—but only if a paradigm shift in the thinking of many practitioners and scholars takes place." (Grunig, 2009, p. 16).

Considerations of price and cost when it comes to purchasing were brought up frequently by the participants–they attributed this to being college students and being limited in terms of their budget. I hope to replicate this study with other groups that are older and do not have the same financial restrictions to see if the influential capability of Instagram influencers is even stronger there.

How do followers react when their trust in an Instagram influencer is breached? This can be seen as a promising area that this research can expand into and one that would be useful to organizations that are looking to use Instagram influencer marketing. After all, Kenza Cosmetics ended up losing public credibility due to the actions of an influencer named Gabbie Hanna (Djafarova and Trifmenko, 2019). Many social media influencers have been in the limelight for breaching trust, called out for failing their followers. This is essentially what constitutes a social media scandal, "a widely publicized set of allegations that damage the reputation of an institution, individual or creed" (Sipe, 2010, para. 10). Recently, Tupa Saravia was condemned for photoshopping clouds into her travel photos making them less genuine and authentic (Jokic, 2020). The pandemic caused a great deal of these breaches: Tana Mongeau and Erika Costell uploaded a video implying they didn't

take the pandemic seriously as they were at a party clearly flouting quarantine rules; Jeffree Star, a beauty influencer released a makeup palette called "Cremated" during the quarantine; and Arielle Charnas went to the Hamptons during the pandemic (Jokic, 2020). I actually included the last one in my qualitative questionnaire, asking participants to put themselves in the shoes of her followers and then react to the scandal.

The Fyre Festival scandal was a huge scandal and along with all the ones mentioned above caused a crack in the facade of perfection, calling into question the whole idea of being an aspirational influencer (Battle, 2022). Some even called it a disaster (Sudnick, 2020).

> While most of the social media influencers involved in the promotion of Fyre Festival deleted their original Instagram posts that fetched upwards of $250,000 for them, transparency between promoter and audience and organization and promoter is one of the major foci integrated marketing communication experts point to for moving forward in social media influencer marketing…organizations need to exhibit transparency when explicating to potential social media influencer promoters what exactly it is they will be sharing with followers and for influencers to clearly state that what their followers are seeing is, in fact, an advertisement (Sudnick, 2020, p. 134)

Essentially, not every influencers' trustworthiness can be taken at face value, "not everyone can be Steve Jobs, some are Billy McFarlands" (Gilmer, 2018, p. 132). This point highlights that social media posts cannot always be authentic and believable, or attributed to experts like Steve Jobs. Sometimes, they are spurious, like in the case of the Fyre Festival hoax. Essentially, because Billy McFarland had a great number of followers, he was able to advertise an enormous music festival without raising suspicion, and a lot of people paid money to attend it but when they arrived were

greeted with desert expanse, no food or water or communication, or anything. Even though Billy McFarland was trusted in the arena of concerts and music festivals, he was shown to be a fraud (Gilmer, 2018), and the sheer number of people that had bought tickets costing up to $10,000 and then showed up, then left high and dry, without performances, without food, cheated out of money and time, constituted a scandal. It was called “UnFyregettable” (Hassan, 2021). Steve Jobs on the other hand was a trusted and true representative of Apple Inc. to the point where people were fighting to write a biography about him (Gladwell, 2011).

In order to look at what constitutes a social media controversy or scandal, we would differentiate it from what is called a ‘crisis’ in public relations literature. Looking to Coombs (2007) a crisis can be defined as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt…operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 164) on a large scale or in a significant way. A scandal could more so be seen as an offshoot, something that affects Instagram influencers and thereby, the organizations that employ them.

There is no literature that I came across specifically defining what a social media scandal looks like when it affects an Instagram influencer and how it is dealt with. However, there is again, very little formal research that I came across looking at what happens when these trusting parasocial relationships are violated by scandal or controversy, especially when this community, prescribed by Charest et al, has been built, at least that accounts for social media influencers. Kendall Jenner, for example, is a model but is also actively posts about modern music and music-centric events

such as Coachella–her fan base, or at least part of it–would therefore see her promoting Fyre Festival as a "common project" (Charest et al, 2016, p. 532) and would be understandably disappointed and angry when their trust in her and the project they associated with her fell through.

When an influencer is associated with some kind of scandal, they, or their team have to be quick to put out a mitigating statement, like the one from the Shein example described earlier (Dani DMC, n.d.) and the apology issued in the aftermath of Scandoval (Jeffrey, 2023; McCluskey, 2023). Otherwise, they risk long-lasting and/or catastrophic damage to their reputation and brand. A major concept we have had to contend with in the course of this project is that of trust, particularly in the face of a breach of trust, or a scandal. There have been innumerable instances of scandals and controversies that test the mettle of public relations practitioners. A particularly high-profile one is the BALCO scandal where Marion Jones, a budding Olympic star was outed by a whistleblower revealing that she used banned supplements, and when she sued for libel, the media called it a public relations stunt (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). To build upon this study, researchers could pose a fourth research question asking how social media influencers are perceived in a controversy.

Conclusion.

Including interviews was ideal while conducting this study; they worked to provide a comprehensive look into how people perceive their own loyalty and connection to Instagram influencers. The interview questions attempt to uncover how Instagram followers self-identify, define their relationship with influencers, how likely they are

to base monetary and lifestyle decisions on influencer recommendations, etc. I am looking to understand how people look to social media influencers to lead by example, sometimes in the way they would normally look to their friends but mostly in the way that they look up to them. Brands can harness this distinctive social proof principle when utilizing social media influencers in their public relations strategy. The nature of the participants following of the Instagram influencers laid out in this project has important implications from the public perspective, which should prompt practitioners to take the quality of follower-influencer relationships into account when making financial and public relations related decisions regarding social media influencers, in addition to the than quantity-oriented indicators of follower-influencer relationships such as follower-count, number of likes, etc. Future answers, along with the ones outlined above have will provide us with extensive and unique insight into followers' experiences with the influencer marketing world, guiding participants to think more about how they identify themselves, and what their opinion is regarding the kinds of influencers they are likely to dedicate themselves to versus casually follow and engage with their content–all useful information for public relations practitioners and brands hoping to partner with Instagram influencers for product promotion and public relations purposes.

Appendices

Appendix A: Qualitative Questionnaire

1. Which social media platforms are you a member of/user of? Check all that apply.
    - Instagram
    - Facebook
    - Twitter
    - LinkedIn
    - Snapchat
    - TikTok
    - YouTube
    - Other(s) _____
1. Which social media platforms do you use the most? Check all that apply.
    - Instagram
    - Facebook
    - Twitter
    - LinkedIn
    - Snapchat
    - TikTok
    - YouTube
    - Other(s) _____

2. What is your social media handle?
3. What is your Instagram handle?
4. How often would you say you use Instagram? Pick the option that is closest/most accurate.
    a. I do not use Instagram
    b. I can't recall the last time
    c. Once a month
    d. Once a week
    e. A few times a week/when I have free time
    f. Once a day
    g. Several times a day
    h. Obsessively
5. How interested are you in social media in general? Describe.

RQ1: What is a social media influencer in the public relations context?

6. What is a social media influencer to you?
7. What, to you, is the difference between a social media influencer and a celebrity?
8. What does it mean to be influential on social media?

RQ2: What roles do social media influencers fulfill in the public relations context?

9. What role do social media influencers play in your life? (Aspirational? Friends?)
10. Does Instagram play a role in your life? If so, could you elaborate?

11. What social media influencers do you interact with the most?
12. Why do you interact with this influencer the most?

RQ3: How, if at all, do social media influencers hinder/facilitate social influence?

13. How important to you is the organization that is associated with the social media influencer?
14. What organizations do you think are trustworthy and do you think associated social media influencers (that you like) have anything to do with it?

RQ4: How do social media influencers extend the public relations function of organizations?

15. Have you bought products from an organization on the basis of them being sponsored or promoted by a social media personality?
16. If so, can you elaborate.
    a) Why did you buy the product?
    b) How much was the decision to purchase based on the influencer recommendation/sponsorship?

RQ5: How are social media influencers perceived in a controversy?

17. Have you ever followed or liked something an influencer has posted to express support to the organization they are sponsored by?
18. Here is a real-world example, please detail how you would feel and act in response to the following: you have been following Arielle Charnas (a fashion influencer with a huge following on Instagram) for over a few months. You enjoy her content. She is embroiled in the following controversy (linked:

https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/04/influencers-coronavirus-arielle-charnas-escape-new-york). How would you feel in the aftermath of this incident and the media coverage?

19. What organizations do you think are trustworthy and how much do you think their associated social media influencers have to do with it?
20. How often do you like sponsored content that is posted on social media influencers' Instagram pages?
21. How often do you comment on sponsored content that is posted on social media influencers' Instagram pages?
22. In what scenario would you, or have you, directly send messages to social media influencers over Instagram?
23. In what scenario would you block a social media influencer posting sponsored content?
24. What are your feelings about organizations sponsoring content on social media influencers' profiles?
25. Are you interested in taking part a further interview? We have reached the end of this questionnaire. If you have an interest in this topic or feel that you have more to say in addition to your answers above, please select yes or no below. You will be reimbursed for taking the time to do the interview but please make sure you have an Instagram account, use it regularly, and are interested in having a conversation about social media influencers and their associated organizations.

a. Yes, please contact me

b. No, I am no longer interested in speaking about social media influencers and their associated organizations

26. Is there anyone else you can refer to this study? Make sure they attend the University of Maryland and can use the SONA system.

    a. Yes

    b. No

Thank you for your time!

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

RQ1: What is a social media influencer in the public relations context?

Instagram

- Tell me about the time you spend on Instagram.
    - How important a part of your daily life is it?
    - How often would you say to visit Instagram?
    - How many social media influencers do you follow?
        - Can you talk about that number in relation to the acquaintances/family/friends you follow on Instagram?

RQ2: What roles do social media influencers fulfill in the public relations context?

RQ3: How, if at all, do social media influencers hinder/facilitate social influence?

RQ5: How are social media influencers perceived in a controversy?

Influencers

- Tell me about the social media influencer you interact with/are interested in the most.
    - What is their Instagram handle?
    - Describe their profile.
    - How long would you say you have been following them?
    - How often do you interact with their profile? Please describe.
    - What kind of things do they usually post?
    - What have you bought on their recommendation/endorsement?
    - Are they associated with an organization?
        - Tell me about this organization?
        - How did you become aware of their relationship with this organization?
    - What post of theirs do you remember liking or interacting with most recently?
        - What about it appealed to you?
        - Was it sponsored?
    - What would have to happen for you to unfollow this influencer?
    - What makes an influencer seem authentic vs inauthentic to you?
    - What products or services have you been tempted to buy as a result of influencer partnership/sponsorship?
    - Have you ever lost trust in an influencer? If so, please describe the situation or incident.

RQ4: How do social media influencers extend the public relations function of organizations?

Organization

- Describe your ideal relationship with an organization.

- Describe your ideal social media interaction with an influencer.
- Do you generally trust organizations that appear in multiple Instagram influencer posts? (by multiple, I mean three or more)
- Are you likely to buy products or services from an organization if they are reviewed/sponsored by Instagram influencers?

Closing

- Is there anything you would like to add about your relationship with Instagram, influencers, or organizations that you think would be important for me to know?

Appendix C: Recruitment materials

Qualitative Questionnaire SONA Recruitment Script – PI (Neha Kamran)

Hello,

I am working on a research project about interacting with social media influencers on Instagram and I need your help.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this project. In order to complete the project, I need to talk to users of social media platforms such as yourselves, who can speak to the roles that they play in your lives or in your purchase decisions and perceptions of organizations.

The questionnaire will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete and can be used to earn SONA credit for your classes. If you would like to participate in or learn more about this research project, please e-mail me at nkamran@umd.edu or sign up for the study at https://umcommunication.sona-systems.com/.

Thank you and regards,

Neha Kamran
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
Skinner Building
4300 Chapel Lane
College Park, MD 20742
nkamran@umd.edu
347-833-7839

Qualitative Questionnaire E-Mail Script – PI (Neha Kamran)

Hello _____,

I am working on a research project about interacting with social media influencers on Instagram and I need your help.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this project. In order to complete the project, I need to talk to users of social media platforms such as yourselves, who can speak to the roles that they play in your lives or in your purchase decisions and perceptions of organizations.

The questionnaire will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete and can be used to earn SONA credit for your classes. If you would like to participate in or learn more about this research project, please e-mail me at nkamran@umd.edu or sign up for the study at https://umcommunication.sona-systems.com/.

Thank you and regards,

Neha Kamran
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347-833-7839

In-depth Interview Script – PI (Neha Kamran)

Hello _____,

Thank you so much for expressing interest in my project!

I am writing to you because you completed my qualitative questionnaire and indicated you would like to have a more in-depth conversation about our shared interest - social media influencing!

If you are still interested, the interviews will last for approximately 45 minutes to an hour and would be scheduled at your convenience over Zoom or a comparable platform of your choice. All interview participants will be compensated in the amount of a $20 VISA gift card and be entered in a raffle to win a pair of Apple AirPods.

Please reply to this email me to let with know if you still wish to participate, and also with any questions or concerns.

Thank you again, and regards,

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