

When the Self Sells:
An Ethnographic Study of Instagram Influencers and
Their Place in the Contemporary Digital and Affective
Economy

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INTRODUCTION

This research began with a simple inquiry: who is an Influencer and *what do they do?* Influencer is a broad term, but it is often used to refer to young women who promote products and services to their audiences on social media, and most commonly on the app and platform Instagram. Instagram, which first emerged in 2010, is both a popular forum for social connection and an important market within an emergent digital economy. Targeted advertising, sponsored posts, and the purchase of followers and likes are woven into the fabric of social media, and the highly visual nature of Instagram has proven as alluring to corporations as to the young people they seek to engage. Influencers can have hundreds of thousands of followers, not always on the basis of talent or skills external to Instagram, but as a direct result of their ability to create content that their followers admire and envy, and that corporate sponsors think adequately represent their brand. Research on social media users with over 100,000 followers has suggested that “they imagined their audience as a fan base or community with whom they could connect or manage” (Marwick and Boyd 2011, 120).

While it might appear easy to define an influencer using a numerical metric (i.e., someone with over 100,000 followers or someone who gets 5,000 likes on their photo), in practice, the category is vague and reliant on a number of factors including following, brand endorsement, engagement from their followers, and even their “claim to fame,” which is the moment in which they go from being a regular social media user, to a corporately sponsored and publicly popular Influencer (which is usually – though not always – related to their increased number of followers and a few very popular posts). Influencers continually cater their social media content in line with the expectations and desires of their audiences (both followers and corporate sponsors), as their incomes are dependent on a dynamic, malleable, and yet “authentic”

display of themselves through images and text. This points to one of the most essential aspects of an Influencer's work: the production of authenticity through an adequate display of "realness." When produced successfully, authenticity blends desire and intimacy into a hybrid commodity-image composed of components of the influencer's private life (Davenport, 2020).

Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews with college students and social media professionalsⁱ, my thesis examines the complex, demanding, and often gendered work of Instagram influencers. By analyzing the experiences of individuals with different perspectives and roles in the production of Instagram fame and influence (followers, commercial sponsors, influencers, and those who teach others how to be influential), I hope to offer a holistic approach to understanding this emergent and changing career path. My study therefore attends to influence as an economic and affective phenomenon. From an economic perspective, I will explore the logic of payments for sponsored posts, the processes of creating and signing contracts, and the roles of the teams of employees who often work in the background of the micro-celebrities they support. To get at the affect of influence, I will examine ideas about performativity, authenticity, and underlying tensions that exist between an influencer and their followers.

My thesis explores these questions in relation to anthropological scholarship on digital worlds, economic anthropological research, and scholarship on the commodification of intimacy. I argue that emergent cultural norms continue to redefine economies of influence and what it means to be an Instagram influencer, directly impacting the young women that occupy these professional roles, and as a result, the young women that follow them on social platforms. As I will explore, the permeation of Instagram and social media into the worlds of marketing, advertising and commerce are troubling the distinctions between real and artificial, public and private, self and sponsor, rendering Instagram both a digital and affective economy.

Methods

Anthropology, and more specifically ethnography, is methodologically distinctive. Rather than trying to create distance or distinction between the researcher and research subject (as with cognitive psychology), the cultural anthropologist instead finds themselves embedded in a complexly social world that involves both themselves and their interlocutors. This relationship is a crucial point of inquiry for the ethnographer and is a distinctive aspect of anthropological research. For this reason, as an ethnographer, I draw on my own experiences as an Instagram user. Like many other young women, I have developed an embodied understanding of the nuances of creating and posting content for social media. And, like many of my research subjects, I spend hours each day posting stories, leaving comments, and sending funny videos to my friends via DM (direct message). In this sense, I am studying a cultural environment that I belong to and identify with, but in other ways am, I am very removed from. My interactions on Instagram are not unrelated to the logic of influence that I explore in this thesis, but I do not have the insider knowledge or experience of the Influencers whom I study. One important difference between Influencers and ordinary users is that for Influencers, Instagram is always also a source of income and a workplace.

Instagram has only been around for eleven years. For many users, especially young users, learning the appropriate code of conduct on a public platform has left little room for error. This past summer I studied the repercussions of these errors when committed by Instagram influencers in the midst of a global pandemic (Davenport, 2020). In this thesis, I am interested in how these inexplicit (although shared and applied across the platform relatively unanimously) rules come to be understood, followed, and reproduced. How do users, particularly those deemed

popular and influential, figure out the key to success, and what sets them apart from other social media users? Additionally, how are non-influential social media users and corporate sponsors an integral part of their success (or failure)?

I conducted in-person ethnographic interviews with college students in the Denver-Boulder Metro area that were between the ages of 18 and 24. Additionally, I conducted an in-person interview with a best-selling author while attending an event at a university about social media success and influence. My interviewee was a guest speaker at this event. The remaining interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, because of the virtual nature of these interviews, I was able to speak with influencers and a small business owner outside of the Denver-Boulder Metro area, and my interlocutors all live in different parts of the continental United States. The interviews ranged from 50-75 minutes in length, all of which were recorded and transcribed. The interview questions varied depending on the participant, and their role in this digital economy. However, they all were more or less centered around social media use, financial compensation and contractual obligations, interactions with their followers and/or Influencers they follow, and what it means for someone to be an Instagram Influencer.

For the interviews with college students, I advertised my research on Instagram and then relied on word of mouth/snowball sampling to be connected to additional college students who use Instagram that are outside of my social circle. For the interviews with the Influencers, the author and the small business owner, I contacted Influencers that I was familiar with, including one reality TV star, as well as Influencers that these individuals followed. I did not discriminate based on Instagram following, and the Influencer's followings range from 22,500 followers to 995,000 followers. While I contacted Influencers from different states with differing ethnic/racial

backgrounds and sexual inclinations, my interviews reflect those that responded to my direct messages and emails. My interview sample included 21 women, 3 men, and 2 non-binary/gender non-conforming individuals.

I recognize that my sample appears to be disproportionate with regards to gender, however, as of a 2019 study 84% of Instagram Influencers are women, and in 2021 women aged 18-24 occupy about a third of individuals on Instagram worldwide. My research focuses on the experiences of women, specifically young women, that occupy the role of Instagram Influencers, and therefore it would make sense for a majority of my interlocutors to be women themselves. Additionally, young women are routinely subject to scrutiny and judgement when it comes to physical appearance and this is only heightened on a predominantly visual platform like Instagram. This means that the experiences of women/femmes on social media platforms are distinct from the experiences of men and, indeed, the deeply gendered nature of social media is one of the questions I explore in my research. In addition to ethnographic interviews, I conducted participant observation by watching (from my own account) what my interlocutors publicly posted on their feed and on their stories and took these into account when conducting my interviews and analysis.

Literature

My analysis of Instagram not only as a site for interaction and self-representation but as a capitalist marketplace and increasingly entrepreneurial landscape builds on scholarship in cultural and economic anthropology, sociology, affect theory, and social psychology. Throughout this thesis I am to answer the following questions: How does someone become an

Instagram Influencer, and who all is involved in the process? What labor, both tangible and affective, is required in order to become and remain a successful Influencer? What are common social attitudes towards the young women that are Influencers, and what impact do these impressions and judgments have on their personal and professional lives? How do different social media users define the roles and social responsibilities of an Influencer, and how do matters of popularity, skill and expertise apply to the ability to influence? My research is not based on the understanding that Instagram and social media are worlds of their own, but instead a part of contemporary social worlds. I see connections between interactions and relationships in online spaces as being connected to and a part of face-to-face interactions, shared affective experiences, and a digital economy with very tangible effects. My goal is to combine these various elements in a thought-provoking new way.

Following Erving Goffman, my research examines online interactions as an extension of sociality, and a “way in which the world’s work gets done,” (Goffman, 1976: 74). In this thesis I use Goffman’s concept of “face work” to analyze how Influencers represent themselves on their social media platforms, and how their success and popularity is dependent on the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the persons with whom they are interacting (their followers) (Goffman, 1967). Goffman’s work on interaction rituals has inspired scholars like me, interested in the intersection of performance, presentation, emotions and affect. When identities are digital and authenticity is in flux, how do we know who people *really* are, particularly when they have some degree of celebrity status?

The expression and manipulation of emotions and affects are central to my thesis, and my research follows a long line of cultural anthropologists and social theorists interested in affect, both on the ground and in digital spaces. In *The Biopolitics of Beauty: Cosmetic Citizenship and*

Affective Capital in Brazil Jarrín wrote, “I see beauty neither as a straightforward form of oppression nor as an expressive act of liberation, because to reduce it to one or the other would be to miss how beauty produces an affective economy *between* bodies,” (78). This proves to be a useful way of thinking about beauty and aesthetic value with regards to Instagram influencers, and as young women participating on this visual platform that is directly linked to the US capitalist economy. It is this “sensory interface” that takes place “between subjects” that makes the use of affect theory so vital to my work.

Richard and Rudnykyj (2009) used ethnography to look at the labor and production in neoliberal systems, with “Economies of Affect” looking to analyze “the way in which affect is mobilized to produce subjects in the context of neoliberal transformations,” (57). Richard and Rudnychyj introduced the term economies of affect so as to address “The connection between economic transformations and affective transactions,” which can help explain the felt connections and relationships that are so vital to an Influencer’s professional success (58). “Affect does not circulate from one sovereign subject to another. Rather, an economy of affect forms a milieu in which subjects find themselves enmeshed,” in other words, something that is less reproduced by people, but that people are involved and enmeshed within (73).

If affect illuminates one aspect of my research, it is that the boundary between “virtual” and “real” is blurry, ambiguous, and increasingly irrelevant. Digital anthropologists have been interested in challenging assumptions about this supposed binary between the real and the virtual and challenged the essentialist notions of geographically bound cultures (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Boyer, 2012). Storytelling, as compelling online as in “real life” contributes to the production and reproduction of shared affective experiences, as well as demonstrates the appearance of realness and authenticity for Instagram users (Chayko, 2008). Wilson and Peterson (2002)

suggests that ethnographers regard mediated identities under a contextual basis, where one's identity on social media falls within the greater context of their overall identity, suggesting that rather than approach it as a strict dichotomy of a real versus virtual identity, the researcher should instead regard them as situational cases of the same identity.

In an effort to bring together scholarship in economic anthropology, digital anthropology, sociology, and affect theory, my thesis offers a theoretical framework that is both interdisciplinary and anthropologically grounded. Drawing on my ethnographic research and the scholarly literature addressed above, my thesis offers a portrait of how Influencers become successful, maintain beneficial relationships with their followers/corporate sponsors, and what goes into effective portrayal of authenticity and “realness” on the social media platform, Instagram.

PART I: WHAT IS AN INFLUENCER?

“It’s digital advertising with a heart, I guess.”

Depending on who you ask, there are endless possibilities for how to define an Instagram Influencer. Is it dependent on the number of followers and likes? Probably not, considering that athletes, musicians, actors and other celebrities may have hundreds of thousands if not millions of followers, and would not fit under the category of Influencer. Does it have to do with popularity and likability? Again, this question is complicated, because while Influencer may receive thousands of “likes” on their post, the comment section may also be filled with ridicule, hate, and offensive behavior. So, what makes an Influencer? Instagram Influencers occupy many social niches, whether they are a 21st century mommy-blogger, a wellness blogger and online

work-out expert, or someone focused on #bodypositivity, self-love and mental health. Some Influencers even reject the label, calling it a “dirty word” and associating it with superficiality or commercialism that they want to distance themselves from (but still honor their contract with this new line of vitamins that you just *have* to try!).

Jane, a college student in Boulder, Colorado associated Influencers with this sense of superficiality and image curation, describing them as:

[A person] who uses a particular social media platform to gain public recognition by means of idealized public portrayal of the self.

Digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin proposed a more nuanced definition, defining social media Influencers as “a contemporary incarnation of Internet celebrity for whom microcelebrity is not merely a hobby or a supplementary income but an established career with its own ecology and economy,” (2017: 1). So, why do brands work with and hire these micro-celebrities? Elena, a small-business owner with her own fashion line (who is a 22-year-old entrepreneur and designer) noted:

Influencers engage with people, [they’re] the person [people] look at, they give off the vibe “I want to know what products they’re using or what clothes they’re wearing.” Someone that isn’t “above” you but inspirational.

Elena finds that Influencer-marketing is the most effective way to market her products, and that it takes skill to recognize which Influencers will be profitable to work with, and which opportunities to pass up (even if the Influencer has hundreds of thousands of followers). This kind of digital marketing works under the assumption that when women want to “be that girl” they just might want to buy that bag, adding a personal element to standard modes of advertising, because instead of a Google Ad telling you a purse that you might be interested in based on your

search history (and several additional variables), this is a woman that you chose to follow, for one reason or another, wearing something that you, too, could own.

Influencers also draw distinctions between what they do and the work of other influencers. For example, Diana, a fitness blogger turned “honest and vulnerable lifestyle influencer” (meaning she posts most aspects of her lifestyle: her clothes, diet, pets, boyfriend, hairstyle fails and interior design hacks) has over 150,000 followers, and she takes her job as an Influencer (and the power that comes with it) very seriously.

I take my job very seriously [...] at the end of the day I do realize it has an impact, and it matters. I think being a creator you know how hard you work, and you know how much you care, but you blow yourself off [and think], ‘Oh, I’m just an Influencer.’ but then, they’re not all created equal. The way everyone does their job isn’t the same [so] I always want to do my job with excellence and care, and with [...] morals and opinions that I can stand up for years later.

Rather than shying away from the title of Influencer, she is open about the monetary aspect of her work and finds it akin to digital advertising, “digital advertising with a heart, I guess.” I found her frank and open attitude not only present on her Instagram stories and podcast, but in our interview together, and it was unsurprising that many of her followers have reached out with statements like “I think we would be friends in real life!” For many people, Diana’s ability to project charisma might seem to be the basis for her success as an influencer. However, Diana explained that her work is not just about likability, but responsibility. She told me that her sense of responsibility led her to use her platform to engage in conversations about social issues including the COVID-19 pandemic, voting, and Black Lives Matter. While some Instagram users might think that it is not an Influencer’s job to weigh in on political discourse, Diana’s audience felt quite the opposite:

I found it really interesting that my most compelling content, the content that people have most connected with [...] most commented on, most enjoyed, was like, the election, politics, and social issues. More than anything else this year. I took a quote-unquote risk to talk really frankly about everything, and not mince words but [...] who you should vote for, what you should stand against [...] I'm really interested in how that has become so important to people and that they said [not talking about social issues] was their biggest pet peeve about Influencers.

Diana's insight works at complicating the boundaries between the virtual and the real, and the supposed superficiality of Influencers' work, seeing as they now intertwine the commercial and the marketable, including their own mediated representations of themselves, with the social, the political, and the "real." It is not enough for her followers to look to an Instagram for fashion advice, or work-out routines, but they want to know that the person they're following is in-line with their own moral and political values. The Influencer is much more than "just a pretty face" and her appeal is based on more than her outward appearance. Seeing as the Influencer's brand is their online identity and the mediated versions of themselves, consumers are able to demand more access to who these women are and what they stand for, seeing as the relationships between an Influencer and their followers operate within the greater framework of a digital capitalist marketplace. This unique affective economy produces a system where an Influencers identity and an Influencers brand are synonymous. Diana talked about herself as a brand, explaining how she fosters an atmosphere of trust and sociality among her followers:

My brand ethos is trying to encourage people to be themselves. A lot of Influencers try and make people want to be like them, it's like this cult-of-personality thing, and I like, I don't want people to be me I want people to want to be my friend. That is at the base of everything I do, that at the base of things they can be themselves, and that my content encourages them to be themselves. Not only that but that they can come to me with problems or they can trust me with a product recommendation.

Not only do social media content creators promote products and reveal their beauty routines or grocery shopping lists, but they need to actively work at maintaining relationships with thousands of people that they may have never seen or spoken to before. For lifestyle influencers like Diana, this job is not only about product promotion, but about shared experiences, feelings, and community, a community based on her insights, opinions, and sentiments, which are her responsibility to disclose and withhold.

Creating Openness

The influencers I interviewed often spoke about how they thought about creating boundaries between what they would or would not share with their followers. More than once, an influencer exclaimed: “I’m an open book!” I took this to mean that it was important to them to communicate that they are transparent and “open” with their followers, allowing them to see an “honest” representation of what their life is like.. However, as we know from scholars like Erving Goffman and Annette Markham, there is no one-true-self, and the online self, whether you have 100 followers or 1 million, is crafted according to the situation and setting. Just like I might be my honest and “real” self when speaking to my professors and when speaking to my friends, the topics of conversation and how much personal information I share would vary between these two groups and settings. So, what does it really mean for an influencer to describe themselves as an “open book”? And how important is it for an influencer to foster a sense of transparency and openness in order to achieve social media success?

Jessica, a reality TV star turned influencer, rose to social media stardom rapidly. She explained that her following grew from 8,000 to 1 million followers in a span of four months. Jessica’s “claim to fame” was grounded in her appearance on a TV show, however, once

established, she described navigating challenges similar to what I had heard from other influencers. Jessica described herself as an open book, someone who, by nature of having been on reality TV and a series of invasive interviews after the show, felt that as a result, much of her life and information was already accessible to her followers.

What you see is what you get with me and I've taken that and I've turned that and put that into my social media and that's where I'm kind of like, my manager talks about [that] a lot.

However, she was also attentive to the need to present herself as having a multifaceted personality with many interests and hobbies:

I want to be able to share experiences. I want to be able to share my life. I'll be able to share anxiety, depression, hard [days] good [days] my plants, my dogs, you know I want to be able to do everything. I want to be able to post plants one day, and then the next day post in a Bikini and a fire ass outfit or, you know, and look I want be able to do all of those things.

The other influencer who described herself as an open book was Layla, a self-described body acceptance and self-love advocate with a following of over 280,000. Layla told me that she had “always had an interest in building an online business.” Her openness, she explained, derives from content focused on her own vulnerability and personal self-love journey:

I've always been an open book so sharing comes naturally to me. The #1 core value of [my brand] is connection and I firmly believe that vulnerability breeds connection. So I open up about my life in hopes that it helps someone else can relate and feel less alone in theirs. I 100% believe that authenticity is important. I mean, you can lie and cheat your way up to the top, but it's going to feel pretty lonely when you get there and you probably won't last up there very long.

However, while she has a large following and dynamic online presence, Layla remains unsure whether being labeled an “Instagram influencer” will ultimately help or hurt her career:

I think a lot of people assume Influencers don't do anything besides post selfies with teeth whitener (...) But now I'm starting to embrace it more because there's truly nothing wrong with that. All the influencers I know work around the clock, giving away a lot of time, energy, and emotional labor for free 99% of the time (...) However, I still don't use that word to describe what I do because sponsorships are not my main source of work.

As a researcher and social media user myself, I was surprised to hear this, given how well interested in Layla seems to fit the mold of Instagram Influencer, specifically in the niche focused on body image and acceptance, social media's equivalent of a self-help book. Rather than turning the pages of standardized advice, Instagram users now can go through their own "self-image journey" alongside someone who is narrating the highs and lows of their experiences. This niche, most popular with young women, often includes unedited photographs (labeled as such), discussion about weight gain, body hair, sex/pleasure and menstruation. Layla's corporate sponsorships, while not her main source of income, include reusable menstrual cups and essential oils. Many Influencers who work within this body acceptance or #bodypositivity space describe themselves as eating disorder survivors, and create content that is explicitly directed to a community of women who are assumed to have had similar experiences.

Brigid, an influencer with 23,000 followers had a hard time labeling herself an Influencer for different reasons. Her concerns are not about struggling to claim the identity of being an Influencer, but instead, that she was unsure of the exact job description for this emergent profession.

I mean, I guess, I have somewhat of an influence, but I wouldn't call myself like an Influencer and, like, I guess, I was going to say in the traditional sense but it's so like it's such a non-traditional like type of thing now because it's so still so new [...] when you have like a regular like scheduled like, 'Okay I'm going to post this on this month,' and it's like a, you know, continuous stream of like advertised content, then I feel like that's when [...] you're an Influencer.

As highlighted by Brigid, the novelty of this profession can be linked to feelings of confusion and tension about using the label of “Influencer.” Well known for her hair-care content, Brigid occupies a very specific niche on Instagram: curly haired women. Hundreds of thousands of women with curly hair use social media to swap ideas, compare product applications, and discuss drying techniques with other curly-haired users. This group represents itself as a somewhat countercultural internet community, pointing out that many curly-haired women do not find role models or advice on television or magazines. Instagram, by contrast, allows these women to seek out, support, and advise one another. While hair care and beauty are often dismissed as superficial concerns, Brigid described the complex labor involved:

I almost DM every single person that DMs me [...] I listen to all of [...] for lack of a better word, symptoms their hair is exhibiting. And then you know be like ‘Okay, this is my diagnosis,’ if they do follow me I do take time to read all of them. I get so many of them a day but it's hard to keep up with all of them, and people will literally send me paragraphs upon paragraphs so that's like also another thing.

Brigid discusses a form of labor (which may vary depending on the niche that the Influencer works within) that goes unpaid, unsponsored, and often (publicly) unnoticed. However, she sees this time, attention and care as crucial in fostering a relationship between Influencer and followers. These relationships are crucial for ensuring future success, including engagement with posts, stories, and, potentially, purchasing a product that the Influencer promotes due to the underlying trust that they have established. However, it would be an oversimplification to say that Influencers put all of this thought and time into their relationships with their followers simply for popularity or financial gain, at least (as Brigid argues) within the curly-hair Instagram community:

The Internet is such, like, a cesspool sometimes of just like negativity and like just you know hate so it's really comforting to find like a community where, like, it feels like everybody is so positive and like want to help each other.

While the community she influences might be a beacon of hope for her and other participants, Brigid is not alone in her assessment of Instagram as a “cesspool of negativity.” Influencers often encounter by the dark side of social media directly in the form of abusive comments and DMs, but those who follow influencers often also have mixed feelings their social media usage, and at times, these feelings are projected onto Influencers they follow. Mitch, an author and presenter at a small social media convention I attended, shared a negative view of social media, in spite of all of the success it has given him:

The initial promise of social media was a beautiful thing, because a lot of people don't feel connected, and social media allowed them to become connected. For me, social media has been very positive for my business because it *is* my business, right, I've made money teaching, training, writing books about all that. However, (...) this is what pains me to say (...) if you were to take a scale and weigh the positive and negative effects of social media, for our society and our culture, we are at a net loss.

While Mitch is a public speaker and author on the art of being an social media influencer, he has only slightly over 15,000 Instagram followers and no sponsored content, so for many people, he would not be considered a professional influencer. While Mitch has gained experience and financial benefit from his use and mastery of social media, as a man in his forties who does not partner with brands but instead advises them, his perspective is different from the young women that I spoke with, who not only work with brands but see themselves and their media identities as brands in their own right.

Annabelle, a college student at the University of Colorado Boulder, described her feelings towards viewing social media profiles of Influencers, and the negativity she often experiences.

If I'm comparing myself either to friends or like Instagram famous people or Influencers, that can be negative, and even though everyone can say and knows it's perfectly curated, when you're looking at photos there is a disconnect [between what is real and what is curated].

The disconnect that Annabelle noted, between the curated and the “real,” seems to be a vital point of inquiry for understanding the nuanced labor of Instagram Influencers, and understanding how the boundaries between private and personal life are at stake when trying to foster meaningful (or at least meaningful enough) relationships with thousands of strangers on the internet.

A non-Instagram user unfamiliar with this digital affective economy might wonder what encourages people to interact and engage with people who are not famous outside of social media. What is the appeal to following these seemingly unexceptional people, and helping them gain popularity by then liking, commenting on, and sharing their posts? This unique sort of relationship between Instagram Influencers and the ordinary Instagram users that follow them can be analyzed as a kind of “cruel optimism,” which can involve, “thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition”—in this case, ordinary users seek the unlikely but seemingly attainable recognition offered by an exchange of likes or even a follow on Instagram from a micro-celebrity (Berlant, 2001: 43). Cruel optimism is a useful analytic tool for this seemingly un-reciprocal relationship because it identifies the proximity to the “the good life” that can be felt by ordinary users when they interact with an Influencer’s post.

In the continual process of interacting with an Influencer’s posts (following, liking them, and commenting on them) there is a possibility that one could learn how to imitate this person’s appearance, lifestyle, or public image, a kind of a depiction of the “good life.” However, the chances of this are very slim, and even Influencers themselves sometimes admit to being worn

out or not always experiencing the “goodness” of life. Instead, they curate content for their followers that may not be an exact depiction of the events in their lives or the emotions they feel, even as they see themselves as “open books.”. In this way, the affective attachment that is formed by following an Influencer may actually harm the Instagram user, which could be understood as an attachment to a problematic desire, soliciting negative feelings from the follower about their own life, or at least that the life of the Influencer is never quite attainable.

Influencers, particularly when willing to share not only their physical appearance but their home, their relationships, their pets and their hobbies, offer for their followers a very specific object of desire or “cluster of promises” (Berlant, 23). It is this “cluster” that allows the Influencer to be simultaneously a tool for digital advertising and at the same time, distance themselves from mainstream marketing, creating a cluster of “good life” which their followers envy, desire, or actively pursue by looking to the Influencer as not only a fashion or beauty icon, but as a blueprint for how and who to be.

Similarly, Kate Crawford has argued that social media platforms are collective spaces where users present ideal representations of themselves and “simultaneously creating a gap between this ideal and what is humanly manageable,” (2009: 526). I would suggest that a successful Influencer knows how to create an appealing “cluster of promises” within this exact gap between the ideal and the possible, creating a persona, and a lifestyle, that is idyllic, convincing, and just far enough out of reach to keep followers engaged, interested, and actively desiring some aspect of the Influencer’s beauty, success, or lifestyle, yet all the while still wanting to be her friend.

PART II: KEEPING IT REAL - AUTHENTICITY & PERFORMANCE

Social media scholar Alice Marwick has described the value of authenticity, or at least producing a convincing performance of authenticity, when it comes to online Influencer success.

Becoming a micro-celebrity requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being ‘authentic.’ Authenticity in this context is a quality that takes many forms, from direct interaction with admirers to the public discussion of deeply personal information, and it is tenuous at best (Marwick, 2013; 115).

In this instance, where the labels “micro-celebrity” and “Influencer” are synonymous, non-Instagram users might wonder what brings certain people celebrity-status and success, while others who try never succeed at becoming an Influencer. I have found that authenticity plays a role in this distinction. Crawford discusses the development of “ambient intimacy” via social media between social media users, and I have found that this ambient intimacy can be extended to the relationship between an Influencer and their followers, a shared affective experience where social media users feel an intimate connection (akin to friendship) with people that they have never met outside of Instagram (Crawford, 2009: 528). However, much like friendship in the “real world,” these relationships are contingent on trust and a certain degree of openness and transparency, making it vital for the Influencers to not only effectively market a product, but to reveal enough about “who they really are” in order to establish trust with their followers and appear to be real and authentic.

Annette Markham conducted research with internet users about their online representations, their perceptions of what is “real,” and their experiences creating and maintaining friendships and relationships with other people online (Markham, 1998). Markham found that when users were posed with the question of what is really *real*, she was struck by their answers, “To my surprise, these users told me this question was of little relevance to them; rather

everything that is experienced is real. Notions of reality are shifting [...]” (Markham, 1998: 20).

While Markham’s internet research was conducted before Instagram, her description of the boundary between online and real resonates today in that the actions of Instagram users while on the app (posting photos and videos, liking, commenting, and deleting content that did not receive the desired reaction) are inextricably linked to the real world, and their experiences both on and offline. For this reason, Instagram users (ordinary or influential) often find it easy to identify when someone else not being authentic in their online behaviors. For instance, Jessica, the reality TV star and overnight Instagram success who prides herself on being an open book, spoke about other Influencers and why it is so important for her to appear real to her followers:

Looking at other people's social media I'm like, ‘Oh my God, you can tell she's just so fake’ like you know, like very scripted on their stories when they're trying to sell things. Like [in] an ad it's like very like, you know they're reading off a script or things like that, like I don't ever want to be that, you know (...) even with my [partnership with] Savage X Fenty I've tried to switch [the content] up a little bit because it kind of feels to me like I'm reading a script sometimes and I don't ever want people to think it's like that.

However, “reading a script” is often part of the contract agreements between Influencers and their corporate sponsors. When I spoke with Elena, founder and CEO of a small fashion brand in Colorado that frequently works with Influencers to advertise her designs on social media, she explained the ins and outs of contract negotiation and agreement:

[A contract] will be the girl that I booked, the post or story, if I chose a date [of the content posting] they’ll put that on there, any certain quotes that I want them to say I’ll put that in there, and then I’ll just like sign it (...) At the beginning, I was saying like, “Can you say ‘Made in Italy’” or can you say this-and-that, but it came off as really unnatural for the girl, like it came off as an ad, and I really like when she’s just posting her outfit and just tags [my brand], it’s super natural and it’s not like in your face.

Curly-girl influencer Brigid explained the same process from the other side of the contract, highlighting how while details might differ, these exchanges appear to have some degree of standardization, as with codes of conduct in any other line of work:

I have to send over a caption they have to approve it, and everything, and you know they'll tweet things like what hashtags do they want in it, what do I, what do they want me to say about said product or whatever (...) So, then, we just go from there, we pick a set date, and then I just post it down to like the minute too, they'll be like, 'You have to post it at this hour.

So, while brands and corporate sponsors may have specifications for what it said in a sponsored post or advertisement, neither the Influencer nor the company wants it to appear that way, and instead, opt for a more “natural” or authentic representation of product promotion. This is what makes Influencer marketing different from other forms of digital advertising and product endorsements. The brands rely on the relationship of trust and authenticity between the Influencer and their followers in order to effectively market and sell their products. This makes it seem like instead of being advertised to by a company or corporation, this product was recommended to you by a trusted (albeit more stylish) friend. The Influencers I spoke with are not naive to this, nor is it considered a kind of coercion or deception. Instead, they pride themselves on the products they promote, and on genuinely testing them, and marketing them, in a way that feels morally right.

Diana, the charismatic lifestyle Influencer, expressed her care and concern for her followers when deciding whether or not to work with a brand and feature their products in her Instagram content:

In 2019 I turned down \$80,000-\$100,000 worth of work because it was products I didn't like, or I didn't like the messaging, or I tried the product and it didn't work, or it promoted things like weight loss.

For Diana, the brands that she partners with must also match how she identifies as a person and as an Influencer, meaning that as someone that often posts unedited images of her body and unfiltered rants about the diet industry, she would not feel right promoting a weight-loss product. In order to build trust and relationships with her followers, Diana recognizes that she has a responsibility to those who follow her, which could explain her success, and they come to her for many things that aren't commercial at all, and instead political or deeply personal. Throughout our interview, I asked Diana if she was ever surprised by what her followers shared with her, or messaged her via DM, and I was stunned by her reply:

The interactions with my community always blow my mind because it's hard to believe, like it's always hard to believe that people trust you, and like, I'm just living my life, right? Like commentating my own life, and so I don't think you realize the impact you make on people. Like, for example, a girl reached out, and (...) she was like 'My husband cheated on me, I don't know what to do, we're newly married, blah blah blah' um, and so I talked her through it honestly, via DM. (...) I was just giving advice like I would give to a friend. But then, her husband reached out like two years later, and, he was like 'I just want to thank you because you just saved my marriage. Like we fully reconnected, we have worked it out, I feel so terrible that I did this to my wife, but your words really saved my marriage.' And comments like that (...) like you come to really understand the ways in which you can reach people.

Diana emphasized that the sense of community and friendship with her followers is not pure luck, nor is it something that occurs for all Influencers and within all niches of this digital sphere. Instead, as a result of well-designed content and transparency about her own life, Diana's followers feel invited to share vulnerable and challenging experiences with her, even though they have never (and may never) meet in "real life." Pink et al. (2015) articulated, "even when

they are conducted primarily online, relationships cannot be purely digital,” speaking to these very “real” connections and relationships facilitated via Instagram, and the very real feelings and consequences of these digital encounters (10).

There are specific occasions when people, Influencers or not, show planned fractions of intimacy within their lives, and when they subvert the norm of only looking and showing the enviable and attractive aspects of themselves. Meghan, a sociology major at the University of Colorado Boulder, explained that whether or not someone was an “Influencer,” social media motivates users to portray the most likable – and thus marketable – versions of themselves. The goal is to present yourself not only as an individual but as a commodity – not just a person, but also a brand. While Meghan at first distanced herself from what she described as “[this] whole thing with Influencers,” as she reflected further, she pointed out that like all users, she was inevitably part of Instagram’s economy of influence. “In a way,” she observed, “we become the Influencers,” because all Instagram users create and post content for social consumption. In this way, Meghan saw parallels between her own experiences constructing and maintaining social desirability and the more explicit self-branding that she associated with Influencers, even if she lacked the thousands of followers that most people consider a prerequisite for Influencer status.

While so much of online authenticity revolves around sharing the “ordinary” experiences of Influencers, their content still must be compelling enough to garner interest and a certain degree of attraction (be it to the individual, their lifestyle, their home or relationships) to make this “ordinary” worth following. In her 2017 study of Family Influencers (who occupy the niche of the digital mommy blogger) Abidin notes that Influencers’ material often consists of two main components: anchor material and filler material. Abidin defines filler content as,

[...] the secondary content for which these Influencers are known and complement the mainstay of their output by giving followers a highly contextualized snapshot of their everyday lives. Such performances are intentionally framed to convey the aesthetic of an amateur, such that the production comes across as being raw, unfiltered, spontaneous, and more intimate. (2017: 4).

It is within this “filler” material that authenticity is articulated, and where the Influencer lets their followers in to the less-than-glamorous aspects of their lives, experiences that their followers can relate to and that humanizes their strictly internet-celebrity status.

This filler can vary depending on the niche or genre that the Influencers occupy. For instance, Jessica often shares moments in her car on the way to dinner or an event, her new plant purchases, or videos of her dog. Diana shares anecdotes and humorous stories about shopping at HomeGoods and finding something that she can’t live without (but, admittedly, didn’t need) or vulnerable moments such as being visibly upset about her neighbors having a party amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. While the specificities of the content might differ, it is these moments that make the Influencers relatable, because I also have a dog, take care of my plants, and get frustrated with my neighbors. However, these are daily occurrences I would usually only talk about with my boyfriend as we cook dinner, or text my best friend about. While I doubt that the decision to share personal (and often mundane) information stems from a lack of other forms of friendship, I have found that it is this interspersed authenticity that allows an Influencer to create relationships with their followers. Authenticity is thus a magical mix of appearance and reputation managed through strategic forms of self-disclosure,” (Marwick 2013, 115).

Influencers also produce authenticity by asking their followers for feedback, and not only on the kind of content or advertisements they would like to see, but about aspects of their daily routines, including their outfit, or how to cut their hair. This sort of advice-seeking could be considered what Abidin refers to as “calibrated amateurism,” comparable to Erving Goffman’s

work on strategic interaction and the individual as performer (2017: 6). In this view, every action and interaction is a performance that is socially and contextually dependent. Goffman saw social situations and interactions as different stages, settings for the performances. Thus, the person/performer takes on either a “front stage” or “backstage” role, depending on the particular context and audience. Goffman’s work is important in showing that in everyday life, understanding that what is “real” matters less than finding a socially obligatory consensus of what is acceptable, or defining a situation.. (1956: 4).

Abidin also argues that for family influencers, much of their filler content can be defined as “domestic fillers” or aspects of their domestic life which differs from their anchor content. Connecting filler content to a Goffman-inspired analysis of Influencers, Abidin argues, “Through their narrative device of domestic fillers, family Influencers often invite followers to occupy the “backstage” together with them, fostering the impression that they have entered a space usually inaccessible to others outside their social group or team,” (2017: 7). While the filler content of the Influencers I interviewed was not necessarily always domestic, it contained the same backstage allure as described by Abidin, allowing the viewer into the seemingly “secret” or “unscripted” aspects and private spaces of the Influencers life, thus creating a shared and felt sense of intimacy and connection. This “backstage” filler content, including asking their followers what to wear or how to cut and dye their hair, could be considered “calibrated amateurism”:

[...] a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital (7).

Due to tensions surrounding what is “real” and “fake” on Instagram, many socially successful Instagram users enact what I describe as “performative vulnerability.” Performative vulnerability is the ability for an Instagram user to acknowledge their popularity, while still maintaining an illusion of approachability and personal connection with their many followers. An example would be a post in which the Influencer looks attractive and enviable, but with a small out of place detail or “imperfection” that suggests that the Influencer is both glamorous but down-to-earth (i.e., the Influencer is at an expensive retreat in Bali but posts a caption about how bad she is at yoga). Both calibrated amateurism and performative vulnerability work to describe the crafted and calibrated representations of authenticity that Influencers enact or display in order to validate their “normality” and relate to their followers.

This need for proof of authenticity can also be understood through the lens of gender and gendered labor. Carla Jones’ research on piety and virtue as performed and displayed by Islamic social media Influencers highlights the tension they experience between the need to post one’s work and self in order to be successful and the requirement to remain sincere and humble: “Thus, the influencer “needs her images to circulate yet risks accusations of posing and profiteering. In short, she can be accused of insincerity,” (Jones, 2017). Jessica, now a brand ambassador for a well-known lingerie company, juggles her online identity with her occupation in her personal life, where she works closely with children:

People coming to me like ‘Oh my God you [are a] behavior technician, you work with kids’ like that's amazing to them. Anything that I posted on my social media that has anything to do with being sexual in any way possible, I got criticized for. [...] I still had in the back of my head like, ‘okay I'm still getting my master's. I still plan to in the future do certain things. I need to keep that all in the forefront of my head when I'm taking these pictures and when I'm posting whenever I do.

While there is an expectation, as felt by many young women but highlighted by the popularity of Instagram Influencers, to be attractive and, to some extent, sexy, fans and followers also demand a balance between this beauty and “realness,” putting Influencers in the position to juggle various aspects of their identity and personal life: the beautiful and the vulnerable, the sexy and the professional. Jessica noted this balance: “If my job or my clinical director or anybody at my job, my supervisor looked at my Instagram right now I would not be worried because there's not one thing on there, that is disrespectful that isn't anything other than me literally being a female.” In this way Jessica ties her Instagram work to her innate femininity or her performance of this femininity, while arguing that her womanhood or sexuality does not make her unprofessional or unrespectable.

However, an Influencer (or social media user in general) does not have to have a lingerie sponsorship in order to confront these contradicting expectations. Even a post where the young woman is fully clothed, an average selfie, is riddled with expectations regarding gender, humility, and sincerity. Jones (2017) highlighted this in her research, “like selfies elsewhere, the subject of the pious selfie may be accused of anti-social, narcissistic impulses. Similar terms exist in both English and Indonesian describing the “desperate” and “thirsty” appetites of female social media users. Global admiration and vitriol for celebrities such as Kim Kardashian exemplify contrasting opinions about the genre's allures and risks.” As feminist scholars have pointed out women’s emotions and affective states have long been connected to their physical appearance and fused to their labor, all of which are under frequent scrutiny (Lorde 1981; Ahmed 2010).

Influencers are clearly aware of these juxtaposing expectations, and yet, this profession is in popular demand, and despite all of the negative aspects, many Influencers are fulfilled and

excited by their work. For some, it may be the sense of community and friendship created among the Instagram user and their followers. As Diana explained, she experienced this long before obtaining Influencer status, “I liked that even when I had 300 followers, I built a community.” Curly-girl Influencer Brigid also described how the niche of Influencer that she occupies seems to be a bastion of support away from the rest of the internet which can be “a cesspool of negativity.” Jessica, who has a career outside of Instagram that is well-respected and recently earned a master’s degree said that she wants to take a break from these areas and focus solely on being an Influencer for a while, including her work not only on Instagram but on YouTube as well:

I definitely want to [make social media my sole profession] because it's only been a year and I see how much that I can do in a year with social media while having my day job, I can only imagine what I could do without having my day job and solely focusing on YouTube because YouTube is so big right now.

While being an Instagram Influencer does not require previous work experience or an advanced degree, it does require an understanding of public image, self-presentation, authenticity (and/or performative vulnerability) and, for some, social responsibility, making this not an easy vocation to master or status to achieve. Once an Instagram user achieves this kind of success, in spite of the messages from internet-trolls or public attitudes about superficiality, they seem to want to remain in this line of work, growing their follower count and their influential reach.

CONCLUSION

“In some instances, digital media have extended their reach into the mundane heart of everyday life, most visibly with cell phones—gadgets now vital to conduct business affairs in remote areas of the world, as well as in bustling global cities. In other instances, digital artifacts have helped engender new collectivities: Web-cam girls, gamers, hackers, and others, whose senses of self,

vocation, and group sociabilities are shaped significantly, although not exclusively nor deterministically, by digital technologies,” (Coleman, 2010: 488).

In 2010, the same year as the creation of Instagram, anthropologist Gabrielle Coleman already understood that digital (and I would argue social) media spaces allowed for the creation of new collectives, professions, and identities. The Instagram Influencer has come to exemplify someone who is deeply enmeshed within the digital age, making their vocation and public personhood into something marketable and the public and private interchangeable.

In this thesis, I have taken up the question of what constitutes the work of an American Instagram Influencer. Influencers’ professional work within this emergent digital economy is also affective labor, and this labor is gendered and closely tied to physical appearance, authenticity and sincerity. For influencers, a performative vulnerability blurs the line between public and private, making the self a product for public consumption, such that the sharing of intimate details of one's life is crucial for professional success.

In future research, I would like to speak with more corporate sponsors or social media industry workers, including copywriters and assistants that work for these Influencers to better understand the team of people behind this one public identity. While interviews with 28 participants offered me a lot of insight, but I was only able to interview Influencers that occupied 3-4 major genres (lifestyle, body positivity/self-love, curly-haired women, and reality television stars-turned-influencers). Additionally, I believe there is work to be done to understand boundary creation and the long-term implications of sharing personal and ostensibly private information with such a large audience, and the risks and rewards associated with this line of work.

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ⁱ Research subjects included 20 college students, 5 self-described Instagram influencers, and 2 entrepreneurs (one the author of a social media book and the other a small business owner). I define social media professionals as individuals whose careers and income are dependent on their knowledge, expertise, or success on social media platforms.