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The Influencer Industry: Constructing And Commodifying Authenticity On Social Media

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Abstract

The most buzzed-about figure in twenty-first century marketing thus far has been the "digital influencer," industry vernacular for the bloggers, Instagrammers, Pinners, and other social media users who—against the backdrop of widespread economic and professional instability—deliver curated content to audiences on social media and earn income by collaborating with major brands. Driving the rise of this phenomenon have been (1) individuals who want to be recognized as persuasive online (2) advertisers who increasingly direct their budgets to social media, where influencers' "authentic," personality-inflected content has proven potent for selling product (3) social media

companies whose tools and rules both advance and encumber these activities and (4) marketing agencies and other marketing-related entities, such as talent agencies and trend forecasters, that build metrics platforms to measure influence, select influencers for advertising campaigns, negotiate deals between influencers and retail brands, and espouse the many benefits of expressing oneself "authentically" online in tandem with corporate sponsors. The precipitous development of an industry around these activities has, since the late 2000s, propelled billions of dollars into the social media economy and helped instigate a chain of events that have and continue to fundamentally change the production of culture. Drawing on 28 in-depth interviews, an analysis of more than 2000 press articles, and participant observation at industry events, this dissertation examines how the above stakeholders construct and negotiate the meaning, value, and practical use of digital influence as they reimagine it as a commodity for the social media age—a commodity whose value shifts in accordance with ever-changing industrial rubrics for cultivating and evaluating authenticity. The dissertation also provides necessary historical-cultural context to the rise of the influencer industry, elucidating its complex roots that predate the digital era. Throughout, I show how in an era where authenticity is increasingly elusive, and trust's and influence's meanings as cultural ideals and functions as social

processes are muddied, the influencer industry struggles to pin these concepts down, stabilize and define them, and make money off of these definitions. To this end, the actors involved in the influencer system work together in a variety of ways both intentional and unintentional, with social, industrial, and cultural consequences. These consequences include who can succeed, the shape of technological innovation and regulation, and products themselves. The study offers theoretical and methodological provocations to scholars of influence and authenticity to consider these concepts' industrially constructed, contextually dependent nature. It also sheds light on practical issues impacted by social- and data-driven consumerism.

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Joseph . Turow

THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY:

CONSTRUCTING AND COMMODIFYING AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Emily Hund

A DISSERTATION

in

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY:

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For my family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is somewhat difficult to make sense of finally being at the end of the road to receiving a PhD. 12 years ago, in 2007, I was a junior in college when a sociology professor first suggested it. I did not know anyone with a PhD besides my professors and had no idea what pursuing one entailed, but I do remember coming back to my apartment and telling my roommates that I was thinking about changing my path.

I ultimately decided to stick to my original plan and work in magazines, both because I can be stubborn and also because I couldn't quite fathom a PhD. But I continued to be dogged by the idea, and when I realized that, through my work, I had stumbled upon a phenomenon begging for study, I began the process of readying myself to go back to school.

I'm paraphrasing a book here, but I do believe that when you make a decision, what you are doing is jumping into a current that will carry you to places you never dreamed of when you first made the decision. I am grateful to have had so many different experiences and opportunities during my time at the Annenberg School. The work is at times soul crushing and spirit building—but I shudder to think where I would be both personally and professionally had I not taken this path.

My adviser Joseph Turow has been a wonderful guide on this journey. When I was starting out, I had an uncertainty that many do, which is, how do I actually turn these interests and ideas into projects and a research agenda? Joe generously included me as he ideated and published a book and carried out some other projects, providing a unique learning and confidence-building experience. It showed me how research is always a process, reaffirmed that paying attention to subjects like shopping is important, and taught me "anything can be made interesting if you look at it the right way." At the same time, he pushed me in my own work to keep peeling back the layers until I found the most interesting way to look at things. I also learned a lot about the history of the barcode and checkout scanner! Thank you, Joe, for providing support at the right moments and not judging me for the moments of struggle.

I've received incredible support from other faculty and staff. Barbie Zelizer and Carolyn Marvin both gave me the sense that they believed in me from the beginning, and when I said I wanted to study something related to the fashion industry, they said, "why not?" Barbie's thoughtful feedback and provocations, as well as her kindness, throughout this process have been key. Victor Pickard swept in right when I needed him, and I am so very appreciative. Litty Paxton showed me how to teach, and I will be forever trying to rise to her remarkable level of nimbleness in the classroom. Michael Delli Carpini was a receptive and generous dean for much of my time here, and taking his class provided a fantastic model for what a graduate course could be. In addition to John Jackson being a wonderful new dean, I am grateful to him for personally reaching out in my first semester to ensure that I was adjusting to the culture of academic life. Joanne Murray, Julie Sloane, Sharon Black, Rose Halligan—thank you for always looking out for us students.

Thanks, too, goes to the many visiting scholars who crossed my path at Annenberg, especially Sonia Livingstone and Susan Douglas, whose influence lives on in the dissertation's first two chapters.

Brooke Duffy took a chance on me when I was a first-year student and she was a new professor. We were complete strangers—albeit strangers whose educational and professional trajectories had uncanny similarities—but immediately got to work. I have learned so much from her as a research collaborator, mentor, and friend. Without her tremendous generosity, I would not be where I am today. Thank you forever!

Thank you to the bloggers, influencers, content creators—regardless of preferred title, the women who are working incredibly hard and earning their living in this world—for sharing your stories, goals, and challenges with me. To the marketers, brand representatives, talent managers, trend forecasters, and other influencer industry professionals who offered your expertise, reflections, and questions: I am so grateful for all of your time and your willingness to help analyze this world as you navigated it yourselves.

A wise person once said that behind every successful woman is a group text hyping her up, and I would like to confirm here that this is true. I want to thank all of my wonderful Annenberg friends, especially Elena Maris, Rosie Clark-Parsons, and my office mate of six years Samantha Oliver, whose in person and digital support from the very beginning has helped me confront the idiosyncrasies, struggles, and excitement of pursuing a PhD. Katerina Girginova, Ope Akanbi, Jonathan Pace, Allie Volinsky, and many others provided laughs and camaraderie as well as thoughtful feedback. Lee McGuigan is an ace collaborator and pal, and I believe we deserve an award for growing a friendship and fruitful collaboration out of an argument in 2013. To all, I'm so glad we have done this together.

I also relied heavily on the support (and respite) provided by my oldest friends: Emily, Elyse, Steph, Christa, Ashley, and Amy. We help each other through life's challenges and are also A BLAST, and I love each of you for it. I also must thank our other best friend, Beyoncé, for providing a symbol of excellence and energetic soundtrack to my endeavors since '98.

Endless thanks go to the #babysquad: the crew that supports each other and takes care of the kids so everyone can get work done. There is no truer phrase than "it takes a village to raise a child." I quite literally would not have been able to write this dissertation without you.

The bulk of this writing and data analysis took place at my second home/office, Function Coffee Labs. Thank you to the owners and staff for making me the perfect writing fuel, checking in on me, and providing such a great neighborhood gathering place.

Earning a PhD is not easy, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that my ability to navigate the last several years came with the help of a therapist, M. As has been a

recurring pattern in my life, I can thank only God for the right help coming at the right time and for the strength to seek and utilize it.

This degree, of course, is ultimately for my family. For my husband Henry, first and foremost, who has supported me even at my most unbearable and is the most devoted father and partner one could ask for, and our son (soon to be sons, plural!) who bring us so much joy. For my parents and in-laws who have helped with childcare and provided moral support throughout. My sisters, sisters-in-law, and brothers-in-law, who may not have always gotten why I was doing this but whose support and pride are much appreciated. My grandparents, who are thrilled to have a doctor in the family, and my great-grandparents, whose immense sacrifices and extremely limited access to, in some cases, even the most basic education I carry with me always. My great-grandmother, in particular, dreamed of becoming a teacher but was prevented from finishing elementary school. Their memory hangs over me every time I enter the classroom. For these reasons and many more, I hope to always be a steward of the wonderful opportunities I have.

June 2019

ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY:

CONSTRUCTING AND COMMODIFYING AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Emily Hund

Joseph Turow

The most buzzed-about figure in twenty-first century marketing thus far has been the "digital influencer," industry vernacular for the bloggers, Instagrammers, Pinners, and other social media users who—against the backdrop of widespread economic and professional instability—deliver curated content to audiences on social media and earn income by collaborating with major brands. Driving the rise of this phenomenon have been (1) individuals who want to be recognized as persuasive online (2) advertisers who increasingly direct their budgets to social media, where influencers' "authentic," personality-inflected content has proven potent for selling product (3) social media companies whose tools and rules both advance and encumber these activities and (4) marketing agencies and other marketing-related entities, such as talent agencies and trend forecasters, that build metrics platforms to measure influence, select influencers for advertising campaigns, negotiate deals between influencers and retail brands, and espouse the many benefits of expressing oneself "authentically" online in tandem with corporate sponsors. The precipitous development of an industry around these activities has, since the late 2000s, propelled billions of dollars into the social media economy and helped

instigate a chain of events that have and continue to fundamentally change the production of culture.

Drawing on 28 in-depth interviews, an analysis of more than 2000 press articles, and participant observation at industry events, this dissertation examines how the above stakeholders construct and negotiate the meaning, value, and practical use of digital influence as they reimagine it as a commodity for the social media age—a commodity whose value shifts in accordance with ever-changing industrial rubrics for cultivating and evaluating authenticity. The dissertation also provides necessary historical-cultural context to the rise of the influencer industry, elucidating its complex roots that predate the digital era. Throughout, I show how in an era where authenticity is increasingly elusive, and trust's and influence's meanings as cultural ideals and functions as social processes are muddied, the influencer industry struggles to pin these concepts down, stabilize and define them, and make money off of these definitions. To this end, the actors involved in the influencer system work together in a variety of ways both intentional and unintentional, with social, industrial, and cultural consequences. These consequences include who can succeed, the shape of technological innovation and regulation, and products themselves. The study offers theoretical and methodological provocations to scholars of influence and authenticity to consider these concepts' industrially constructed, contextually dependent nature. It also aims to shed light on some practical issues impacted by social- and data-driven consumerism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHOD

The most buzzed-about figure in twenty-first century marketing so far has been

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other social media users who—against the backdrop of widespread economic and

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advertising campaigns, negotiate deals between influencers and retail brands, and espouse

the many benefits of expressing oneself "authentically" online in tandem with corporate

sponsors. Indeed, tightly tied to the industry's conception of influence is the notion of

authenticity.

The rise of the digital influencer during the first two decades of the twenty-first

century has propelled billions of marketing and advertising dollars into the social media

economy and helped instigate a chain of events that are fundamentally altering the

production of culture, wherein a focus on quantification and social media metrics

increasingly determines which people and products have power (Schaefer, 2012). This

dissertation examines how the above listed stakeholders have constructed the meaning, value, and practical use of digital influence—reimagining it as a commodity for the social media age—and explores the consequences, which encompass who can succeed, the shape of technological innovation, and products themselves. In so doing, the study also sheds light on broader issues impacted by social- and data-driven consumerism.

Research on who can influence and how within the field of communication largely stems from Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's foundational research on the subject. In *Personal Influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication* (1955), the authors outline their "two-step flow" model of communication, wherein people who act as "opinion leaders" or "influentials" filter information from the mass media to their friends and neighbors, and ordinary people's interactions with these influential people drives how they form opinions. While Katz and Lazarsfeld's work has been both taken up and challenged by many research perspectives in the decades since, their notion of "influentials"—that is, people who have seemingly measurable effects on those who listen to them—is probably more salient in the digital age than ever before. A parallel stream of thinking going back to Max Weber (1946) has linked the success of influential leaders to their perceived authenticity, which can mean a kind of charismatic authority to make lifestyle suggestions to followers (Dion & Arnould, 2011) as well as the integration of truth or "realness" into persuasive messages (Creel, 1920; Duffy, 2013).

Perhaps nowhere are the contemporary dynamics of influence—and authenticity's role in them—more apparent than at the nexus of social media, marketing, and the fashion industry. Fashion, by its very nature, has always been inextricable from

conceptions of influence. It is a central symbolic realm of society, and those who work in fashion are interested in continually changing people's ideas about the meanings and purposes of its symbols. The industry has not received much academic attention, particularly when compared to other cultural industries such as television or film; the reasons for this are surely tied up in gender politics and the popular misconception of fashion as belonging to "the area of the bizarre, the irrational and the inconsequential" (Blumer, 1969, p. 290). Yet critical analysis of this industry is important for a variety of reasons. While it is common knowledge that advertising undergirds the U.S. media system, few scholars have attended to the fact that *retail undergirds the advertising system*, spending more than any other industry on advertising (eMarketer, 2016) and impacting the media we use, content we see, and physical environments in which we shop (Turow, 2017). Further, cultural shifts including the pervasiveness and speeding up of consumer culture (McGuigan & Manzerolle, 2014a; Hyland, 2015) and changing understandings of cultural authority (well documented by the field of journalism studies, e.g. Carlson, 2007) are imbricated in the industry's dynamics and cultural and economic significance. All told, the fashion industry offers a crucible for understanding the changing nature of influence that has widespread impact in the social media age.

By examining the construction and cultivation of social media influencers in this realm, this dissertation aims to (1) contextualize and historicize the development of influencers, demonstrating how the "influence economy" emerged as a locus of power tied to tangible economic and social rewards on the social media-driven, visual web (2) critically examine how the authenticity of digital influencers is constructed by and operates within this ecosystem and (3) explore the consequences of this industrialization

of "authentic" influence for professional life, technological innovation, and culture production.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention to issues related to influence and its social consequences dates back to ancient Greece, when persuasion and rhetoric were studied and practiced as arts—and eventually seen as devolving into tools for social ill. Thinkers through the ages continued to address these "arts of influence" and related topics, but empirical attention to influence blossomed in the twentieth century amidst concerns about propaganda and the development of mass media. Many disciplines have taken up influence as a focus of academic inquiry since then, highlighting its various psychological and social components and its relationship to culture. Largely unexamined in the existing literature are the ways in which influence is *industrially* constructed. In an era when "influence" has become a commodity—cultivated by individuals, quantified by companies, and leveraged for material benefit—understanding these dynamics is a pressing matter.

Authenticity, authority, and influence

Fundamental to research on influence is a concern over authority and social power: who has it, how is it deployed, and what are the consequences? Through early exploration of these questions, a few thinkers set the stage for understanding what influence is and how it operates—long before "influence" became a keyword in academic research.

Max Weber's writings on "charismatic authority," for example, conceptualized influence as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon (1946). Weber focused on the political and economic circumstances out of which influential leaders arise, arguing that "in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, [or] political distress," leaders who seem to have exceptional qualities tend to become influential (p. 245). Yet what enables these leaders to thrive is their perceived *authenticity*. According to Weber, charismatic leaders "always reject as undignified any pecuniary gain that is methodical and rational," and they prove themselves not by expertise or training but by their ability to follow through on claims they make about themselves (p. 247). Crucial, too, is an interpersonal relationship between the leader and followers, who tend to create communities with each other around the leader and help to encourage continual reassertions of authenticity.

Indeed, the notion of the "authentic" is evergreen in discourses surrounding influence and authority, even while in recent years it has become a muddled, overused concept. In the early twentieth century, authenticity captured the popular imagination as a means for simultaneous personal fulfillment and influence over others. As media historian Jefferson Pooley has pointed out, a number of writers in the 1910s and 1920s encapsulated a peculiar contradiction at the "core" of American culture: "be true to yourself; it is to your strategic advantage" (Pooley, 2010, p. 71).

In the same period, government and media institutions began to understand that they could create and enact influence on a broader scale by leveraging "authentic" messages and mass media technologies. In his controversial book, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), advertising giant and agency founder Bruce Barton cautioned that "the

public has a sixth sense for detecting insincerity; they know instinctively when words ring true" (p. 151) as he encouraged businessmen of the era to follow the example set by Jesus: "What he was and what he said were one and the same thing" (ibid.). George Creel, head of the Committee on Public Information (the United States government's first organized propaganda outfit) wrote that the Committee's work—"selling" participation in WWI to Americans and American ideals to the rest of the world—was successful in large part because of its authentic nature. "Our effort was educational and informative throughout," he wrote, "the simple, straightforward presentation of facts" (Creel, 1920, p. 3-4). Yet, notably, it was also "a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising" (ibid.).

Institutional propaganda efforts such as these grew in size and scope during the 1910s and 1920s, drawing both scholarly analysis (e.g. Lasswell, 1927) and popular attention. In his historical assessment of this period, Stuart Ewen (1976) describes how the growing advertising industry worked to "habituate" people—particularly the huge population of factory workers, many of them immigrants—to its vision of life in industrial America, reorienting them away from traditional values of family, self-sufficiency, and thrift (p. 58) and toward finding meaning and identity in the consumption of goods (p. 43). As Ewen wrote, "the development of an ideology of consumption responded both to the issue of social control and the need for goods distribution" (p. 19).

Indeed, Edward Bernays' landmark work *Propaganda* (1928) summed up the ways in which large organizations had begun to understand that they could create and

enact influence at mass scale and rationalized the activities as necessary for living in an increasingly complex society:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of…. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind (p. 9).

As such adulation for the power of—and questionable need for—organized persuasion campaigns became mainstream, questions about how people are or are not persuaded, and the social implications of these processes, began to captivate researchers.

Influence: A burgeoning field of study

Alongside the growing movement among practitioners like Bernays and Creel to understand the persuasive power of institutions, academics—particularly those in the field of social psychology and sociology—began to deliberately and systematically study various dynamics of *influence*.

In the 1920s, social psychologists Rensis Likert and Louis Thurstone advanced the idea that attitudes—or the "evaluative judgments" that all people make about ideas, people, and things (Maio & Haddock, 2010, p. 3)—influence behavior. As part of a general effort to understand how and when this type of influence occurred, these researchers focused on finding ways to quantitatively measure attitudes. Most notably, they created the Likert Scale, a questionnaire model wherein respondents provide

answers that also indicate the level of their intensity for that answer (e.g. rather than simply "agreeing" or "disagreeing" with a proposition, respondents might be able to "strongly disagree" or indicate that they are "neutral"), which remains a widely used tool for studying attitudes and opinions today. The ability to quantify an attitude "was seen as an enormous breakthrough" (Maio & Haddock, 2010, p. 5) and helped define the research agenda for social psychology for decades to come: tying quantitative measurements of psychological phenomena to social corollaries is a central activity of the field. More immediately, it inspired other social psychologists to question the *degree* to which attitudes might influence behavior in a variety of circumstances—or the ways in which behavior might influence attitudes (e.g. LaPiere, 1934, as discussed in Maio & Haddock, 2010).

In the 1930s and 1940s, the rise of fascism and WWII stirred widespread concern about propaganda and authoritarianism, and "how does public opinion become mobilized or changed?" became a guiding question for researchers. A prevailing belief had been that messages constructed in the "right" way could exert direct influence over everyone who received the message. Otherwise known as the "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" theories, these arguments contended that media messages could be metaphorically "shot" into the minds of audience members and elicit a uniform reaction. Nazi propaganda seemed to provide a sinister example of this possibility. Other incidents, such as the panic induced by Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, provided more supposed evidence for this theory. Yet upon further examination, researchers began to realize that the message-receiver relationship was not so simple; a variety of factors could intercept and alter it.

Hadley Cantril, Hazel Gaudet, and Herta Herzog contributed one early, significant study in this vein. They interviewed people across the United States to understand audience reactions to the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, which had misled many listeners into believing they were listening to a news report of an alien invasion rather than a fictional play. Their analysis, published as *The Invasion from Mars* (Cantril, 1940), argued that while the broadcast did induce fear and sometimes hysteria in many, others reacted differently. Some checked with neighbors or other broadcast stations to verify the information and found that it was fictional, some recognized that the format of the broadcast was more like literature than the news and determined on their own that it could not be true. Further, the authors "found no single observable variable consistently related to the reaction [of panic]," pointing out that "personality characteristics made some people especially susceptible to belief and fright; the influence of others in the immediate environment caused a few listeners to react inappropriately" (Holt et al, 1958, p. 6). The authors concluded that social-psychological factors such as a person's level of "suggestibility" (the extent to which they are easily convinced of something), their religiousness, level of education, and others, were all relevant to how a person was influenced by the broadcast.

After WWII, research interest in persuasion persisted as the Cold War and spread of television brought about new concerns and questions about how people respond to messages. To this end, Carl Hovland and colleagues at Yale worked to pinpoint *how* and *when* people change their attitudes, finding that "factors such as characteristics of the message source, the message recipient, and the persuasiveness of the message itself would determine the likelihood of attitude change" (Maio & Haddock, 2010, p. 9; see

also Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Hovland's attention to the discrete steps involved in persuasion, from the message origin to the message itself to the receiver, was transformational within social psychology and the budding field of communication research.

In the 1960s and 1970s, critics from within social psychology began to argue that the work of the Yale School, while innovative, was too simplistic. Among other critiques, they argued against the linear model of communication outlined by Hovland and his colleagues, wherein a message leaves the sender, reaches a receiver, and induces some sort of reaction in the receiver. Instead, they argued for a shift to a "social cognition" model that would encompass the complexity to the "cognitive processes and structures that lie behind persuasion" (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991, p. xvii). This model is rooted in the belief that people are able to link persuasive messages to other attitudes and integrate information in their own minds. In the decades since, this paradigm shift in the field has yielded a variety of understandings of influence well beyond issues of persuasion and attitude change. Research attending to compliance, conformity, social learning and more has flourished (ibid.)

As social psychologists in the postwar era attended to the ways in which attitudes and psychological processes of persuasion complicated the "hypodermic needle" theory, sociologists explored the notion that social relations, rather than psychological phenomena, affected how people were influenced and why. The work of the Columbia School was critical in developing the sociological and popular understandings that "people were still most successfully persuaded by give-and-take with other people, and

that the influence of the mass media was less automatic and less potent than had been assumed" (Katz, 1957, p. 61).

The People's Choice (1948), which reported the results of a study conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet during the 1940 election, was an early milestone in sociological understandings of influence. In this study, the authors sought to understand how people made voting decisions, finding that the influence of other people was "more frequent and more effective than the mass media" (Katz, 1957, p. 62). The People's Choice suggested the existence of a "two-step flow"—wherein people are influenced by personal contacts who act as "opinion leaders"—and also indicated that some people might be more influential than others. These findings were unexpected, however, and not able to be fully supported by the data collected (Katz, 1957). As such, Lazarsfeld, with Elihu Katz, continued to explore the notion of a "two-step flow" in a later study.

In Personal Influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication (1955), Katz and Lazarsfeld explicitly outline the two-step flow model, wherein people who act as "opinion leaders" or "influentials" filter information from the mass media to their friends and neighbors, and ordinary people's interactions with these influential people drives some behavior and opinion formation. Drawing on a study of women's decision-making on topics from public affairs to fashion conducted in Decatur, Ill., Katz and Lazarsfeld argued that people were not "a mass of disconnected individuals hooked up to the media but not to each other," as many believed, but were really comprised of "networks of interconnected individuals through which mass communications are channeled" (Katz, 1957, p. 61).

The impact of Katz & Lazarsfeld's work on academic and popular understandings of influence was tremendous. Indeed, the vocabulary with which influence has been discussed in academic and popular discourse for the last half-century—particularly the idea that certain people are "influentials"—stems, in large part, from their work. Within sociology, the two-step flow model became the dominant paradigm through which researchers studied influence (Gitlin, 1978). In particular, it inspired a decades-long proliferation of research concerned with theories of "diffusion," or how influence or innovations move through a population, as well as methodological interest in social network analysis (e.g. Granovetter, 1973, was a breakthrough and now widely cited article that pushed the field in this methodological direction).

As computational capabilities advanced, more recent sociological approaches have worked with massive datasets to pinpoint tipping points for the diffusion of ideas or behaviors, identifying individual "influentials" in the process (e.g. Bakshy et al, 2009). These studies draw connections between people's social circumstances (number of friends, for example) and the ways in which they are influenced, to varying degrees of success (e.g. Watts & Dodds, 2007; Cha et al, 2010). However, while this research seems to confirm the idea that some individuals are influential—or "play a more active role in the transfer of assets than others" (Bakshy et al, 2009, p. 333)—it does not necessarily say why, or why this process matters. Watts & Dodds (2007) attempt to account for these particulars of "influentials" in large scale diffusions, but their findings stop short of any specifics, and they admit that their models are "at best a simplified and partial representation of a complex reality" (p. 442).

Indeed, writers over the years have argued that the domination of the two-step

flow model within sociological research on influence has caused the field to develop significant oversights. Gitlin (1978) critiqued the field's lack of attention to the agenda-setting role of mass media and overemphasis on measurable effects. Sociological attention to influence, he wrote, "has enshrined short-run 'effects' as 'measures' of 'importance' largely because these 'effects' are measurable in a strict, replicable behavioral sense, thereby deflecting attention from larger social meaning of mass media production...By studying only the 'effects' that could be 'measured' experimentally or in surveys, it has put the methodological cart ahead of the theoretical horse. Or rather: it has procured a horse that could pull its particular cart" (p. 205-206). Later, Douglas (2006) argued that conceptualizing two-step flow as a generalizable, quantifiable process of influence obscured the role of culture and gender in that process. As Douglas pointed out, the original Decatur study was comprised entirely of women, a fact obscured by the use of male ("elderstatesman") or neutral ("people") pronouns in the book. "One of the central contradictions of the Decatur Study," she wrote, "is that it simultaneously disguises that only women are being studied and universalizes them as representative of the general population" (p. 42).

Taken together, the historical trajectories of the two central strands of influence research—the social-psychological and the sociological—have perhaps over attended to *processes* of influence while overlooking the questions of who enacts it, why, and what influence means in different settings. In so doing, the literature glossed over some contextual complexities of influence, including the role of authenticity and industry, while upholding the notion that influence is something to be *quantified*—and studied with quantitative methods.

Applied approaches to influence

For nearly as along as influence has been studied, business leaders and entrepreneurs have looked for ways to apply research findings for their own ends. In 1957, cultural critic Vance Packard detailed in his book *The Hidden Persuaders* how public relations professionals had been leveraging "motivational research"—the term at the time for understanding how people make decisions—to sell everything from washing machines to political candidates. Their behind-the-scenes activities, he wrote, worked to "engineer consent" of citizens to receiving advertising messages; most worrisome, they used academic theories about to "train" people "like Pavlov's dog" (p. 4). Though Packard's book was a bestseller and catapulted him to the rare position of nationally renowned critic of consumer culture, the activities it detailed—persuasion professionals leveraging academic theories to sell products—have only intensified since.

Since the 1990s, some social-psychological and sociological research on influence has gained a popular audience as entrepreneurs and businesses have found practical value in it. While the two strands of research might suggest different applications, those who have taken them up do so with the basic shared goal of improving business operations and profits.

Popular social-psychological research is primarily concerned with two active modes of influence. First, a form of *enacting* influence, or gaining "compliance." Cialdini (2001), for example, famously outlined six "weapons of influence" that he deduced from experimental and participant observation research, emphasizing how certain norms that seem to be embedded in most human cultures—such as reciprocity, compliance with

authority, and looking to "social proof" (or what others are doing) when making certain decisions—can be used to get people to think or behave in certain ways[1]. This work recognizes the increasing sophistication of influence tactics utilized by all kinds of people and organizations, from salespeople to media organizations. Another growing body of work is concerned with *tracking* influential people, ideas, or behaviors. Reminiscent of the "hypodermic needle" metaphor, some have framed this model of transmission as "social contagion" or "virality." This research begins at the end, taking as its object of analysis things that are already understood to be "influential" and attempting to trace how they became that way. It looks for the human behaviors or tendencies that drive ideas or behaviors to "catch on." Berger (2013), for example, described the six "STEPPS" that make something "contagious": it must have social currency, naturally trigger discussion and emotions, be public, have practical value, and be wrapped in a broader narrative. Because a significant amount of research in this area is oriented around business management or marketing, however, an underlying question tends to be "how can we design products, ideas, and behaviors so that people will talk about them?" (Berger, 2013, p. 18) rather than providing critical insight into existing systems of influence or their consequences. Social researchers with an applied focus also adopted the two-step flow model and helped push it to a mainstream audience. Keller & Berry of RoperASW, for example, ground their 2003 book *The Influentials: One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat, and What to Buy* entirely on the notion that people are more likely to turn to friends, family, or other "personal experts" for advice than to the mass media. Arguing that "more than a handful of people control the levers of change in

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[1] Taking a slightly more measured view than Berger (2013), Cialdini (2001) also included suggestions for how people can recognize and resist these tactics.

America" (p. 2), they aimed to pinpoint the sociological factors associated with being an "influential" person and conclude the book with suggestions for how businesses can leverage this sort of influence. Schaefer (2012), too, lauds the utility of the "influencer class" for business, focusing on how influence is constructed and enacted online. Unlike Keller & Berry (2003), Schaefer (2012) claims that in the digital age, whether or not one is influential is in the hands of that individual. Schaefer argues that in an era of "information overload," people revert to "primitive methods of sorting information" (p. 22)—namely, relying on people we deem to be trustworthy, as Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) suggested—and that there are economic and social benefits to be found for those who cultivate their influence. Echoing Bernays' (1945) pronouncement that "media provide open doors to the public mind, and through them anyone of us may influence the attitudes and actions of our fellow citizens" (p. 158), Schaefer optimistically asserts that "in this new world of social influence, even the obscure, the shy, and the overlooked can become celebrities in their slice of the online world...You, too, can earn your way into the influence class" (p. xvii).

While Schaefer (2012) is correct in asserting that social media enable new meanings and uses of influence, his ideas—and that of other contemporary writers on influence—reflect persistent themes in the historical trajectory of influence research. That influence can be quantified, that certain people are more influential than others, and that technology makes the whole process democratic, have all at turns been championed by academic and popular writers on the topic, and continue to guide scholarly and applied uses of influence theories. Yet academics have taken for granted the role of authenticity in the process—and ignored the fact that the literature on influence has been coopted by

companies and popular marketing discourse, and their implementation of these theories helps to build agendas for public discourse and consumer culture.

The internet & celebrity culture

Throughout the history of scholarly research on influence, mass media have primarily been conceptualized as channels through which potentially influential messages are sent. Schaefer's (2012) mention of "celebrity," however, is a reminder of the role media companies and their technologies can play in *constructing* influence; celebrities are, fundamentally, a particular type of influential person whose social power is wholly dependent upon media industries (Boorstin, 1962; Currid-Halkett, 2010). The expansion of celebrity culture during the twentieth century—acutely accelerated by the rise of the internet and social media (Turner, 2015)—has allowed its logic to seep into everyday life. Public visibility, personal branding, and awareness of performance metrics are all valorized in popular discourse, baked into new media technologies, and even taught in schools as a matter of professionalization (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2010; Marwick, 2013; Tan, 2017). Further, the heightened enrollment of "regular people" into mass mediated visibility during the twenty-first century—what Graeme Turner (2010) has referred to as the media's "demotic turn"—has helped centralize the notion of authenticity (or "realness") within positive industrial evaluations of content. Current understandings of the dynamics of influence, particularly online, must take this into account.

Scholarly attention to fame and celebrity culture slowly burgeoned during the last century as cultural critics analyzed the relationships between the growing media system

and the kinds of influential people who thrive within it. Lowenthal (1944), for example, illuminated the shift in popular magazine coverage from "idols of production" to "idols of consumption." Boorstin (1962) later argued that the television- and news-saturated environment of the twentieth century made it too easy to build "cults of personality," calling the process "anti-democratic." Boorstin outlined how a culture of "pseudo events," driven by the mass media and public relations industries, had given rise to a distinctly contemporary form of influential person: the "human pseudo event," or the celebrity. Later, in his expansive study of fame throughout history, Braudy (1986) provided support for Boorstin's argument that the tendency for societies to hold certain people up as important has existed for millennia, and the nature of their influence is likely tied to dominant media forms of the time. Different types of people are lauded in different eras, Braudy argued, depending, in part, on the technologies available at the time to spread their messages.

Most recently, expanding scholarly output related to celebrity culture and digital media has noted the particularly symbiotic relationship between celebrity culture and the commercial web, characterizing it as a function of the internet's "attention economy"—a term coined in the 1990s to describe the way the world economic order might change in the internet age (Goldhaber, 1997a). As Goldhaber (1997a) argued at the time, "we are moving into a period wholly different from the past era of factory-based mass production of material items…we now have to think in wholly new economic terms" (p. 1). He noted that while others often characterized the internet as an *information* economy, "economies run on scarcity, and information is more abundant than ever. What is scarce

is people's attention"—and therefore, he predicted, "seeking attention" would become a core activity of the digital age (p. 3).

The development of social media in the 2000s—an era sometimes referred to as Web 2.0—enabled new forms of seeking attention online and using that attention strategically. While the social and economic benefits of being an influential person were sometimes implicit in social-psychological and sociological writing on the subject, digital media scholars elucidate these benefits for the contemporary moment more clearly. In the mid-2000s, Senft (2008) offered a theory of "micro-celebrity"—the practice of cultivating a public persona and an audience for oneself online—drawing on her research of early internet users who broadcasted their lives via webcams and gained cult followings. Senft highlighted the trend of amassing large followings and leveraging them for economic purposes, which Marwick (2013a) further detailed in her ethnographic study of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Writers now emphasize that micro-celebrity practices have become inextricable from being online; internet users, particularly social media users, must continually be aware of their public personae and potential for influence (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Senft, 2013; Schaefer, 2012; Marwick, 2013a). Senft (2013) points out that there exists online a "commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (p. 1).

Similarly, Hearn (2010) points out that in the digital era, people commodify and consume their own and others' public personae as cultural products in hopes of achieving economic rewards. Further, she ties this to broader cultural norms of which Boorstin (1962) and others wrote, arguing that "the celebrity industry works ideologically to

valorize this hope" (p. 435). As digital media scholars continue to demonstrate the ways in which logics of micro-celebrity and self-branding permeate social life online and off (e.g. Hearn, 2008; Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013a; Duffy & Pooley, 2017) as well as the cultural significance of micro-celebrities and influencers (e.g. Marwick, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015), Goldhaber's (1997b) pronouncement that the internet would become a "star system" appears ever more prescient.

Baym (2013), Wissinger (2015), and others have critiqued the ratings and quantification systems that are increasingly important to life online. Many of these critiques have been situated in debates about the labor required on the part of internet users in order to "perform" well, but Hearn (2010) questions how rankings might impact cultural products as well as people. In her study on reputation, Hearn traces the "pre-history" of digital rankings, observing that bestseller lists and other rankings of cultural products "serve the promotional interests of the book or music industries [and] work to discipline consumption" (p. 428). In the digital era, people commodify and consume their own and others' public personae, or "self-brands," still providing material benefit to industries (in this case, primarily the advertising and technology industries). "Individuals generally craft reputation via the self-brand because they hope this work will eventually find its realization in the general equivalent—money" (p. 435), Hearn writes, urging that, "the question of how it matters, of what the mechanisms are through which reputation is measured and rendered productive…are the real issues here" (p. 434).

As social media have continued to evolve and change the nature and content of online information, from news to personal images (e.g. Petre, 2015; Marwick, 2015), influence—as a quantified product, made meaningful by the advertisers and marketers

who have coopted academic theories—has supplanted mere reputation (as discussed by Hearn, 2010) as a critical form of social and economic capital. Indeed, a pervasive logic of celebrity culture, appropriation of academic influence theories, and beliefs about the meaning and value of authenticity have combined to birth an industry that is helping to guide the social and economic market of the internet—and spill out to shape cultural production more broadly.

The "influencer economy"

Since the advent of the commercial web in the 1990s, people have gone online to self-publish ideas and commentary on an endless number of topics. Some early users of email did this through newsletters; later, blogs popularized as places where people could combine text, images, and video to express thoughts or share information. Blogs proliferated exponentially in the new millennium as the advent of software like Blogger and WordPress made it easy for people without technical knowledge to publish content online.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, political bloggers offered perhaps the first glimpse of the agenda-setting power of self-publishing on social media (though it was not yet called that) when a few of their own were responsible for initially reporting and pushing to mainstream news the Clinton-Lewinsky and Trent Lott scandals (Scott & Jones, 2004). Throughout the first decade of the 2000s, the number of bloggers and blog readers grew every year, though all told, the numbers remained fairly low relative to all internet users (Gard, 2004; Nielsen, 2012).

As the first decade of the twenty-first century ended, a perfect storm of technological, economic, cultural, and industrial factors helped social media self-publishing to grow exponentially:

- **Technological**. In addition to the continued growth of blogging platforms like WordPress, social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook emerged, making the process of sharing information and connecting with people online easier than ever and pervading the population at a rapid clip. (According to Pew Research Center (2018), in 2005, only 5 percent of American adults used a social networking platform; 10 years later, nearly 70 percent did.) Soon, websites like Klout and PeerIndex emerged, offering tools that purported to measure individuals' influence based on aggregating and analyzing their social media data—and offering branded "rewards" depending on their score. Technologically-enabled entrepreneurship also popularized, with websites like eBay and Etsy enabling contact and direct commerce between people all over the globe.

- **Cultural**. These technological changes allowed individuals to have direct lines to "publics" they never had before (Baym & boyd, 2012) and dovetailed nicely with the cultural valorization of entrepreneurialism and self-branding, as well as the increasingly individualized nature of work, that had begun to take hold in the 1990s (Peters, 1997; Neff, 2012). From enthusiastic predictions about a "free agent nation" (Pink, 2001) to the emergence of the so-called "gig economy" (Hook, 2015), the 2000s saw a

marked increase in visibility—much of it optimistic—for people working independently.

- **Economic**. The trend towards independent work continued, albeit with a less agentic feel, as millions of people lost their jobs in the wake of the global financial crisis that began in 2008. Many under- or unemployed people, particularly aspiring creative professionals, took to social media platforms to continue to "work" in some form—posting online to communicate their professional expertise and personal interests with the hope of building reputations and attracting employers (Bishop, 2009). Official tracking of independent workers has not been consistent (Shambaugh, Nunn & Bauer, 2018), but a 2016 Pew Research Center report concluded that "the share of U.S. workers with these alternative employment arrangements has gone up significantly" in the twenty-first century. The widespread and deep-seated economic turmoil seemed to only enable neoliberal logics of self-governance, inciting workers of all stripes to by mindful of their personal brands and live as if "life is a pitch" (Gill, 2010; see also Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). Indeed, in the wake of the recession, relying on the "brand called You" (Peters, 1997) had become less of choice and more a requirement for participating in the new economy.

- **Industrial**. The economic crisis accelerated media industry shifts that had been slowly approaching since the birth of the commercial web. Journalism was becoming a less viable career path as job opportunities

dried up, pay stagnated, and revenue models became outdated and

unsustainable (Pope, 2018). Advertisers were looking for more effective

outlets than the print establishment and found blogs—and later, individual

"influencers'" feeds on social media platforms like Instagram—ideal.

Thanks to their personality-driven content, this crop of miniature media

empires offered audiences that were conveniently already segmented.

Their digitally native existence also made measuring ROI convenient and

straightforward, a particularly attractive benefit in an era where cultural

industries were becoming increasingly risk-averse and fixated on

quantification (Hesmondhalgh, 2012; Petre, 2015). Further, bloggers did

not necessarily hold themselves to journalistic standards such as the

traditional "church-state" separation between advertising and editorial,

which made it easy for advertisers to forge new norms of commercial

messaging in the new medium of "influencer marketing." Sponsored

content and activities such as gifting products in exchange for coverage

became typical. These technological and interpersonal capabilities of

social media reinvigorated the advertising industry's decades-old love

affair with "word of mouth" marketing.

Driven by these forces, blogs covering topics as varied as parenting, politics, and

personal style all popularized, innovating new forms, norms, and possibilities of digital

self-publishing in the process.

In the fashion industry, blogging became a particularly potent force. For a

notoriously top-down, closed off industry, social media initially seemed to pose quite a

threat: fashion brands could not retain tight control over their brand images as social media users all over world uploaded photos of themselves styling clothing however they liked, and fashion magazines were no longer singular voices of authority on trends and critique as readers enjoyed the opinions of bloggers who were "just like us." Yet social media's emerging fashion stars were also irresistible to the industry itself; they were buzzy, attention-grabbing, and potentially profitable. *Women's Wear Daily* famously declared 2006 as the year "the blogs took over the tents" at New York Fashion Week (Corcoran, 2006). A few popular voices in the space—overwhelmingly young and female—caused a stir by getting front row seats at fashion shows, next to top magazine editors. In mainstream coverage, the rise of fashion bloggers was an attractive anecdote to fit the increasingly common narrative that social media was going to "democratize" culture by giving voice and visibility to "anyone with an internet connection" (Damico, 2017).

As popular bloggers' fan bases grew, advertisers recognized an opportunity. By 2010 retail brands understood that these digital content creators offered not only opinions and style cues, but direct lines to the buying public (Nichols, 2010). Major brands became interested in advertising on blogs large and small, and advertising networks cropped up to meet the need. Sometimes brands and bloggers worked together to design and market a co-branded product, such as a line of shoes or handbags. Blogs partnered with advertisers to create branded content, wherein a blogger integrates an advertiser's product into her own visual or textual content. This sort of paid-for advertising that appears to be "authentic" content has since permeated social media and become the lifeblood of the influence economy.

As blogs followed in the footsteps of legacy media in being financially dependent on advertisers, advertisers improved their abilities to measure how and where their messages were most effective. As such, the notion of "digital influence" became central. Metrics that purport to measure a social media user's influence—typically drawing on numbers such as follower counts, engagement and click-through rates, unique visitors, and more—became the currency for securing the brand partnerships and advertisements that brought financial stability, recognition within the industry, and other professional opportunities for bloggers. As visual social platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest proliferated, the term "digital influencer" replaced "blogger" as the vernacular to describe those who produce digital content and boast significant social media clout—regardless of platform.

Conveniently quantifiable, "influence" quickly became a stand-in for the nebulous cultural authority on which fashion's central figures had long traded. Even "old media" titan *Vogue* could not resist the allure of using metrics to try to pin down previously elusive factors; Style.com, the magazine's website from 2000 until 2015, began in 2013 to feature a continually updated graphic called "The In Cloud," which ranked fashion editors, bloggers, designers, front-row stalwarts, and models. To use its own description: "The In Cloud is Style.com's new custom ranking of the most influential people in the fashion industry. […] In fashion, no one works in a vacuum. With the In Cloud, you can see who's on top in any one category, or discover how they stack up against one another. They're all connected; they're all in the cloud…So happy ranking, and may the buzziest win" (The In Cloud, 2014).

Today, influencers have helped to construct a new environment for the way people interact with information and cultural products in the digital age. Influencers are means of sorting information; their easily digestible personal brands signal what type of content they provide. More recent technological development has allowed them to offer seamless integration of content with the ability to shop. And in what many advertising practitioners and researchers call a "post-ad world"—where consumers increasingly tune out or avoid blatant advertising (e.g. Serazio, 2013)—influencers offer companies a crucial means of getting messages to the public. While fashion influencers typically identify themselves as being "fueled by passion" and their work being a "creative outlet" (Duffy & Hund, 2015), collectively, they are marketing juggernauts and vital components of the retail system. *eMarketer* estimated that influencer marketing revenues on Instagram alone totaled more than $570 million in 2016, and argued that "the space is likely a multibillion-dollar industry—and growing" (Drolet, 2016).

As advertising-fueled monetization pervaded the social media landscape in the early 2010s, a cottage industry of agencies cropped up to serve as middlemen between content creators and advertisers. These agencies build metrics platforms, negotiate deals between influencers and retail brands, and in some cases serve as 360-degree talent managers for influencers. They position themselves as "helping" digital content producers earn money from their passion projects. Agencies' services for streamlined and predictable flows of branding deals help to define the sorts of content that shows up on popular social media platforms. At the same time, influencers—that is, people who earn income as independent workers providing "authentically" curated content to a carefully

cultivated audience online—have become a one of the most visible symbols of the ever-converging worlds of social media and commerce.

Influence as labor and industry

At present, academic approaches to bloggers and other digital media workers have tended to place theoretical emphasis on aspects of their *labor*. Many of these contributions are part of the so-called "digital labor" debates inspired by Marxist theory. Particularly prominent in these debates are Italian autonomists' notion of "immaterial labor"—labor that produces cultural products, knowledge, or services (Lazzarato, 1996; see also Gill & Pratt, 2008)—as well as Dallas Smythe's (1977) theorization of the "audience commodity," which recognized the value extracted from audiences when commercial media companies sell their attention to advertisers and argued that audiences were, therefore, working. Writers who have contributed to these debates consider both the labor *of* online content creation—from unpaid users moderating or posting on message boards (Terranova, 2000; Andrejevic, 2002) to professional bloggers who make a living from their work (Luvaas, 2016; Duffy, 2017)—as well as the ways in which circumstances of the digital age, such as constant connectedness and the incitement to self-brand, could be *remaking labor more generally* (e.g. Gill, 2010; Neff, 2012). Conceptualizations of venture labor (Neff, 2012), aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), visibility labor (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and others variously point to several salient themes about labor in the digital economy: risk is shouldered by the individual; self-promotional, "always on" work-styles are the norm; labor is oriented toward nebulous future payouts; and inequalities of gender, race, and

class persist. Underpinning this scholarship is continual consideration of whether these forms of digital labor are exploitive, enjoyable, empowering—or some combination of the three. In one of only a few studies explicitly about fashion bloggers, Luvaas (2013) reached an ambivalent conclusion while describing what he called the "conscious commercialization" of bloggers:

> The question that remains, then, is whether such a position is ultimately more empowering or exploitative for those who adopt it. Are these the newly empowered subjects of a democratizing fashion industry? Or the industry's new pawns, subjected to the disciplinary dictates of self-monitoring and self-promotion, so intrinsic to the logic of neoliberalism? And is there…any conceivable difference between the two? (p. 73).

Taken together, this body of work illuminates various dimensions of what it means to be a cultural producer, whether amateur or professional, in the digital age. Yet scholarly attention should expand to attend to the industry that has sprung up to support and encourage the forms of labor these writers describe. The influence industry—which includes marketers, retailers, social media and analytics companies, and individual social media influencers—quantifies, ranks, and commodifies those who self-identify as workers (such as professional bloggers and Instagrammers) as well as casual users who do not. The industry's ideas about what influence is, how it works, and why it matters increasingly help to define what it means for a person or a cultural product to be successful (how many times was this photographer's Instagram image shared?), and can determine whether they will be successful at all (does this person have enough Twitter followers to be a viable book author?). Plumbing the beliefs and practices that drive the

industry as well as the relationships and tensions inherent in this system as a whole will enable a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which larger structural conditions lead to particular kinds of approaches to cultural production.

Authenticity as a key to influence and influencers

While debates about digital labor are not necessarily closed, this dissertation aims to "zoom out" from them to explore the dynamics of the influence industry that provides infrastructure for various forms of digital labor to exist and be rendered valuable. The literature that exists on this topic suggests that these dynamics center on authenticity—specifically on the ways various forces within the influencer industry compete to influence consumers through the building and selection of "authentic" voices of authority.

Although the term "authentic" in the digital realm has generated academic interest in recent years, scholars have not typically described it in industrial terms. As Jessa Lingel (2017) notes, much discussion of authenticity emerges from an "implicit understanding…that the rules and norms of social life restrict people's ability to express themselves fully in person. Online interactions, in contrast, permit people to identify in new ways and to play with presentations of self in terms of their gender, ethnicity, or sexuality." Lingel notes the problems inherent in this general description, most notably that people's claims of digital authenticity sometimes turn out to be superficial attempts to claim certain alternative identities to enhance their egos or the knowing cultivation of personas in the interest of persuading others for the purpose of some form of gain. This tension around the nature and purpose of authenticity is stressed by Banet-Weiser (2012),

who writes that it "is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value…We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we *need* to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange" (p. 5). Recognizing this tension, Lingel highlights the phenomenon of self-branding studied by Marwick (2013a) and notes that "whether in the context of major celebrities or ordinary office workers, the strategic link between self-promotion and the Internet highlights the extent to which our online selves are constantly performed and constructed rather than innate or natural" (Lingel, 2017, p. 26).

Marwick (2013b), in fact, provides a description of the significance of authenticity in fashion blogging, just before the dawn of the new era of digital influencers. She writes, "even in online environments saturated with celebrity culture and marketing rhetoric, authenticity…becomes a way for individuals to differentiate themselves, not only from each other but from other forms of media" (p. 2). She also describes the various ways that bloggers follow the unwritten rules of constructing authenticity:

> First, an authentic blogger is one who reveals something about her true inner self. Second, as a "real person," she extends her honesty and transparency to the relationships with her readers. And finally, an authentic fashion blogger expresses her personal style regardless of trends, sponsors, or free branded goods (p. 4).

Note, though, that Marwick's description of influencers speaks about their creation of authenticity as individual and independent actors despite her understanding that they work within a promotion industry of marketers, retailers, social media and

analytics companies as well as other individual social media influencers. In that sense, both she and Banet-Weiser fit into the confluence of social-psychological and sociological studies over the past several decades that have explored the social influence process but have not delved into the ways in which influence is an industrially constructed concept. Nor have they asked how marketing and retail companies, often drawing on distilled versions of academic models of influence discussed in earlier pages, engage individuals they perceive to be "influential" and attempt to build agendas of authenticity, authority, and consumerism for target audiences.

This dissertation explores the industrialization and leveraging of authenticity in service of influence through an investigation of strategies and tactics of persuasion in social media's "influencer economy." The development of this ecosystem lies at a cross section of literature on influence, celebrity culture, digital media studies, and labor, and has been contextually dependent the changing nature of work—and of media industries—in precarious economies. Its existence has a number of practical ramifications. As Backshy et al (2009) emphasized, "social influence determines to a large extent what we adopt and when we adopt it…and has become of increasing importance due to the deluge of user-generated content on the Internet" (p. 325). The questions asked here are basic but the answers deeply important to understanding the dynamics of persuasion and authority in contemporary digital culture: Who has control over notions of authenticity and, ultimately, influence? How might that impact consumerism? What are the attendant tensions and implications?

More specific questions this dissertation will explore include:

- *What are the operating assumptions held by influencers, retail brands, marketing agencies and other key players regarding the meaning, nature, and role of digital influence, and how do those assumptions play out in practice?*

- *How does perception of social media/"influence" metrics relate to ways in which all three parties—influencers, agencies, and retail brands—choose to partner and the ways they do their work? What are the consequences for the cultural products these actors create—whether it is social media images, advertising campaigns, or material goods?*

- *How do brands and agencies define influencers as useful and authentic? How do brands and agencies select influencers for campaigns? To that end, what types of people are* not *"chosen" in this economy?*

- *What are influencers' strategies for building an audience and a personal brand? How do influencers try to "get chosen" by brands and agencies? How do influencers decide with whom to work?*

- *What kinds of deals are made between agencies, influencers, and brands, and how is that communicated to audiences?*

- *What are the tensions involved in this ecosystem?*

The dissertation explores these questions using a range of qualitative methods. The dissertation also provides necessary historical contexts for the evolution of meanings and practices of influence in the digital era, which is currently absent from the literature.

Method

Sociologists and communication researchers offer forms of mid-level methodology that sets a framework for understanding these types of questions. These approaches are called the "production of culture" perspective (Petersen & Anand, 2004) and "critical media industry studies" (Havens, Lotz & Tinic, 2009). It is important to note that there are differences and points of debate between these approaches—primarily that the "production of culture" perspective advanced by sociologists does not adequately account for the idiosyncrasies that differentiate cultural industries from other organizations—and in many ways the critical media industries approach was a response and corrective to the production of culture approach. But they are joined by two important features. The first feature is a concern with "how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved" (Petersen & Anand, 2004, p. 311). The second feature is an emphasis on taking a "helicopter view" of cultural production processes (Havens et al, 2009). A "helicopter" approach draws on fieldwork and other qualitative analyses, aiming to find a middle ground between the macro-level structural critique offered by traditional political economy (or a "jet plane view," as Havens et al, 2009, argue; see also Hesmondhalgh, 2012) and studies that exclusively privilege audience interpretation (whose optimism, the same authors imply, tends to gloss over structural issues). This approach aims to account for "interactions among cultural and economic forces" (Havens et al, 2009, p. 237) and the "complexity and contradiction of power relations" (Havens et al, 2009, p. 239). Important, too, is rooting current relationships between culture, society, and commerce in historical context (Hesmondhalgh, 2012).

Central to carrying out this method is drawing on diverse data sources in order to gain as full a picture as possible of the site of study. As such, I conducted in-depth interviews with influencers, marketers, retail brand executives, and others engaged in influencer marketing; participant observation at industry events; and close readings of industry press and Instagram. Each of these has strengths and limitations.

- **In-depth interviews.** Between 2015-2018 I conducted 28 interviews with influence industry professionals. I recruited participants by identifying relevant professionals through readings of industry press, web searches, LinkedIn, and Instagram, through meeting people at industry events, and then through snowball sampling. Participants who were not recruited by snowball sampling were cold-contacted via email, in which I introduced myself as a researcher, explained the contours of the project, and asked for a phone call or in-person meeting. Interviews were conducted either in person or, most often, via phone; they varied in length from roughly 20 to 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed by a professional transcription service or me. Participants were given the option to maintain anonymity or grant permission for me to use their real names and/or affiliations in subsequent writing about the research. As such, the dissertation contains a mix of real names and pseudonyms, which are noted by asterisks in-text.

- **Participant observation**. I conducted participant observation, and worked to recruit study participants, at New York Fashion Week S/S 2015 (which took place in September 2014) as well as FashionistaCon 2016, a

conference that brought together marketers, brands, influencers, and

aspiring industry professionals to discuss the prospects for the industry.

- **Readings of industry press and Instagram.** Using a Google News

  search and alert for "influencers," I collected more than two thousand

  press articles on the subject that ranged in date from 2008 to June 2018,

  when I ended collection to begin data analysis. This trove provided a

  historical trajectory of the influencer space as it grew and developed,

  offered relevant statistics, and showed how professionals engaged in the

  influencer ecosystems discussed its tensions and goals. I also consulted

  relevant industry reports, such as those from *eMarketer,* and reports on

  internet and social media use from outlets such as Pew Research, to

  bolster my understanding of the space. Further, through regular use of

  Instagram, I was able to test new influencer-focused technologies as they

  were released. For example, my knowledge of the development and use of

  LikeToKnowIt, a plug-in that makes Instagram shoppable and pays

  influencers a commission of sales made through their content, came from

  using Instagram.

The goal with this three-pronged approach to data collection (and, within the

interviews, further streams of data coming from the different stakeholders of the industry)

was to capture the various levels of activity and articulation of the influencer industry.

Interviews with marketers and retail brands provided insight about the beliefs and

practices (for example, influence measurement and influencer selection) that guided the

economic and technological development of the industry. Interviews with influencers

themselves illuminated the degree to which the standards set by marketers, retailers, and social media companies were successful, and also showed how influencers sometimes oppose prevailing industry norms to advance their own agendas. All of the interviews helped provide necessary historical context for the trajectory of the industry.

Reading industry press and attending industry events provided access to knowledge about how the industry talks about and promotes itself, as well as its goals for the future and what it sees as potential hiccups or roadblocks. Finally, my own use (or "reading") of Instagram proved to be deeply informative for identifying significant trends or changes in the industry, which informed both my interview process and my charting of the industry's history. As Havens et al (2009) explain, part of the goal of this type of research is to "examine the relationships between strategies (here read as the larger economic goals and logics of large-scale cultural industries) and tactics (the ways in which cultural workers seek to negotiate, and at times perhaps subvert, the constraints imposed by institutional interests to their own purposes)" (p. 247). Taken together, this multi-pronged approach was necessary to reveal the tensions, beliefs, practices, and continually negotiated activities of this fast-growing, ever-evolving industry.

A note on positionality

The different ways in which participants responded to the option for anonymity reveals power dynamics and tensions inherent to the influence industry. All brand executives and related professionals (such as the trend forecaster who participated) opted for anonymity, noting concerns about their employer disapproving of them speaking about their work and their potential to reveal "hard truths" about the business that might

reflect poorly upon themselves or their companies. Nearly all influencers and marketers, however, elected to reveal their identities, typically mentioning that they would be "happy to get [their] name out there," as one interviewee said.

Additionally, there are unmistakable gendered dynamics to the landscape of social media content creation, which other researchers (including myself) have explored in other projects (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Hund, forthcoming; Duffy, 2017). In the present study, this is most blatant in the fact that all influencers, brand executives, and other miscellaneous influence professionals who participated were women; any male participant was a marketer (marketing participants were roughly evenly split between men and women). My dissertation centralizes industrial dynamics rather than gender *not* to obscure gender's significance to the industry but to expand upon this previous work and contribute to a different theoretical conversation, and ideally, in so doing, bringing the significance of gender to bear in these other areas of research. This also reflects my personal position that the researchers studying influencers and social media content creators from various perspectives are allies in drawing attention to the ways in which this space dominated by women is a powerful engine of culture. I return to this subject in the dissertation's conclusion, where I assess this study's findings that are specific to gender and their contribution to the broader conversation about women and work.

Chapter overview

In the remainder of this dissertation I show how, in an era where authenticity is increasingly elusive, and trust's and influence's meanings as cultural ideals and their

functions as social processes are muddied, the influence industry struggles to pin these concepts down, stabilize and define them, and make money off of these definitions. To these ends, the actors involved in the influencer system—namely brands, marketers, influencers, and social media companies—work together in a variety of ways both intentional and unintentional, with social, technological, and cultural consequences. The chapters are loosely chronological, but are not an attempt at periodization. Rather, the chronology offers a means of making sense of the industrialization of influence *as a process* that was informed by and responsive to current events. As will become clear in the ensuing chapters, this process was not always linear or evenly paced.

I refer to the development of the influence industry as the *industrialization of influence* because it represents a coordinated collection, processing, and commodification of a good or service. These various groups worked (and continue to work) together to make influence meaningful as a commodity—to give it social meaning as well as financial value as a product, and to build infrastructures for its measurement and sale. Throughout, their work also exhibits themes linked to classical thinking about industrialization and capitalism (e.g. Weber, 1946; Marx, 2012), particularly rationalization, dehumanization, automation, and pivots for continued financial growth and cultural relevancy. These themes intertwine and take turns being at the fore throughout the dissertation.

Earlier in this chapter, I explained how the logic of a digital influencer economy was born out of a "perfect storm" of events in the 2000s. In Chapter Two, I continue forward from this point, showing how a range of creative professionals began working together to rebuild their careers in the wake of the Great Recession, and in so doing,

created the mechanisms and negotiated the terms by which the influence industry would blossom. In Chapter Three, I explore how, once the industry began functioning in a coordinated way, stakeholders aimed to maximize its efficiency by introducing various new technologies for relationship management and monetization. In so doing, the industry grew precipitously, and its growing impact on various cultural products became eminently obvious. Soon, however, a sort of backlash developed. Chapter Four highlights the changing cultural environment of the late 2010s and some specific public events that contributed to wider suspicion about—and regulation for—the influence industry. It then explores how various participants repositioned their work so the industry could continue to thrive. I conclude the dissertation in Chapter Five by discussing the influence industry's ever broadening scope, and its technological, cultural, and material ramifications.

CHAPTER TWO:

(RE)DEFINING THE INFLUENCER

Introduction

In February 2006, *Women's Wear Daily* ran an article covering "the blogs that took over

the tents" at New York Fashion Week (Corcoran, 2006). The piece was a one thousand-

word attempt to grapple with the new presence of bloggers in the fashion industry—both

literally, at runway shows and industry parties, and existentially, as a group of "outsiders"

who had somehow, through the use of the internet, become recognized as voices of

authority. The article trafficked in what most scholars and industry experts now recognize

as tropes about blogging: namely, that it represented a democratic process where "the

population tak[es] control" of the culture (ibid.). The writer made the banal observation

that "the stereotype of a blogger is a lonely soul sitting in her bedroom, sending her

innermost thoughts to anyone who will read them in cyberspace, but blogs are

increasingly taken up by the mainstream" (ibid.).

As the central publication of the fashion industry, *WWD* was trying to make sense

for its readers of these seemingly significant shifts happening in real time. What would

become of these people—mostly young women with little traditional industry

experience—who were sitting front row as experts? The sense was that an imagined but

entrenched industry boundary had been breached. But what did their presence signify for

the industry and broader culture? It would take several years—and complete economic

and industrial upheaval—before observers could begin to formulate a sophisticated

answer. Tellingly, however, the writer noted, "bloggers see themselves as truth tellers in

a world where the truth is hard to come by."

In this chapter

As described in Chapter One, the contemporary influencer industry developed in the mid-to late 2000s amidst a "perfect storm" of technological, historical-cultural, economic, and industrial factors. In this chapter, I will discuss how the industry's growth accelerated precipitously in the years during and immediately following the global financial crisis, fueled by creative people who had been unceremoniously detached from other planned career paths. Both aspiring and established media and marketing professionals began working together—both intentionally and unintentionally, at times cooperatively and contradictorily—to refashion their own careers and create a guide for how culture could be produced in a post-recession, "post-ad," socially-mediated age. While some bloggers and other proto-influencers had worked with advertisers before this time, these relationships had often been exploratory and not well defined. During and after the financial crisis, a cottage industry of marketing middlemen developed, angling to solidify, streamline, and profit from the influencer-advertiser relationship. While these marketing firms positioned themselves as "helping" independent content creators earn money from their passions—and to be sure, working together was financially appealing to all parties—tensions between proto-influencers and marketers existed, particularly in their approaches to personal branding, the labor of social media content production, and the meaning and value of influence and authenticity. In exploring the way stakeholders navigated these fraught concepts as they brought the influencer industry into existence, this chapter illustrates that their primary achievement during these years was defining and

operationalizing an industry logic of cultivated-but-authentic visibility, while evangelizing the values of metrics and self-monetization.

Economic crisis as catalyst

"I started the blog when the economic downturn had affected the amount of work I was doing at my full-time job. I had more time on my hands and, you know, I didn't really have a life that required a ton of attention—[I was] single, 24—and I have a lot of creative energy. I started it as a way to focus on work that interested me and hoped that I would be able to drive a few freelance projects my way. I was blogging as a way to meet people and network." – KATE, designer and influencer, Wit & Delight

"I realized that traditional PR was a dying breed. I was trying to figure out something else to do." – REESA, SVP, Digital Brand Architects

"[My first job] was in traditional PR, but it was, of course, 2008, so it lasted for five minutes." – JESSY, founder of Boldstreak Talent Management

"I wanted to work in magazines, but this was the mid- to late 2000s, and nobody would hire me." – BRITTANY, senior director of influencer strategy and partnerships, Hearst Digital Media

In the late 2000s, millions of Americans were adrift, having lost jobs and homes in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. For a subset of aspiring and established creative

professionals, the internet and its many budding social media platforms seemed to offer a chance to move forward in a time marked by inertia and uncertainty. Using blogs and social media sites like Twitter, tumblr, and Facebook to showcase a "digital resume," express oneself, and connect with others also enabled a sense of control over an unclear and precarious professional situation. While the roots of the influencer economy are long, complex, and not exclusive to the social media age—connecting to the ongoing "celebrification" of everyday people and lifestyles (e.g. Boorstin, 1962; Turner, 2010), the perennial popularity of one-to-one marketing strategies like word-of-mouth and "guerilla" (e.g. Schaefer, 2012; Serazio, 2013), the cultural valorization of entrepreneurship and "doing what you love" (Tokumitsu, 2015, and declining trust in institutions (Harrington, 2017), among other shifts—it was the precipitous increase in creative people looking for work that accelerated and guided the development of the influencer industry, allowing these long-simmering trends to combine and create a new avenue for work. Indeed, it was the work of people determined to move forward professionally—or at least, to not fall out of the workforce altogether—that built the technological infrastructure, social norms, business processes, and commodities that would comprise the influence industry.

As the above *WWD* article illustrates, bloggers were the first to gain public visibility as potential creative change-makers of the social media age. Yet as popular press focused on an adversarial "blogs versus magazines" narrative, the real tensions existed between bloggers/proto-influencers and a new class of digital marketing firms that angled for a share of the financial and social returns bloggers seemed to be receiving—as well as a "power role" (Turow, 1997) in charting the development of the

social media marketing space. These firms appeared rapidly and in a range of business models. Some agencies brokered opportunities for influencers and brands to connect in a transactional manner. Companies like theShelf and IZEA act as clearinghouses, allowing influencers and brands to sign up for access to their proprietary platforms, find each other, and engage in paid campaigns. Marketers search these platforms using keywords to turn up profiles that detail influencers' metrics—particularly their ability to drive sales. For example, a retail brand that specializes in inexpensive workwear for women might search "workwear" and "budget," find influencers who align with these topics, and reach out for collaboration. Other agencies approach influencers directly on behalf of corporate advertising clients, and build up a smaller stable of influencers to whom they can reach out directly with appropriate brand partnership opportunities. Agency representation allows select influencers to have teams of marketing professionals backing their personal brands and seeking out relationships with retail brands. Digital Brand Architects, Socialyte, and the now-defunct but much lauded firm theAudience are examples of this sort of intermediary. Much like traditional Hollywood talent agencies, these companies seek out social media personalities they would like to represent and manage their careers; this includes finding and negotiating deals, coaching influencers through brand relationships and campaigns, and providing general career guidance.

Proto-influencers and influence marketers had varying priorities and assumptions regarding their work, but there was a shared suspicion—and optimism—that there was money to be made, creative freedom to be had, and innovation to be done at the axis of social media, marketing, and creative expression. From roughly 2007 to 2011, the industry expanded exponentially with entrants from all corners (Mediakix, 2017).

Through navigating their daily work of constructing personae on social media and marketing it to audiences and advertisers, an emic set of rules emerged. In what follows, I outline four significant redefinitions that influencers, marketers, and brands arrived at— sometimes through tension-filled negotiations—that set the course for the influencer industry. The efforts covered in this chapter were largely ignored by the press as they happened, and thus took place out of public view; as such, this chapter draws primarily from interviews with the people involved.

Brands as people; people as brands

While marketing scholars and practitioners have long spoken of the need for commercial brands to be more like people (Burns, 2014), this effort became particularly pointed as the advertising industry began trying to reckon with the problem of "increasingly tuned-out consumers" in the twenty-first century (Blankenhorn, 2001). As advertising scholar Michael Serazio observed, "the more obvious [advertisers'] efforts to influence, the more we screen out their messages" (Serazio, 2013, p. 16). In response to this situation, advertisers and marketers have come up with countless ways to try to humanize brands, from hosting events to engaging in social activism. At the same time, cultivating a *personal* brand became increasingly critical to professional success, particularly in the digital economy (Peters, 1997; Hearn, 2008). As bloggers, brands, and marketers began working together in an organized way during the 2000s, they needed to come up with a common language and system of value with which to do business, and "brand" was the answer. "Brands" are neither human nor divorced from humanity (Bogost, 2018). As such, there occurred a simultaneous *collapsing* of self and *building up*

of corporate brands so that they engaged on the same plane and were able to engage and exchange within the marketplace they were creating.

Bringing a company to life: cultivating a voice

A guiding principle from the very beginning of digital influencer marketing was that the days of connecting with customers in a one-to-many model were ending. As one advertising observer reflected in *Adweek,* "People expect brands to talk *with* them rather than *at* them. They no longer expect brands to sell to them, but to entertain and inform them" (Talavera, 2015).

Thomas Rankin, founder of Instagram marketing and analytics firm Dash Hudson, explained that, regardless of company size or particulars of their marketing goals, the guiding question was now: "How do you really connect with your consumer through great content and deepen your engagement with people?" Social media allowed brands to transmute their "brand values"—or words they used to identify and focus the company—into "personalities" in a way that was never before possible. Many viewed this as a powerful evolution of an old marketing practice: word-of-mouth.

"Word-of-mouth is the oldest channel of marketing in the world because it is just people talking and other people listening," reflected Ryan Berger, an early entrant into the influencer marketing field as founder of advertising and marketing firms The Berger Shop and HYPR. "But as the technology started to amplify that word of mouth, it became very clear where this was headed. [It was] so much more efficient and quicker and it reaches so many more people. [We were] moving away from interrupting people and

moving into a thing where you provide value for people by coming up with ideas that become part of their world and their life."

To this end, brands undertook efforts to cultivate a "voice" online. Marketing professionals encouraged brands to "Ask yourself: "Who would my brand be if it was a real person? What would it sound like?" (Purinton, 2017). This was an opportunity to "inject the brand into culture in a different kind of way," Berger said. By making a brand a "personality" that could interact with people on a social media platform, companies and friends could become social equals, with similar abilities to influence—or at least that was the hope.

Indeed, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) observed, "building a brand is about building an affective authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 8). Allison*, a marketing director for a U.S. designer, provided an example of how the designer's brand "humanizes" itself to connect with consumers and the social media strategy behind it:

> We did an event at our store on Bleecker Street and it was called the Leopard Leopard Leopard event. We had Leandra Medine of Man Repeller and our chief creative officer doing a panel. It was livestreamed. [We were] watching and following the commentary on the livestream, keeping tabs on the temperature of whether people seemed like they were interested in the conversation. We had a collaboration with the ASPCA that weekend and had a big activation at the store. So the entire façade was in leopard spots and we were highlighting our leopard print product and made leopard print cat beds; if you adopted a cat from the

ASPCA you got this cat bed. So there was just this thematic leopard spot thing

going on. Seeing how many people reposted that and said, like, 'I wish we could

be there, is this coming to my city'—seeing the kind of comments, and seeing if it

has a sort of viral effect.

Allison* noted that "entertaining, being the consummate host, and throwing

parties" were some of her company's brand values—and thus, by hosting events that

integrated their products and then sharing it online in an affable voice, they were able to

more deeply engage with established and potential customers.

Branding the individual: discipline and distancing

As brands worked to build themselves out into "humanized" social media

personalities, individuals on social media worked to simplify and distill their personalities

into easily understandable personal brands, which—given the economic turmoil of the

era—was increasingly seen as a way to ensure one's financial and social stability (Banet-

Weiser, 2012).

In interviews, influencers describe their processes of personal branding as a form

of disciplining particular aspects of themselves that they wish to project into a cohesive

brand voice that is easily digestible to audiences. As Carissa* explained in an interview,

"I tried to take my personality in real life and then create that, as best as I could, in this

digital way…When you look at it online, it's very colorful. It's all about positivity and

sunshine and travel and just making your life easier as a 20-something. When you meet

me in person I'm all about the same things. I think it just molded from there."

Crucial for influencers, too, is making their personal brands legible to advertisers as a potential partner or vehicle for their own brand messages. In addition to constructing appealing social media feeds, they also use tools borrowed from traditional media industries such as media kits. As Arriagada (2018) points out, influencers' media kits serve as a key means by which they are "assessed and subjected to valuation" (p. 2). Media kits distill personal brands into accessible, bullet-point language; as Erin explained, "In my media kit, when I'm explaining my brand, [I say] it is just a platform women can turn to when they need like a best friend." She then expands on the more complex personal history that her media kit language distilled: "I moved my sophomore year of high school to Texas and everyone had their own groups, and it was hard for me to adjust. So I was actually reading blogs and watching YouTube videos, and I kind of looked at [the content creators] as all my best friends. I felt like I knew them because they shared so much of their life—but of course I didn't…[but] I loved how much it did for me. So when I started my blog that's what I wanted."

Influencers readily acknowledge that, despite their appearances of being forthcoming, the personal brand is obfuscatory by necessity. "Of course there's always that aspect of filtering it a little bit because I'm also a working professional," Carissa* explained. Individual personalities are too complicated and contradictory to be captured in the clear, bullet-point legibility required by advertisers, so a distancing occurs: *this is me, and this is my personal brand*. Constructing a personal brand for social media often, ultimately, amounts to creating an avatar of the self, one that is cloaked in discourses of "realness" (Duffy, 2017).

Heidi, a top-tier fashion and lifestyle influencer, was a former investment banker who transitioned into fashion writing just as influencer marketing was beginning to develop in the 2000s. She described a reluctance to call herself a "blogger" or an "influencer" and construct a personal brand online, but realized that the visually-oriented personal brand was becoming a necessity for success in the creative economy of the social media age:

> I live in Los Angeles and I thought, 'OK, I see all these girls, they're posing on the beach literally in bikinis at sunset, rolling on the grass, and I thought, oh, that's what I needed to do. And I did that, but I felt weird about it because first of all, I don't do that [laughs]. I don't roll through the grass, talk about sunsets and be dreamy, I'm not that sort of person. And it made me so uncomfortable…When I realized why, and I realized, you know, that I need to stop trying to be whatever these girls are and I kind of stepped back. I talked to someone and she said, 'Heidi, you have this amazing corporate background, you're very intellectual and you have a lot of strong opinions, so why don't you just try to be yourself instead of being another LA girl, for lack of a better phrase, rolling around on the beach in a bikini?' And I said, yeah, that's kind of true, and I stopped doing that, kind of a 360 where I just, I became myself. An amplified version of myself, for sure. Still myself, but an amplified version. So we're talking lots of power suits, lots of photos of me working, looking like I'm out there conquering the world. And that worked, and I felt happy because I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not. Obviously, I still wear sweatpants at home…but back in the early days, if you

look, it's lots of tailored clothing, and just looking like this boss lady who's

killing it. And that really worked for me.

As personal branding on social media became an answer to "a world where more people

than ever are operating as freelancers and are having to invent business models to support

themselves" (Clark, 2014), individuals began to need to treat themselves more like media

businesses—and less like people who were "fun, free, and just being me" (Duffy &

Wissinger, 2017). While their efforts to be "real" were often genuine, they began to adopt

practices long associated with traditional media businesses, such as scrutinizing audience

demographics and adjusting their branding accordingly. Heidi recalled working with a

branding expert to help develop her social media presence:

She said, 'there are certain things that sound more confident and would resonate

more with the kind of women you want.' So we developed that. The visuals came

together after a few months. And we changed the [blog] name. And honestly,

once that change came, the improvement in the reach and the follow rate just sort

of exploded because it resonated with what women wanted.

Ironically, Heidi observed, "when you become yourself"—notably, expressed in the

language of the brand—"people can see *she's not trying to fake it*."

Brand exchanges

As corporate brands and individual people began, with the help of marketers, to

understand themselves as the same types of commodities existing in the influencer

marketplace, they were better able to determine who might match with whom for

sponsorship deals that would be financially and reputationally beneficial for both parties.

By speaking the same language of brand "voice" and scrutinizing audience size and demographics like a traditional media company would, they made decisions about brand "fit" (Duffy, 2017)—or whether a partnership would be appropriate.

Carissa* is an influencer and maintains a full-time job on the influence marketing team for an American fashion designer. As an influencer, she said, "I do my research. I look at all their social platforms. I see what their engagement is like and how far along they are as a business. I love working with female-owned and founded businesses as well. Just little tidbits like that—that I can relate to, and I think are on brand, or I believe in paying for—are all things I take into consideration." As an influence marketer for a designer, she continued, "I really take [influencers'] personalities into consideration and see how creative they are in taking on our brand voice but making it their own in a really special way that will connect with their audience."

While constructing a brand and making it profitable is—for individuals and advertisers—quite labor- and time-intensive (Duffy & Hund, 2015b), many interviewees emphasized that too much *effort* in these relationships could be a signal that the influencer's brand and the advertiser's brand were not a good match. Annette*, director of marketing for a digitally native women's fashion brand, said, "I don't really want to be working with girls and forcing them to create content that they don't want to create. I want to be working with girls that truly believe this is an amazing brand and they love the clothes and they love working with us and it's a relationship—and that's truly what it is behind the scenes as much as it is on social media."

As individuals and advertising brands endeavored to engage in the influencer marketplace, they adjusted their identities and means of expression to suit each other and

the audiences they deemed desirable. As Erica*, another influencer marketing professional who also had begun to monetize a personal brand on social media, said, the landscape had developed to "kind of an amazing place, where people are brands and they have all the capability to fully develop businesses online through that." At the same time, she worried about the longevity of the situation, musing, "to see it grow will be kind of scary because…what does that look like?"

Followers/audiences as assets

At the same time that participants in the burgeoning influence industry redefined certain people and companies into persona-inflected brands, they came to understand other people—namely, the faceless members of the social media "audience"—as economic assets. This followed in a long historical trajectory of media audiences being understood as commodities (for an overview, see McGuigan & Manzerolle, 2014b). The notion of "the audience" was often mentioned but rarely interrogated in burgeoning influencer ecosystem of the 2000s. Yet various stakeholders' approaches to the audience—imagining it, cultivating it, and measuring it—were critical to influencers' transition from amateur bloggers to professional cross-platform personal brands, from unpaid to advertiser-supported workers, and from marginal to powerful cultural forces. Further, the push to view followers as economic assets also revealed how influencers, marketers, and brands were negotiating bigger questions related to the nature of creative production in the social media age.

Importing an "institutional" logic

Ang (1991) and others have described the "institutional point of view" that guided mass media industries' approaches to audiences throughout the twentieth century. This point of view implies that audiences are faceless groups onto which economic or cultural "aspiration and expectations, policies and planning schemes are projected" (Ang, 1991, p. 2); they are "quantifiable economic assets" (Baym, 2013, p. 3). As Napoli (2011) points out, a wealth of industry research has "illustrated how the concept of the audience is constructed and defined to reflect the economic and strategic imperatives of media organizations," and, further, that "media organizations define audiences in particular ways, using analytical tools and perspectives that reflect their needs and interests" (p. 3).

Like the television industry of Ang's focus and the other mass media industries that ruled the twentieth century, the social media audience is measured, analyzed, and delivered to advertisers to propel the influence industry. Social media audiences' digital traces—much more easily collected than, for example, television viewers' habits—allow industrial measurement and analyses to occur at ever more individualized and granular levels. The notion of audience "engagement"—clicks, purchases, and other quantifiable indicators of media content's assumed *effects* on audiences—became central to the way marketers, influencers, and advertisers thought about social media audiences (Napoli, 2011; Kerani, 2013).

Through their language and practices in the 2000s, influence marketers encouraged budding influencers to follow their "economic and strategic imperatives" (Napoli, 2011), helping to guide this emergent medium into one that would support individual users as miniature media companies and establish a norm that "user generated content" could be advertiser-supported. Tensions came to exist, however, between

influencers' desires for more personal interactions with followers, and the marketers and advertisers who encouraged a streamlined and strategic approach.

Interacting with the Audience: Creativity and strategy

In interviews, influencers made it clear that they viewed themselves primarily as creative people who happen to be able to make a living from these impulses. "I've always been a little bit more of a creative versus, like, sort of the analytic type gal. So the flow [of the blog was to] kind of move with my life," explained Kate, a designer and lifestyle blogger. "I want to create all day long now," said Jeanette, a fashion blogger. "I just want to concentrate on, like, making beautiful pictures and just being creative." She continued, "I have to stay true to myself."

Comments such as these conjure up an image of the "lone creative genius," a well-wrought myth of creative production that implies that the work is a solo endeavor—where a creatively gifted person silos herself away until inspiration strikes. Many researchers of creativity have deconstructed this myth over the years, pointing to the importance of social, historical, and political contexts for creative production (e.g. Simonton, 2000). Yet the myth continues to be pervasive, particularly in the technology sector, where Marwick (2013a) pointed out that the successful "bootstrapped" entrepreneur is lauded for his or her singular ingenuity.

Despite their emphasis on their individualized creativity, influencers also discussed the role of their followers in the creative process. Lindsay, for example, described a more affective or emotional investment in "putting herself out there" for the audience:

"I think that my audience has become what it is because of my voice and the way that I blog, if that makes sense. Storytelling is a huge part of it. And that doesn't mean that every post really tells a story, but the majority of mine do… I really tried, once I started [my blog], to just be like: you know, here's me. I've really tried to just be me, and here's what I'm naturally gonna share, and I think people have responded well to that. I want myself and who I am as a person woven throughout the blog, just because that's the only way that I could enjoy doing it."

Others described more business-like approaches in the way they took their followers into account creatively. "It takes time to figure out what works for you and what doesn't work for your audience, what they like, what they don't like, so they would keep coming back," Brittiny, a city-focused fashion blogger, said. Kate recalled the creative and strategic adjustments she made with her blog a year or two prior to our interview, as the blogging market had become more saturated: "I think I just reacted to the fact that I wanted to keep my audience," she said. Audrey, meanwhile, noted that she conducts audience surveys a few times each year to ensure that she provides content that they want.

In reflecting on their creative processes and their audiences' roles in them, then, influencers ultimately described a situation of continual negotiation between creativity and strategy. The influencers maintained that honoring their own creative satisfaction and impulses ("being true" to themselves) were the ultimate drivers of their decisions. Yet they also acknowledge that they wanted (and needed, for the sake of their careers) their content to resonate with their audiences.

Marketing firms, on the other hand, sent clear messages about the nature of influencers' creative work and the role of the social media audience in it. In interviews and on their websites and other public marketing materials, these agencies tended to describe influencers in one of two ways. They might be "publishers" or "content creators," invoking an efficient, corporate approach to creative production. Or they might be "channels" who are "activated" in service of retail brands' needs—rationalizing away their personhood altogether. To marketers, the audience is often conceptualized a receptacle for branded deliverables: "professional quality, platform-optimized content," as the HelloSociety agency described it on their website. Creativity on the part of the influencer is both encouraged and restrained; once a person becomes a bankable "influencer," her role is to be a "trusted media property" (according to theAudience) that delivers consistent and continual content across platforms. HelloSociety further explained that the goal of influencers' is making content that meets certain metrics:

> "A successful social media campaign means constantly monitoring your audience and making changes to the content, voice and network without compromising quality or authenticity. Through detailed analytics across our network and even through to our partners' properties, we help both brands and influencers meet their goals together."

Marketing firms tended to describe influencers as a mass of data points that could be aggregated into verticals and statistically analyzed; they became significant only when they can use their creativity for an effective, applied purpose. As agency rhetoric makes clear, a successful creative worker in the social media age is one who "shine[s] themselves up" (as Kate said in our interview) to be a mouthpiece for brands. At the same

time, influencers attempt to hold onto a feeling of personal connection with their audiences.

"You know, it's fun to do it for yourself, but I wouldn't do it as much, not like everyday or multiple times a day, if it weren't for the people who follow me who ask questions and really are interested," Carissa* reflected. "I look at my audience like they're my friends," Maranda said. "I've connected with so many genuine people that I've never met in person. I talk to about 15 girls a day that I've never met and I consider them my best friends…so when I put out a post, I want to be helping other friends."

Influencers both cultivate and care for their audiences—cherishing the personal connections while also leveraging them in the marketplace. Indeed, in interviews, influencers often responded to the question of "who is your audience?" by rattling off statistics and demographics: "my audience is primarily females who are mid-high school to mid 20's, but then I also do have a number of very loyal moms. I have a lot of East Coast followers as well, but I do know that my top cities are New York, Dallas, Philadelphia, and Chicago," Carissa* reported.

Ultimately, the negotiations over how to understand the social media audience showed that the influence industry would ultimately expand and digitize a longstanding marketing practice: "friendship becomes a raw commodity to be instrumentalized like any other resource" (Serazio, 2013, p. 121).

Influence is measurable and monetizable

Participants in the nascent influence industry realized that for stability and longevity, they needed to offer a clearly defined product. The notion of digital influence

became a convenient way to communicate the economic and cultural potential of the

brands and audiences that existed on social media. While marketers and scholars had

studied and utilized quantitative measures of influence for decades before this time, the

user-friendly social media technologies and metrics tools offered in this era were able to

distill and make meaningful a particular idea of influence and make it widely accessible.

Influencers used tools like Google Analytics and the individual analytics available from

platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and later Instagram; influencer marketing firms also

built their own propriety platforms, often charging a subscription fee, that measured

digital influence at massive scale, often tracking metrics for hundreds, sometimes

thousands or millions, of potential influencers.

The idea that digital influence could be tracked, measured, and monetized was

initially put into practice by a company called Klout. Klout launched in 2008 with the

goal of tracking and ranking the influence of every person online. The company's

technology combed through social media data, primarily from Twitter, and assigned

every user a score based on a variety of factors including follower count, frequency of

posts, the Klout scores of friends and followers, and the number of likes, retweets, and

shares received. The only way to *not* be scored was to opt out of Klout on their website—

meaning that even social media users who did not know the company existed were still in

their database. Klout users with high enough scores were eligible for "perks"—

connections to brands that were willing to give out free goods in return for "influential"

online praise. Klout's executives saw the company as providing a roadmap for brands to

find "society's hidden influencers," and envisioned a future where "people with

formidable Klout scores will board planes earlier, get free access to VIP airport lounges,

stay in better hotel rooms, and receive deep discounts from retail stores and flash-sale outlets" (Stevenson, 2012.). "We say to brands that these are the people they should pay attention to most," a company vice president was quoted as saying. "How they want to do it is up to them" (ibid.).

Klout and its competitors like PeerIndex found a fan in author and marketer Mark Schaefer, who espoused his belief that such social scoring represented the "democratization" of social influence (Schaefer, 2012). Yet in practice these services more often amounted to discrimination: Klout received sharp criticism for its methodology, and worrisome stories, like that of job seekers being rejected from opportunities because their influence scores were too low, circulated in the press (Stevenson, 2012). In 2014, the company was sold to Lithium Technologies, who shut down the service for good in 2018.

While the marketers interviewed for this study maintained that they had not been inspired by Klout when starting their own influence-based ventures, Klout's initial success did help to normalize the idea that "regular people" could leverage their social media followings for commercial benefit. Further, it also lighted a path for the digitization of word-of-mouth marketing—that particularly potent form of marketing whose importance Berger, the agency founder, explained (and countless researchers have confirmed over the years (e.g. Keller, 2007)—and provided evidence that there was a market for middleman-type firms that brought individuals and brands together for advertising and publicity campaigns.

Measuring influence

Marketers, influencers, and brands toggled with various "metrics of influence" in an effort to determine which most effectively captured an individual influencer's value. Early proponents of social media monetization prioritized follower counts, subscribing to the theory that "bigger is better." Yet that soon fell away in favor of more specific measurements such as click-through, conversion, and the crucial *engagement* metric—or the rate at which audience members click, watch, "like," or otherwise provide digital evidence that they have *engaged with* content. Tensions existed among those involved in the influencer ecosystem about the importance, accuracy, and appropriate use of various metrics.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, early influencer marketing firms built the argument for the primacy of metrics (and in turn, the value of the firms' very existence) by using the language of innovation. They touted their exclusive, cutting-edge metrics technology: Style Coalition claimed on their website that their platform was "an industry first," offering "verified stats" that measured influencers' "reach and impact by viewing their fans and followers across blogs and social platforms." Firms also hyped their own reach: theAudience announced on their website that they offered "a unique blend of creativity, proprietary technology, and influencer amplification [that] enables artists and brands to collaborate in popular culture and syndicate content to over 1 billion consumers" and boasted that their BackStage platform "manages every stage of the social publishing process, at massive scale."

While each influencer in this study described her own strategy for understanding and utilizing her influence metrics, a common thread existed among them in the way they characterized their relationship with metrics over time: at first, "obsessed" (as Lindsay

put it), constantly wondering how their content was doing and checking their analytics (typically via an iPhone app, readily available at all hours); later, a period of realization as they determined they should re-center themselves around their creative voices in order to bring both personal and professional success and fulfillment; and finally, a feeling of regained control, deciding to have a less emotional attachment to the numbers, checking them occasionally to be aware of what was going on and to make rational, well-informed, creative-driven decisions from them.

Lindsay was in the midst of moving from her "realization" stage to her "control" stage at the time of our interview. "I try to really let go of the numbers and love what I'm posting, and do my job well and kind of let the chips fall where they may… I've just found there's no way to really tell [what is going to do well]," she said. Yet she continued, "that being said, like, I'm going through this huge Pinterest overhaul right now. I definitely do give thought to what performs well and what doesn't and why."

Jeanette was firmly in the stage of feeling in control. In her nearly 10 years of blogging, she had dealt with a notable amount of cyber harassment, which had led her to develop a firm point of view about how much attention should be paid to people who may be reading the blog. "I want a general sense [of how things are going] but I'm also like: okay, *whatever*, you know? It is what it is," she said. Jeanette emphasized the affective and interactive relationship she has with her dedicated readers as paramount; she prefers to learn about what her audience likes by talking to them. "I'm a marketing ninja but a metrics hippie. I kind of have a general idea of how the audience is feeling about something because I look at comments, and there's kind of a general number of likes [I typically get], and it's, like, a general feeling," she explained. "But, I am totally

stubborn, and I do what I want. I'll blog about what makes me happy and that's about it…because I really think there's so much noise that tries to get you involved in what people are saying."

The "noise" Jeanette was referring to was not only the criticism of "anti-fans" (McRae, 2017; addressed further in chapter 4) but also the industry rhetoric that attempted to guide influencers' attention to certain types of deals and methods for getting them. The influencers I interviewed who had worked with an influencer agency tended to describe these relationships as fraught ("very tumultuous" as Kate described it). There was a clear power struggle between the influencers—who were interested in influence metrics but increasingly trying to pull away from them in favor of interaction with their audiences—and the marketing firms who were pushing influencers and brands to sign on for their metrics and management services.

Notably, the social media audience was at the center of this struggle—but the way in which the audience was implicated was a departure from prior models. For example, radio, television, and film audiences have been measured (through tools such as Nielsen ratings and box office sales) for decades, but with often unpredictable consequences: low ratings are often cause for cancellation of a television show, but not always. Films that "bomb" at the box office are typically dubbed failures, yet numerous films and television shows that were considered poor or mediocre at their time of release have later become "cult favorites" or had significant impact on cultural production in years following. Fan studies show other ways that audiences might impact production, often through individual back-and-forth relationships rather than quantification (e.g. Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). Yet neither mass media measurement tools nor fan-producer

communications could ever purport to capture everyone *actually in* the audience. In the

influence economy, each member of the audience is watched; their every click and "like"

tracked, counted, and analyzed[2]. The influencers I interviewed endeavored to use this

data sparingly and not define themselves by it; others, meanwhile, angled for it to directly

determine content production.

Monetizing influence

Only once influence could be measured could it be shaped into a good and

assigned monetary value—and monetization was the goal, particularly given the

tumultuous economic context of the late 2000s. In these early years, brands and

marketers approached bloggers and other social media users in order to initiate a

professional relationship, espousing the idea that these users could and should recognize

their digital influence and monetize their followings. "I was, like, the third [Pinterest]

Pinner they funded, and I was naïve," Kate, the lifestyle and design influencer, reflected

on her early relationship with an influencer firm, "honestly, it was really embarrassing. I

was like, 'oh, you can get paid?'"

While influencers and influence agencies came to share the goal of monetization,

at this time, they often differed in their approaches to making it happen. To agencies,

optimizing monetization was central. Influencers, instead, preferred to recognize that

behind every blog was a person who has her own set of goals, creative impulses, and

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[2] Revelations in the 2010s of rampant "fake followers" complicated how marketers
translated influencers' audience metrics into measures of influence (discussed in detail in
Chapter Four), but the understanding that audiences could and should be equated with
influence remained unchallenged.

needs. "That's the first thing, when you're talking about monetization, is that every blog is so different," Jeanette said.

"There's so many ways you can go, and that's one thing that excites me so much," Lindsay explained. "I have friends who get a third of the followers I do or less, and they make three times what I do, and they don't even have ads on their site. It's just from [things like] shoppable Instagram. And then I have a lot of friends who have just grown an awesome following, so they make the vast majority of their income from ads. That's really my goal at this point: to just continue building my brand to the point that ads and sponsorships pay my salary." Lindsay's description of monetization highlights some of the different revenue streams that influencers could pursue: banner advertising on blogs, affiliate links, and sponsored content. Each type of revenue has different implications. Banner ads, for example, require no creative effort on behalf of the blogger; they simply sell ad space on their sites. Affiliate links are particularly useful for fashion bloggers or others, like DIY or interior design, that frequently discuss specific products, as the blogger earns a small amount for every click-through or purchase that a reader makes. Sponsorships or partnerships require the most creative effort on behalf of the blogger, as this is when a brand or a product is fully integrated into content. Lindsay's goal was to emphasize ads and sponsorships; Jeanette, on the other hand, earned most of her income from affiliates and sponsorships. The influencers interviewed for this study emphasized that they had to figure out what monetization tactics worked for them, given their creative inclinations and the preferences of their audiences. As Audrey admitted, "a huge thing that goes into blogging is looking at what does well and what doesn't. Especially if

you're putting that much time into it, or paying photographers, paying videographers…I

don't want to pay for that and not reap the benefits or [have] my audience not like it."

Authenticity governs the process of monetizing influence, but it often means

different things to influencers and to marketers and brands, particularly in this early era.

In the face of increasing pressure to monetize, influencers aimed to maintain what they

saw as the creative drive that brought them to social media in the first place. They hoped

to make money in a way that felt pure to them and not feel, or be perceived, as if they

were "selling out" (Duffy, 2017). Marketing firms attempted to prove that they, too, were

"authentic"—or understanding of creative processes, and not necessarily looking for

profit—in the way they publicly positioned themselves. theAudience distanced itself

from its industry, announcing, "we think like publishers, not like marketers."

RewardStyle framed their work as that of empowerment: "Empowering the world's

publishers & retailers to maximize market potential." Indeed, most influence marketing

firms positioned themselves as "helping"—though helping meant measuring and

monetizing in ways that were not always agreeable to all involved.

Authenticity as perception

The process of commodifying influence through standardizing measurement and

monetization showed that authenticity was the axis on which the influence industry

would spin. The early bloggers and other social media users who were able to monetize

their influence did so by leveraging their "real" relationships with their followers—a

sense of "realness" that had come to exist, in part, because they *were not* monetized

(Ronan, 2015). Yet as individual monetization permeated the social media ecosystem,

marketers, advertisers, influencers and their followers had to figure out a way to continue moving forward. Marketers did not make it their businesses to ensure that what happened behind the scenes with an influencer's work process was "authentic" to whoever she "really" was—merely that it appeared that way. (And, as an agency executive said in an interview, "The second the influencer starts saying, 'yeah I do it because its authentic,' that means the authenticity has totally gone out the window.") Influencers wanted to "be true" to themselves, but faced an industrial reality that might not always support that.

In their exploration of authenticity, social media, and contemporary politics, Gaden & Dumitrica (2015) point out that authenticity was historically understood "as an ethic for living a virtuous life" (p. 2). Authenticity was linked to political engagement; by understanding oneself, one could understand others, and be a better citizen. Yet, they observe, the "strategic authenticity" that has become standard for social media users of all stripes "reinforces a consumerist attitude, where the individual presents herself on social media in order to be 'consumed' by others" (ibid.). As Chapter One showed, this marriage of authenticity and strategy for persuasive messaging is not a product of the social media age—and, further, deploying "realness" in commercial advertising has long been popular, perhaps made most famous by the 2000s-era Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Yet the gradual de-politicization of authenticity has also defanged the concept of any significant social meaning. In the influence industry, authenticity is significant only inasmuch as it can be perceived and given numeric and financial value; it is purely instrumental, even as it remains a resonant ideal. Influencers, marketers, social media companies and users navigated this situation as they—intentionally or not—helped bring it into being.

Being "true"

In interviews, influencers tended to describe their own drives for authenticity as a twofold desire: to "be true" to themselves—meaning that they created content that resonated with them personally—and to represent themselves truthfully online. As Lindsay reflected:

"You know, a lot of people out there will tell you…that you have to be super professional. [Readers] don't even need to know who writes the blog. You can't talk about beliefs. You can't give your opinion on anything. But for me I just—I do not function that way. I feel like I'm lying."

At the same time, being true to oneself and striving for "real" representation of one's life does not mean sharing everything. The process of self-branding, by necessity, entails curation. In order to be legible as a viable personal brand, one must have a clear message and fairly predictable posting practices, from the "cadence" (or how often new content is posted) to its aesthetic. Cohesiveness and consistency are key. Duffy (2017) illustrates how influencers and users who aspire to be them must reconcile the "seemingly incongruous values of authenticity and profit making" (p. 104), typically by constructing themselves as relatable and aligning their personae with an imagined "everyday girl" reader with a middle class background and values (p. 108).

Indeed, Audrey explained the strategic thinking and effort behind a single video she posted on Instagram and YouTube:

I actually just hired a guy to help me work kind of behind the scenes…he goes through my stuff and sees what works well or what people interact with. He said,

'every time you share something about your life or a photo that's not perfectly done, it does well. It works better than others.' So he's like, 'what if you started sharing just more real life?' We threw some ideas around and I was like, OK, I'm not sure I'm really comfortable with doing that video on Instagram because I feel like it's front and center to everyone. If I put it on YouTube not as many people will click to it [laughs], but I filmed it and it did really well. I got really good feedback, emails from girls who were like, 'I love this!' But yeah, Instagram is just so pretty and I put so much thought into just posing it. And my room is such a mess half the time and if I take a photo in my room, everything is thrown into a corner. And no one sees that. So it's just, I don't know, to me, more relatable. I feel like that's what makes me gravitate to other girls is just, someone who isn't just all put together and fake and pretty. It's someone who actually shares their real life.

Further, influencers must carefully calibrate their campaigns so as not to diminish their feeds' relatability. As Brittiny said, "I don't want to feel like I'm always trying to get my followers to buy something. I try not to get too many sponsored posts at any time, so that it looks like *she's just in it for money*. I try to break everything up." Brittiny also explained how she strives for authenticity when seeking out branding deals, remembering a campaign she agreed to with a brand that did not actually resonate with her personally. She ultimately decided, "this isn't me; I'm not going to do this."

The ways in which brands and marketers discuss authenticity makes clear that it exists only as perception. As a marketing director at a fast-growing apparel startup told me, "we value the *idea* of authenticity" and the company looks for influencers whose

content "has an authentic *feel* to it" (emphasis added). They have no means—and no time—for evaluating whether an influencer's content is actually true to her life, so they rely on their "gut" reactions to influencers' content.

Further, an interviewee who had worked in marketing for American designers for a decade and was in the process of launching her own influencer career observed, "I think if you're showing enough of your personality and *it seems like who you are*, [emphasis added] then I think that's the most important thing. I think people are [following] people that they're interested in and they want to see what they're doing, or where they're going, what they're eating. You're trying to successfully capture the 'someone,' so much so that they want to be your friend or they want to be involved in your life to the point that they're subscribed, so to speak."

Influencers need to share enough "truth"—constructed textually, visually, and interpersonally through responding to followers—to be able to be perceived as authentic. No one to whom they might be accountable—such as sponsors—has the resources to verify whether it is accurate.

"Authentic but not accurate"

In order to reconcile the competing demands to "be true" with the needs of advertisers for predictable, reliable, and measurable media channels, participants in the influence industry constructed a differentiation between authenticity and accuracy, affirming authenticity's place as a subjective evaluation rather than a distinct concept.

Brittany Hennessy, who directs the influencer booking department for a major media company, described, for example, how influencers were often expected to look

conventionally attractive when selling a product. "In a way, that's where you might run into the authenticity problem," she said. "It's like, I understand you need to look pretty when you take a picture because I don't want to see a picture of you after you've run two miles. You're not gonna look super cute, and it's not gonna make me want to buy this water. So I see why you lie [laughs]…so maybe the content isn't 100 percent accurate, but it's probably still authentic."

Heidi, the fashion and lifestyle blogger, remembered:

"When I first started I would be more relaxed in the kind of sponsors I would go for. Let's say I don't use anything but iPads but let's say Verizon comes to me with this tablet that kind of looks like an iPad but it's not. And I have to be honest. This is a decision I would not make today, but back then I would say, yeah, I can do that. It paid a lot and I needed the money and campaigns weren't easy to come by, so you're kind of silly if you're gonna say no. It's not like these are drugs [laughs], they're tablets. So I wasn't really lying, I did talk about the benefits of the tablet and I did use it, blah blah blah, but if you want me to be honest—are you gonna use your iPad or are you gonna use this pseudo iPad/tablet, you're gonna use the iPad. But because this brand came to you, you took this campaign."

Beth, an influencer marketing manager for an American ecommerce startup, noted that influencers are "really just about *showcasing* what's real in their lives [emphasis added]—even if it is a little bit posed or staged."

Despite the often-genuine desire on the part of members of the influencer industry to "be true," their work requires them to rely on a paradoxical version of authenticity—

"realness" that exists only in perception. As Duffy (2017) observed, the "conceptual imprecision" of authenticity in the social media sphere "enables bloggers to deploy these terms in ways that resonate with their ever-shifting allegiances—to themselves, to their audiences, to their advertisers, and to members of the public who celebrate them for wresting power from fashion's old guard" (p. 135).

Conclusion

The tremendous growth and increased visibility of the influencer economy in the mid- to late 2000s helped to cement its reputation as the most accessible pathway for creative success in an age of otherwise decreased opportunities. As bloggers and other proto-influencers began working in a more formalized way with brands and new class of influence-focused marketers, they negotiated the meaning and significance of a range of concepts that would come to guide their industry.

Marketers aimed to encourage a new way of imagining and using social platforms that felt frictionless and inevitable: where everything is measurable and a potential channel of commerce. Influencers—those who turned posting on social media into a job—enjoyed the expanded income opportunities that marketers offered, but also worked to defend their creativity and autonomy in an increasingly rationalized and competitive environment. Popular metrics platforms encouraged social media users to view their audiences as potentially monetizable or otherwise quantifiable for personal gain (such as branding deals or higher status)—in a sense, contributing to what Jose van Dijck (2013) described as a social media culture of commercially-focused "connectivity" rather than connection.

Influencers and marketers sometimes tussled over how monetization should proceed, and through their work a set of definitions emerged to guide the burgeoning industry. The ultimate consensus that people and companies should engage using the language and self-identity of "brands," that these brands should view their social media audiences as economic assets, that these could be quantified and leveraged as metrics of influence, and that the authenticity on which this system relied was meaningful only as much as it was believable set the course for the influencer ecosystem to develop, within a few short years, into a multibillion-dollar industry that would rearrange the logic of cultural production.

While influencers often described themselves in interviews as satisfied with their jobs—and often, "lucky"—they acknowledged the limits. As Kate said of this period, "it's all about how [influence marketers] are able to best inspire or keep influencers moving on the track they want it to go."

CHAPTER THREE:

RATIONALIZING THE INFLUENCER

Introduction

As the second decade of the twenty-first century began, excitement continued to grow around the ability to measure and monetize individuals' social media followings to deliver targeted advertising messages. Advertising industry leaders and academic researchers were once again touting the "pass-around power of everyday people" (Evans, 2012) that Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) had popularized, and industry insiders were bullish about leveraging it on social media platforms' unprecedented scale. Advertising and marketing professionals envisioned a social media environment where individuals and brands worked ever more harmoniously to deliver authentic-but-sponsored content to niche audiences. As *Advertising Age* pronounced, "Consumers must prove willing and successful in helping drive value for a brand—whether that value comes from providing insight and ideas or successfully spreading the word about products. In return, the brand must have a way to identify those who create value for it, and have ways to retarget and communicate with them on an ongoing basis, building a deeper relationship" (Evans, 2012).

During the next several years, those means of identifying, measuring, and monetizing influencers matured in particular ways aimed at maximizing efficiency. This transformed the influencer space from a haphazard ecosystem of actors into a more smoothly functioning industry, with clearer goals and roles for various participants. By 2015, popular narratives about the influencer industry remained positive and sometimes

grandiose: *Adweek* estimated that 75 percent of marketers utilized influencers (Morrison, 2015) and venture capital flowed into the space (Brouwer, 2015). At the same time, however, a small subset of critics was beginning to emerge. One of these was Tay Zonday, who had who had experienced the promises and perils of digital influence in a particularly heightened way since accidentally achieving viral fame in 2007 for his "Chocolate Rain" video. He reflected to *New York* magazine:

> "In 2015, internet influence is an accepted fetish. No hyperbole can describe the way every person and brand is frantically inflating social-media metrics as a form of 'digital plastic surgery.' We all want to be influencers. Every facet of our self-actualization is enhanced by appearing to be the biggest digital Pied Piper. Digital influence is now the costume of our century and a problematic eugenics for sorting human value" (Rainey, 2015).

Indeed, in the increasingly commercialized, social media-focused, and *sprawling* internet environment of the early 2010s, the notion of "digital influence" became an efficient means of identifying people's value: amidst the immense noise of social media content, who should be singled out as worth listening to, what should they say to obtain and maintain that position of power, and how can they more consistently earn money from it? In this period, marketers and brands worked together to rationalize this process.

In this chapter

The influencer industry expanded rapidly as its participants operationalized the guiding definitions discussed in Chapter Two. With this expansion came forces of rationalization, as companies and individuals sought to make influencer marketing more

efficient. This chapter presents an overview of industry stakeholders' various efforts to streamline, commercialize, and optimize the notion of digital influence and the growing influence industry. It illustrates how these strategic moves enabled the industry to experience sharp growth, while at the same time undermining its democratic and authentic self-image. By arbitrarily assigning value to certain metrics, minimizing or exploiting the labor of countless aspiring influencers, and de-incentivizing creative risk taking—among other activities—the influencer ecosystem quickly evolved into a highly lucrative and highly visible industry, critical to the marketing plans of brands of all sizes and product specializations. Indeed, *WWD* dubbed 2015 the "year of the influencer," and Google noted that same year that the keyword "influencer marketing" had reached "breakout" status, meaning it was "experiencing growth greater than 5000 percent" (Talavera, 2015). By year's end, however, a pair of high profile events put the industry on the brink of yet another precipice.

Streamlining

In the early 2010s, the rapid uptake in smartphone use[3] shifted internet users' attention to mobile devices, and, with the launch of popular apps like Instagram, helped usher in the "decline of blogging" (Pavlika, 2015a) and the rise of the "digital influencer." As bloggers "fanned out onto other social platforms and, importantly…no longer expect[ed] to make a living by blogging alone" (Segran, 2015), "influencer" became the go-to terminology for these multi-platform personal brands that boasted

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[3] According to the Pew Research Center, in 2011, 35% of the U.S. population owned a smartphone; in 2017, 77% did—making them "one of the most quickly adopted consumer technologies in recent history" (Perrin, 2017).

impressive followings. In a *Fast Company* article addressing the so-called end of "the golden age of blogging," a marketing executive noted that "influencers have a more nuanced and complex strategy…they use different social platforms to build their brand; their blogs are just one extension of this effort to engage followers" (ibid.).

New influence marketing agencies continued to appear, merge, shutdown, and pivot at a rapid clip as they searched for ways to further develop—and profit from—digital influence. While their specific approaches and offerings differed (see Chapter Two for a basic overview of various business models), the influence marketers' central goal at this time was to streamline the influencer identification, selection, and pricing processes for the brands and individuals involved. As Ryan Berger, the advertising industry veteran and cofounder of influencer marketing platform HYPR, explained, "the whole idea [behind this company] is: Ryan Berger's really interesting, but he can only fit so many people in his phone and bring only so many people to the same things over and over again. So what if we had a database of everybody in the world with their contact info and their audience demographics, and brands could pay a subscription fee to connect to those people and reach out to them?"

Intensifying the urgency to streamline the influencer landscape were the early, high-profile successes of bloggers like The Glamourai (working with Digital Brand Architects) and Fashiontoast (represented by Next Management), who earned enviable incomes by starring in commercials, collaborating with brands to create product lines, and displaying ads and sponsored content on their websites and social media feeds (Kurutz, 2011). Several early fashion bloggers such as Bryanboy and The Man Repeller attracted the attention of traditional Hollywood talent agencies like Creative Artists

Agency, which began signing bloggers "left and right" in order to capitalize on their growing buzz and the new possibilities for visibility and monetization that the social media environment offered (Lo, 2011). The seemingly overnight successes of these bloggers-turned-digital influencers—whose "authentic" personal brands made them seem "just like us," and thus, their fame accessible—created a goldrush moment on social media. Countless users, especially women interested in fashion, beauty, parenting, and other traditionally feminine domains, began posting in strategic ways in hopes of "making it" as an influencer, engaging in what communication and gender scholar Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) has called "aspirational labor."

Identifying, selecting, and pricing influencers

Given the widespread enthusiasm for the influencer industry—from advertisers who looked for new channels for their messages and from users who yearned for the free products, glamorous lifestyles, and passionate work that early influencers depicted as accessible to all (Duffy & Hund, 2015a)—marketers and brands found it increasingly necessary to make it easier to identify who could "count" as an influencer. As a writer for *Racked,* the now-defunct fashion website, observed in 2014: "originality doesn't get bloggers noticed anymore—numbers do" (Leiber, 2014). Indeed, influence marketers continued their work, discussed in Chapter Two, to quantify and package digital influence in ways that would be easily consumable and actionable by brands and influencers. In research interviews and in the industry press, many marketing and brand executives characterized the influencer industry of the early to mid-2010s as "the Wild

West," and argued for standardizing influencer selection and measurement processes (Pavlika, 2015b).

To this end, marketers and brand executives began to set metrics benchmarks for would-be influencers. In interviews, they often characterized these as basically arbitrary. Daniel Saynt, co-founder of marketing agency Socialyte, explained in a 2015 interview that for his agency, "the minimum number of followers across their combined social networks is 50,000 before we consider them." While Jane*, a director of brand partnerships at one of the first, and later largest, influence marketing platforms, said that her company's view was that 10,000 followers was the minimum point of entry. Brittany Hennessy, who directs the influencer division of Hearst Digital Media and authored a how-to book on influencer marketing, said, "100,000 followers—that's when you're an influencer. Unless you're…some weird niche where there's only 10 of you. But if you're doing fashion or beauty or travel, you should be able to get to 100,000 or you're not that good."

Beyond follower count, a person's perceived influence was shaped more significantly by their engagement rate—or the degree to which their audience interacts with their content. "It's easy to say 'this influencer is an influencer,' but if the audience doesn't share content, doesn't engage with the content, then you just flushed your money down the toilet," said Berger, the cofounder of HYPR. Similarly, Saynt said a key part of his agency's evaluation of an influencer is, "does the audience click, does the audience care what they're doing?" To this end, many influence marketing companies offered tools to analyze influencers' engagement along with a variety of other attributes, such as audience demographics, brand affinities, and typical price point of goods advertised, and

make the information readily available to brands so they could make quicker decisions about influencer campaigns. These product dashboards made searching, analyzing, and matching with influencers easier than ever. As one agency director told *Digiday,* "The beauty of using technology platforms to identify influencers is that it makes [influencer marketing] very turnkey. Now we can get influencer programs live in a matter of weeks" (Chen, 2016).

Influencer marketing and technology start-ups continued to introduce and refine proprietary data-driven technologies, and countless articles in the advertising and marketing industry press encouraged readers to use data and ever more sophisticated analyses to refine their influencer strategies. As the trend toward data-driven influencer marketing gathered steam, marketers identified potential influencers within ever smaller and more specific niches. A *MediaPost* article cheered on these efforts, arguing, "it's essential to identify if certain personalities have micro-audiences centered around specific interests and passions. By taking a closer look, you'll have a diverse arsenal of influencers available" (Pavlika, 2015b). A trendy focus on "micro-influencers" and later, "nano-influencers"—individuals whose social media content drove their followers to action, even while these followers may have numbered in the low thousands—later followed (Maheshwari, 2018; addressed further in Chapter Four).

Yet as these data-driven influencer marketing technologies continued to evolve, it was not always clear how influencers were being judged. One agency's head of influencer marketing explained his company's approach as such:

"We look at demographic data, and then we run them through a proprietary

qualitative scoring methodology that allows us to rate and rank influencers so we

can help our clients make a smarter decisions…We rate them qualitatively based on a few different factors and those factors, in general, are their reach, that's one piece of it, potential and actual reach or a selection of both. We look at their authenticity or credibility. Then we look at their—what we call potential impact or resonance, and there are a number of factors that we use to qualitatively determine that. But we pull those three things together to give a recommendation to our clients."

These sorts of specific-yet-vague descriptions were common as agencies worked to situate themselves as always on the cutting edge in an industry that was constantly changing. As Sabina*, an executive at a Los Angeles-based influence marketing agency, explained, "almost every first influencer project is a test-and-learn project because we're seeing what audiences respond the best to. Are the audiences that the client thinks are the right audiences really the right audience? Or is it some random group that actually responding better? What content really drove people to particularly engage with this product?" Further, she explained, "we'll be able to see what to do if someone's really difficult to work with, or their content formed really poorly. We'll probably just make a note on that for ourselves 'cause we wouldn't want to leverage them again."

While followers and engagement metrics were the gatekeepers that got influencers in the door and opened them up to the *possibility* of securing branding deals, once they were "in," agencies reserved a level of human touch to verify whether an influencer could become viable. Marketers often combed profiles to look for an appealing aesthetic and consistency of content, and read comments for a "gut check" on the "health and quality" of the audience, as one agency founder said in an interview. Jessie

Grossman, founder of influencer talent agency Boldstreak, explained that for her,
"comments are weighted a lot more heavily because you can easily tap on the photo and
like it, but to actually sit down and write a comment because that content resonated with
you so much that you felt compelled to comment on it, that has so much more weight
than just tapping a photo. So if I see someone with hundreds of comments on a piece of
content they're creating, that's someone I'm really interested in." Further, Hennessy
emphasized the importance of paying attention to the personal details influencers post in
the event they offer new branding opportunities. "I have a list of influencers who are
pregnant and when they're giving birth based on the fact that they hashtagged something
like, #36weeks! So I'm like, OK, that means you're due in four weeks, so right around
this time we should start pitching you for new mom stuff."

Renee*, a director of influencer marketing for a legacy public relations agency,
characterized the identification and selection process as a "mix of art and science,"
explaining:

> The science part being those data driven points, from audience demographics to
> engagement rate and total following but also looking at their momentum—seeing
> whether their audience is growing over time or whether they're static. We
> obviously want to be working with someone who is growing, we want to work
> with someone who is on the rise, who might not be at their peak at this point
> because the more that they grow the more we can grow with them. And then from
> an art perspective, we look at their overall content aesthetic of course, whether
> they've worked with competing brands previously, other branded content that
> they've done and whether that measures up to their organic content.

Indeed, influencers' sponsored content is expected to be just as engaging to audiences as their "organic"—or not sponsored—content. A sponsored post advertising a handbag line must be legible within, and induce similar audience resonance as, the same feed that showcases "organic" photos of an influencer on vacation or playing with her children. While it can be understandably difficult for influencers to muster the same enthusiasm, personal touch, and audience outreach with sponsored and "organic" content, they were increasingly expected to make them nearly indistinguishable as the influence industry streamlined in the early 2010s. Influencers' degree of success in achieving this became part of the means by which they were valued: by further collapsing the "self" and "brand" into the same aesthetic and rhetorical plane, their level of authenticity supposedly became clearer. This, in turn, made it easier for marketers to assess and sell influencers' authenticity factor, which had come to moderate the value of digital influence. Corey Martin, director at the 360i agency, reflected:

> Authenticity is really subjective and really hard—so we need to make it less subjective. The assumptions that we make are: the more that an influencer is engaged in promoting products from a paid standpoint, the less authentic their overall content is. So we evaluate how often they do that. But other factors play into that, [such as] their expertise, their credibility, the kinds of content they produce, quality of content. And the last piece of it is the engagement—and not just the number of people that engage with an influencer but reciprocal engagement, the depth to which an influencer is engaging back with their audience.

Indeed, as other scholars have noted (e.g. Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013b; Duffy & Hund,

2015), influencers need to carefully navigate the imagined boundary between being "authentic" and "selling out," which means calibrating the frequency with which they post sponsored content as well as partnering with the "right" brands. As one industry watcher wrote,

> "an influencer accepting payment to endorse a product should be seen as more of an 'access fee' to their audience. They are the gatekeepers of their audience and their credibility depends on who they let through that gate. The less scrupulous their 'door policy,' the less their audience will respect their judgment. *Entry* must come down to more than paying the right price or influencers will lose their audience's trust. Influence is built on a foundation of trust. Without trust, you cannot influence" (Trapp, 2015).

Yet, while industry insiders urged each other to centralize authenticity and trust in the influencer selection process (ibid.), they also turned to older entertainment industry shorthand to help carry out the selection process. One executive urged brands to "have a 'casting' hat on when selecting people" even though influencers should not be "treat[ed] like a cast for an ad" (Johnson, 2015). As others have pointed out (e.g. Duffy & Hund, 2015; Pham, 2013) pointed out, often the influencers who are "selected" most frequently—who are ranked as most influential—represent beauty and racial stereotypes (young, thin, female, and overwhelmingly white) long relied upon in traditional ads.

In order to deal with the influx of influencers and how to use them, marketers and brands also created loose, internal methods of sorting influencers for selection. Annette*, the director of marketing for an American fast fashion brand, explained:

> There's probably four tiers that we look at. The fourth tier, which is the lowest, is

more organic. So we've got tools that look at our Instagram and look at people

that are talking about us in the social sphere, and they're not really influencers,

they're just everyday girls who have an affinity for the brand. So you know, we're

connecting with them on a regular basis and there's no dollars exchanged, it's just

really, 'hey, we noticed you like the brand and we'd like to sort of bring you into

the fold.' We've got a showroom in our office where we've got a pretty steady

stream of girls who come through and are gifted pieces from our collections and

so forth. So that's really relationship building, we're not expecting any sort of

KPI, it's just about celebrating these girls who are just fans of the brand. I'd say

the next level is really digital influencers, so kind of your true kind of fashion

blogger girls where this is what they do for a living and in that regard it really is

all about the content that they are creating and ensuring that is content that we can

then use on our own channels to drive sales. So they're kind of like the

workhorses. And I think we are very discerning in terms of what we put on our

own social channels. So all of these tiers, the expectation is that all of these girls

are on-brand for us and are creating content that makes sense for our own feed

and feels organic. Then I would say the next tier up is what we would refer to as

brand ambassadors. So these are girls that, they have a following, they have great

engagement, they're producing great content, it's all in line with who we are as a

brand and we really want to kind of champion them to be an ambassador for us.

They're obviously higher tiered than this organic level—these aren't just

customers, these are influencers. But they may be models, they might be singers,

they might be something other than a digital influencer and a blogger, you know,

these girls sort of live and work across a number of different mediums but they have an amazing presence on social. And then the top tier is as I said this celebrity grouping. So we work with an agency who sort of gifts out pieces to celebrities on a regular basis and we can choose to sort of engage with them, kind of a pay to play model. And again these are women that are identifiable throughout the world, who people are looking to for style inspiration, who are getting picked up in editorials and PR and their goal is not so much revenue but moreso the brand awareness, engagement play.

Most brands and marketers described some form of a "bucket" system when explaining how they think about the influencers they work with, especially when discussing pricing. Buckets—often, though not always, corresponding to arbitrary metrics benchmarks— help determine how much an influencer can charge for campaign work. Indeed, "buckets" were a way of streamlining pricing schemes in an industry that was still trying to determine the value of digital influence in various contexts. For example, while some firms indicated that pricing was directly correlated to follower counts or engagement rates, others described a system of valuation that shifted depending on various stakeholder perceptions. Martin pointed out that "somebody who has 150,000 followers may be more valuable to a particular client than someone who has two million followers." Saynt explained:

"Instagram can range from, say, $100 to $15,000 depending on the influencer and the amount of 'asks' that are required with the Instagram—like if they have to travel somewhere. So someone with 100,000 to 500,000 followers might make $2,500 to $5,000 for an Instagram. Somebody with 500,000 to a million followers

might make $4,000 to $10,000. Someone with a million-plus normally is looking

for a minimum of $4,000 but up to $15,000. We've offered some celebrities up to

$30,000 for an Instagram. It depends on a lot of factors but those are the ranges.

The way we break down influencers is by four categories: fresh faces, rising

stars, leaders, and icons. That is by social following and we have prices associated

with each of those so the brand knows how much they can expect to spend."

As brands and marketers worked to streamline the influencer marketing process,

they hoped to make things easier for "everyone"—though in practice, these changes did

not always benefit influencers, as they were often left having to guess how much their

own influence could be worth. Hennessy, in her position at a major media company, has

worked with countless agents, marketers, brands, influencers, and other participants in

the influence industry. Her view was that the way the industry approached pricing put the

burden on individual influencers to guess and advocate for their own fees. "The

discrepancy in fees is mind-blowing. There are girls who—I once did a campaign where I

had $10,000 allocated for this girl and she asked for $2,500. It just blew my mind. She

has no idea how much she's worth," she said.

Further, the streamlining process also changed the rules for influencers' creativity

with campaigns. As the influence industry grew and brands increased budgets for

influencers, the stakes became higher. Contracts, my interviewees noted, began to dictate

specific language to be used in captions, specific times posts should go up, and other

details that previously had been left to influencers' discretion. They also increasingly

required influencers submit their exact content for brands' approval before they post it.

"Some of the old guard are like—'wait. I never used to have to send my content for

approval. Doesn't the brand trust me? Don't they just want to work with me because of

who I am?' And yes, that is true, but now maybe they're paying you six figures instead of

$2,500, and they want to make sure that the brand messaging is correct," said Reesa

Lake, senior vice president at Digital Brand Architects.

Content and the slippage into "lifestyle"

In the ever more streamlined influence industry, the performance and perception

of authenticity was increasingly used as the differentiating factor between people with

similar metrics of influence. As such, influencers, brands, and marketers realized that it

would be more efficient if influencers presented themselves as "lifestyle" brands rather

than experts in fashion, beauty, or otherwise. Influencers thus began to expose more of

their personal lifestyles in order to set themselves apart—and, in doing so, they could also

diversify what aspects of their personal brands could be monetized. In dissolving their

content genres, they were no longer limited to earning income from "just" fashion or

beauty partnerships; they could remodel themselves as a lifestyle influencer (who perhaps

had special affinity for and knowledge of the particular area from whence she came) who

could provide advice and suggestions related to a range of topics. Grossman, the talent

manager, reflected:

> We like people to discuss all parts of their life. We're human. That's why I'm
>
> like, we don't really represent people who—I keep going back to beauty
>
> influencers. Like, I love that you love makeup, but I also know you're a human
>
> being and you like other things. In remaining authentic to yourself as a human,
>
> what else are you interested in? So I think just being authentic to themselves, and

being authentic to the world around them and to their audience, and being comfortable enough and compelled enough to talk about things that are going on in the world or comments that are made in their captions, and just really being plugged in really goes such a long way when it comes to maintaining and building an audience. I've just seen that happen time in and out, even just the comments back of their followers and response to some of their comments, that sort of engagement back to them—that will have someone hooked for life. It's like, your idol who back in the day used to be some sort of actor in a movie—how often did that ever happen that your idol would personally connect with you, tell you you're appreciated? You know, this is the new type of celebrity and they have that ability to do that and it's pretty simple to do. So we definitely encourage our clients to always respond back to their followers, find personal, authentic ways to connect with them. Like, celebrities are detached, celebrities are this like aspirational sort of figure, where influencers are exactly the opposite—they're relatable, they're just like us, but they're still—it's this desire to, like, learn from them. They're not *just* like you and me, there's still some sort of distinction between the two, but they're so much closer to who [we] are, and that I think is why people relate to them so much.

Additionally, after Instagram introduced ads in 2015, it made further aesthetic and ideological sense within the platform for influencers and advertisers to model their content after each other. Together, the streamlining activities of influence marketers enabled influencers and brands to "buy and sell 'influence' as easily as they can buy and sell used books on eBay" (Levine, 2015)—and enabled more widespread

commercialization of social media self-presentations.

Commercializing

While monetization was a priority of the influence industry nearly since its beginning, in the early 2010s, brands, marketers, influencers, and social media companies began to look beyond the sponsorship models they had been working with to a future where an influencer's social media presence could be more wholly and efficiently commercialized, from each item in her photos to the very social media platforms on which influencer marketing was increasingly carried out. In other words: rather than advertising a specific clothing brand in a photo, why not earn a commission from the shoes, the sunglasses, the handbag, and the hotel in which the photo was taken? And rather than directing followers to outside ecommerce websites where they could find items displayed in the photos, could it be possible to shop within an app like Instagram? As a variety of influencer stakeholders explored these possibilities, they also changed the technological infrastructure supporting the influence industry in important ways.

Perhaps the most commercially—and socially—impactful force was the company RewardStyle, whose tools allowed influencers to earn money off of their blogs or Instagram content without needing access to an agent or even to interface with a brand directly. RewardStyle launched in Dallas in 2011 by Amber Venz, who at the time was a fashion blogger looking for more efficient ways to monetize, and her partner Baxter Box, who helped build the technology that would make this possible for her and thousands of others. Their first, eponymous product was simple: by embedding RewardStyle links into blog content, bloggers could earn commission for the traffic and sales they drove to

retailers' websites. The technology works by saving a cookie in the user's browser; if a person clicks a RewardStyle link that brings her to a retailer's website where she makes a purchase, the retailer can see the cookie and then pays out a commission to RewardStyle. This model, known as affiliate marketing, had existed for nearly as long as the commercial web and been perfected by Amazon in their Associates Program—but had yet to be utilized in the fashion blogger space (Mari, 2014). Success was nearly immediate. By 2013, the company had 87 employees and had signed on 4,000 retailers and more than 14,000 "publishers"—mostly individual bloggers and influencers, but also some legacy media outlets like *Vogue* and *Glamour*. That year, RewardStyle's publishers drove $155 million in retail sales (ibid.). By 2018, they had driven nearly $3 billion (Bray, 2018). RewardStyle was not the only affiliate marketer in the influencer space, but they were the largest and most pervasive.

A key reason for RewardStyle's continued growth and market dominance was their second product, LikeToKnowIt, which launched in 2014 with the aim of making Instagram posts shoppable at a time when the platform was still resisting commercialization. The product worked like this: an Instagram influencer who had been approved for the service (publishers must apply to be a part of RewardStyle) posts an Instagram image through LikeToKnowIt, providing information about where to buy the items in the photo. Followers, meanwhile, sign up for their own LikeToKnowIt accounts. When they encounter an image on Instagram from which they would like to buy something, they could "like" the photo by double tapping it. They then automatically receive an email with affiliate links through which they can purchase the items from the Instagram post. In 2017, RewardStyle updated LikeToKnowIt into a standalone app

whose technology can be used across the web rather than only in Instagram, now by utilizing screenshots rather than Instagram's "like" function. TechCrunch described the new functionality:

> Immediately after taking a screenshot the app will analyze it…and send you a push notification if it can match the image with one of millions of influencer-submitted and tagged photos in its database. Then, you can open the app and shop the content that was featured in the photo, with both the influencer and rewardStyle taking a cut of any transaction. Essentially it's the same service that LIKEtoKNOW.it fans have grown to love, except it can now be used anywhere across the open and closed web (Tepper, 2017).

By the time of LikeToKnowIt's 2014 launch, Instagram (which itself had launched in 2010) had been acquired by Facebook and was well on its way to transforming from a nostalgia-tinged photo editing and sharing tool to a central vector of sociality, commerce, and culture. Its sleek user interface that enabled infinite scrolling through image after image, uninterrupted by advertising or the excessive linking or commenting that plagued other platforms, proved appealing; its user base mushroomed to more than one billion, and even as the company added new features such as video, replaced the chronological feed with an algorithmic one, and began to allow advertising, the app maintained its reputation as the nicest and most "authentic" place on the internet (Lorenz, 2018). Indeed, Instagram quickly became the top destination for marketers wanting to sponsor social media users whom they believed to be influential for driving brand awareness and sales (Williams, 2018). The commercialization of Instagram—including efforts by third party companies like RewardStyle to make the platform

shoppable in the face of corporate resistance, and later the corporate-sanctioned commercialization that began with its 2015 decision to allow ads—was a defining shift for the influence industry. A *MediaPost* writer reflecting on the Instagram influencer landscape noted that **"**the human attention span has decreased from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013" and concluded "there's something beautifully disposable and playful about this world that brands and agencies should embrace" (Johnson, 2015). And indeed, the shift to Instagram as a the central marketplace for influence opened the doors to more immediate and more socially embedded forms of commerce, and gave the platform's users access to the dominant technologies and visual codes for commercializing themselves.

Aside from capitalizing on the enormous and engaged user bases of fashion blogs and Instagram, RewardStyle's services were appealing to brands and influencers for a variety of reasons. For brands who are continually on the lookout for more data that can make their operation more efficient and less risky, in 2013 RewardStyle launched a service called Campaigns, which uses historical performance data to cast influencers for brand campaigns. As Venz Box told *WWD,* "As a brand, when you're giving us your exact goals and targets, like 'I need to hit this many sales and this much traffic and this is my target demographic,' we're using all of that data to cast. Brands are always very surprised at who we cast for those campaigns because it might not be celebrity influencer A, B or C, who they thought, but we already know who that person's audience is and what type of products they convert at. We're able to rationalize their rate because we know what kind of sales they drive" (Tietjen, 2018). Increasingly, brands were indeed looking for proof that influencer recommendations resulted in sales, or "conversions." As

Lake, the senior vice president of influencer marketing firm DBA, said in an interview, "Something that we are really paying attention to…is conversion. So looking at RewardStyle, who are the top converters through those platforms? We manage most of the top converters, because we know that's what brands really want right now." Nadia*, a trend forecaster for a global firm, confirmed: "I think that it all becomes about point of sale…an influencer is someone who influences someone to make a purchase."

For influencers, RewardStyle offered an attractive way to earn income that seemed nearly effortless. Affiliate links allow money to be continually deposited in publishers' accounts according to the clicks and sales made off their posts. "Every time someone clicks [an rstyle.me link], I get [some] change, which is fine for me because it adds up—and it's still money coming in somewhere," explained Brittiny, the city-focused fashion blogger. Being a RewardStyle member was also a status symbol; because the service was invitation-only (and most influencers need to apply in order to be invited), getting in symbolized a rite of passage—that they had "made it" as an influencer. "It was so—almost secretive, and not everyone was getting in," Audrey, a style blogger, remembered. "So [getting in] was super exciting for me." Danielle, a fashion blogger, said, "the LIKEtoKNOWit thing, it definitely gave me that confidence. I was like, 'Yes. I'm actually a real blogger since I'm doing LIKEtoKNOWit.'"

The massive success of RewardStyle's products hinged on their ability to be implemented seamlessly, providing minimal disruption to influencers' carefully constructed authenticity. RewardStyle affiliate links embedded in blogs were virtually invisible; only by hovering a mouse over a link and looking to the URL preview at the bottom of the browser could one notice the rstyle.me extension—and even then, only the

savviest readers would know what that meant, since RewardStyle was primarily a

business-to-business company. LikeToKnowIt was more obvious, as influencers'

followers had to join the service in order to use it and Instagram posts using the

technology usually featured a "liketkit" link and hashtag, but it capitalized on a social

action central to Instagram—liking photos—and thus barely disturbed the established

influencer-audience dynamic. Pulling off this technological and social feat meant that

RewardStyle accomplished what others who had tried to enter this space could not:

finding a way to commercialize social media users' self-presentations without making it

seem, to audiences, overtly commercialized. As a writer for marketing firm

eConsultancy, observed:

> "One of social's most powerful attributes is that it's widely seen as a more
>
> authentic medium. If consumers start to believe that it's just an extension of the
>
> Madison Avenue marketing machine, brands could find that it becomes a much
>
> more difficult medium to take advantage of. Obviously, many consumers know
>
> that much of the content posted on services like Instagram…isn't exactly au
>
> naturel, and a growing number are aware that brands are paying their favorite
>
> internet celebrities to incorporate their products into content. But if large numbers
>
> of consumers come to see influencers as fakes and sell-outs, and *distrust* the
>
> content they post, brands could find that they've contributed to killing the goose
>
> that laid a golden egg" (Robles, 2015).

Indeed, as an influence marketing agency founder told *Philadelphia Business Journal,*

"We live in a world with a trust deficit. We tend not to trust governments, we don't trust

corporations and we don't trust advertisers. But what we do trust is people" (Wylie,

2018). By building technology that not allowed that person-to-person sense of trust to be mostly uninterrupted yet financially profitable, RewardStyle effectively ushered in a new era of socially embedded, technologically driven consumer culture.

Perhaps the most significant externality of RewardStyle and other similar technologies of self-commercialization was the widespread normalization of monetizing one's lifestyle. In the contemporary moment of precarious work-lifestyles, these technologies emerged as means of gaining both income and a sense of autonomy, and were part of a rising tide of marketplace logic seeping into public spaces and cultures, where almost anything could be "shoppable"—and where there could be "commercial opportunity in every image, intimacy, and interaction" (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 20). As a writer for *Refinery29* observed, "Our everyday lives are becoming increasingly commercialized, our attention and private data sold for ad dollars,"—a situation which, she argued, had desensitized people to the notion of allowing brands intimate access to their lives, or what used to be derided as "selling out" (Lam, 2018). Increased income inequality and lack of opportunities for middle class jobs and lifestyles "creates a strange kind of pressure: if only you can figure out what it is you've got to sell so you don't end up at the bottom, and once you do—cash in. That divide has brought with it the birth of a new ethos: Get that money…Get those #lifestylegoals. Monetize everything" (ibid.).

In dealing with this logic, though, there are practical ramifications. RewardStyle, for example, was not without issues, particularly for influencers. Many were confused by what they experienced as a lack of transparency in the application process. Jennifer, a style blogger, explained her experience: "I applied four times. The first time I applied I had just started blogging, like a month in. The second time was probably six months later.

The third time I was actually—I had a referral. I don't know why I got denied, I'm not quite sure and I don't think the girl [who referred me] was either. But then I applied again a week later with a different email and I got it. So, I'm not quite sure. Because I really didn't change anything, it was just—I used a different email." Other influencers were surprised to learn, after joining, that they could not receive payouts for commissions until they had earned at least $100. "For me, that took a really long time to get to that $100 because each thing would be $2, $3, $5," Danielle, a fashion blogger, said.

Carissa*, another fashion blogger, illustrated how using RewardStyle—particularly when it has the potential to become a significant income stream, with top influencers earning millions annually and, according to Venz Box, thousands more making six figures (Camintini, 2017)—can disrupt the "realness" of an influencer's social media self-presentation. "It's definitely lucrative, but you have to be consistently linking up products and be strategic about which brands you link to because certain brands have higher commission rates than others," she said.

Similarly, brands felt pressure to adjust creative decision-making based on the data they got from RewardStyle and other social platforms. When asked whether a product "doing well" on RewardStyle or other social media platforms impacted future product decisions, Annette*, the director of marketing for an American fast fashion brand, responded, "oh yeah, absolutely." She continued:

> A lot of what we do is test and repeat. So if a product is working, we order more of it, we order in different colors. So really it's a conversation with our influencer team and our merchants and buyers on a regular basis in terms of what product are we even gifting to these influencers, what products should they be choosing

from…we have a pretty much weekly conversation, take a look at the last week or

so on social and just say, like, we posted six things that featured product, how did

each of those do?

While in interviews influencers and brand executives voiced some questions about the

way in which the influence industry's commercialization was proceeding, writers in the

industry press rationalized these efforts as a form of "giving the people what they want."

"The truth of the matter is that consumers are largely an aspirational bunch," proclaimed

the *eConsultancy* firm (Robles, 2015).

Optimizing

Because a social media user's influence became legible to agencies, brands, and

other intermediaries like RewardStyle through a combination of performance metrics and

aesthetic coherency, the pressure to optimize activities around known, or assumed,

evaluation protocols became amplified. A variety of aesthetic- and metrics-related trends

—and services to help users participate in them—emerged in the 2010s. Given the stakes

of participating in the influencer economy—it continued to be considered a reasonable

route to professional success in an entrepreneurial- and fame-obsessed culture,

particularly as people continued, even a decade on, to reckon with the recession's damage

to career prospects (Lowrey, 2017; DePillis, 2017)—successfully utilizing these numeric

and aesthetic codes was increasingly critical. A writer for *Slate* keenly observed the

landscape in 2014:

"If people believe those [influence] scores are being judged, especially in life- or

career-affecting ways, they have every incentive to game the scores. They are

goaded into behaving artificially on social networks: sharing safe Like-bait, and

holding back anything they deem quirky, eccentric, or controversial. Anyone who

doesn't want to be an 'influencer' comes under intense pressure to be, especially

as 'influence' becomes a measure of self-worth. The result: a lot more people

trying to pass around the same articles, memes, and themes. A lot more

homogeneity. A lot more noise, masquerading as signal. A self-defeating search

for quality in an ocean of quantity" (Nathanson, 2014).

Metrics

Because follower count and engagement rates were the primary means through

which influencers were identified and selected by brands, a number of services appeared

that purported to sell followers and even commenters in order to boost these metrics.

While these services attempted to operate under the radar—and the practice of buying

followers had existed on Twitter for some time (e.g. Schonfeld, 2010)—their existence

became obvious through sudden boosts in high-profile users' follower counts (sometimes

suddenly gaining thousands or even millions of followers in a matter of hours). Quickly,

the notion of "fake followers" became a point of discussion and controversy.

In 2014, the fashion news website *Racked* published an exposé on the growing

trend, particularly as it related to the blogger and influencer world. Primarily they

detailed a service called Buy Instagram Followers that claimed to operate "real accounts"

that people could purchase to be their followers and comment on posts. *Racked* noted that

its offering ranged from $90 for 1,000 followers to $1,350 for 15,000 followers (Leiber,

2014). The reporting described a turning point in the way the industry understood

influence metrics: follower count could no longer be relied upon as a meaningful measure of users' influence, and metrics could not be taken at face value. The notion of authenticity as an evaluative measure of influencers' worth took on new form, as aspects beyond the personal brand—particularly the audience—became potential grounds for contention. "You begin to realize after a while that it's all fake," a blogger bemoaned to *Racked.* "The focus is not on fashion, it's about how they can get bigger and richer and more famous. To the blogger, it doesn't matter if it's real. The sad thing about the last few years is that it's become all about appearance" (ibid.).

Brands, marketers, and influencers began devising strategies—some crude, some sophisticated—for ferreting out "fakes." Many of these centered on paying more attention to audience "engagement" and devising norms and expectations for what sorts of engagement could be considered *authentic*. Often it relied upon setting up imagined boundaries for *believably* authentic metrics. "If someone only has a one percent engagement rate, that's gonna give me some pause," explained Sabina*, the executive at an LA marketing firm. "[But] honestly, an incredibly high engagement rate is also suspicious at this point. So if I see a really high engagement rate I'm gonna dig in, what does that engagement look like? What are those comments? Is it a lot of comments that look like they maybe automated or spam or just disingenuous in some way?"

Jane*, a director at a large influence marketing agency, detailed her firm's process, which included multiple steps of vetting the influencers and their audiences through in-person discussions paired with behind-the scenes qualitative and quantitative assessments:

The way we vet authentic or real followers is, a lot of it is relationship based. So we meet with these people [influencers]. We'll have one-on-one interviews with them in LA and New York. We have an in-house data science team that is...all of our influencers are plugged into a computer system and we're able to [see] where the majority of followers are in terms of demographics or whatnot. Also we chart their following and...if there's a huge spike in the follower count we're like, 'OK, what happened here?' And then we'll have a human touch as opposed to computerized, we'll have a human being actually look into, OK, what happened around this day...like, did they get an interview on a dot-com or something like that? Or is it a time where followers were purchased?

There's actually a lot of tactics to recognizing that someone has fake followers. So for instance, if someone has 20,000 followers but they are only getting 200 or something likes on a photo that's not the regular...[there's] a ratio of, if you have a certain amount of followers then you should get X amount of likes on average for every post. There's an equation that is in place that they can see if it's normal or not normal. So if you have below normal average of likes based on your following there's something fishy there.

These other countries are in the black market of faking accounts. So if you look into ... just check the first 15 followers of influencers and just check if they're authentic. Are [followers] posting themselves? Are they indigenous to the US? If the influencer is international, like they're from Germany, are there a lot of

German followers? Because in theory, if you are an LA-based influencer, your following should have come from LA, New York, maybe Chicago, Miami. There's a common sense to it once you start looking through the followers.

As influencers gradually discovered the strategies that brands and marketers were implementing to evaluate audience authenticity, they too began devising and implementing new numbers-boosting strategies in response, from collective behavior to aesthetic tweaks. Some influencers began participating in "Instagram pods"—groups of a few dozen influencers who bound themselves together by a mutual agreement to like and comment on each other's every post in order to boost each other's "authentic" engagement metrics. Popular discourses often described these collective behaviors as "gaming the system"—characterizing them as dishonest or even amoral—as the platforms on which they were carried out simultaneously encouraged and punished influencers' engagement as a means of exerting control (Petre, Duffy & Hund, forthcoming).

Aesthetics

Both before and after the rise of metrics-related issues, the primary means by which influencers worked to optimize their digital influence was by adjusting their content to fit with aesthetic themes that tended to gain more "authentic" positive feedback. When blogs were the primary "home" of influencers online, the notion of cultivating an "aesthetic" was less important. Photos needed to convey the blogger's brand—a quirky blogger took quirky photos—but not until the increased competition and the shift to image-centric mobile platforms like Instagram in the early 2010s did

particular visual trends gain traction and ultimately precedence in the influence industry. Instagram, in particular—and its users' perceptions about what sorts of content "did well" there—became the arbiter of influential aesthetics, and influencers and advertisers looked for ways to optimize content for the platform (Carlson, 2015).

Within a few years of Instagram's launch, a particular "platform vernacular" emerged on the app. Gibbs et al (2015) describe platform vernacular as "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication" that "emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice" (p. 257). Instagram's filters that bestowed a nostalgic feel to photos, the clean square crop applied to every image, and its visual-first layout provided an ideal environment for particular aesthetic trends to flourish. As the influence industry became increasingly Instagram-centric and focused on "lifestyle" content in the 2010s, images that purported to document a user's "authentic" but highly edited and curated lifestyle popularized. These were perhaps best summarized by a satirical account called Socality Barbie that launched in 2015. The account's feed featured images of a Barbie doll wearing particular clothes and accessories and doing particular activities in locations that had become trendy for many influencers, all punctuated by aspirational but vague captions. As one observer described it, Socality Barbie "takes jabs at all the things that make Instagram ridiculous yet addictive: still-life outfit photos, artsy candid shots, and, most recently, pumpkins and fall foliage. The captions contain dozens of hashtags and cheesy lines such as, 'I believe in the person I want to become'" (Shunatona, 2015). The account resonated with Instagram users quickly, gaining more than one million followers within a few months and receiving attention from a number of press outlets. After five

months, the person behind the account decided to suspend her activity, posting on

Socality Barbie's last image caption:

> "I started SB as a way to poke fun at all the Instagram trends that I thought were
>
> ridiculous. Never in 1 million years did I think it would receive the amount of
>
> attention that it did but because of that it has open [*sic*] the door to a lot of great
>
> discussions like: how we choose to present ourselves online, the insane lengths
>
> many of us go to to create the perfect Instagram life, and calling into question our
>
> authenticity and motives" (Alteir, 2015).

While Socality Barbie neatly summarized and skewered the ways that influencers (and

those who aspired to be them) had begun to rely on visual and textual tropes and themes

in order to gain attention, build audiences, and monetize their followings, it did not alter

influencers' industrial reality, where metrics reigned and influencers needed to dedicate

significant time and energy to figuring out how to boost their own. If they hit on a

strategy that works—a particular way of posing or editing photos, or a frequency or tone

of interacting with followers—they continue to do it because their livelihood directly

relied upon it. As Heidi, the fashion and lifestyle blogger, explained, "For some reason,

people love the quotes. I didn't even know when I posted that it was going to be such a

hit, but…the number one thing people love on my feeds are the OOTDs [outfits of the

day], number two is selfies, and number three is the quotes. Anything like, you know,

like 'maybe she's born with it, maybe it's caffeine.' That got, like, literally 700 saves.

That's a record for me. People just love it, I don't know why, I wish I could tell you.

When the numbers show that, we do more of that."

Marketers, too, relied on influencers' increasingly disciplined aesthetics as shorthand when looking to match them with advertising clients. "I'm looking for specific aesthetics depending on the client that I'm working with," explained Sabina*. "I'm doing a project with Nickelodeon right now, and first of all, one of their goals is to have content that they can share on their page. So immediately I'm looking at their page, seeing what they're doing there. Okay, a lot of bright colors, a lot of pretty colors, a lot of bubbly personality space. So then that is really going to kind of filter [what influencer] I'm looking for." "It's a visual language," Kate, the design influencer, said of Instagram, noting that she used the language metaphor to determine how to present herself and her work on the platform.

Because influencers' aesthetic cohesion was so important to advertisers, services like Planoly launched to help influencers' plan their Instagram feeds *before* posting—and potentially making a major content mistake. Many influencers described the effort they put into planning their Instagram feeds to ensure brand cohesion and visual appeal. "I'll look at the greater color story of what's happening [on my feed], or the mood of the previous post. And if it all kind of fits, like, it goes together," said Erica*, the influence marketing professional and aspiring influencer. Indeed, from colors (such as "millennial pink" and "matcha green" (Smith, 2018)) to poses (such as the "lay flat," when influencers artfully arrange items on a floor or other flat space for a photo), particular aesthetic trends emerged, inspiring mimicry in hopes of gaining the likes and comments—and boost in influence—that these trends seemed to induce.

The industrial pressure of market saturation in the 2010s also set higher bars for what metrics made influencers "count," creating more intense competition. Many

influence industry participants described how this situation also contributed to aesthetic mimicry. As Jennifer, a fashion blogger, explained, "Comparison is very big in the blogger world, especially with Instagram. And I know I do it sometimes. I'll see an account and think, *I want to be just like them*." To this end, some even noticed trends beyond particular clothes or editing techniques. *Fashionista,* for example, described how people were imitating, through use of makeup or even plastic surgery, the physical features of top influencers in hopes of gaining likes and other forms of social media acceptance (Hubbard, 2016).

While influencers worked to present the appropriate lifestyle aesthetics to court audiences and help ensure security for their personal brands, retail brands also became actively engaged in determining their own appropriate aesthetics and products for the Instagram-centric influence industry—often taking cues from each other. Lauren Jung, co-founder of data-driven marketing agency theShelf, shared a memorable example:

> We've been looking into the J.Crew pave bracelet. They came out with this [a few] years ago and we've seen it pop up on so many blogs. The volume of mentions they've been getting on this bracelet is just ridiculous. Usually with J.Crew you see things in one season and out the next, but it's still being sold and it's still being talked about like crazy. We looked to see—I'm not sure if J.Crew started this trend—but after they started, we saw a number of other brands come up with almost an identical bracelet. They really hit it hard on the influencer scene with that, and I don't know if it was done on purpose or if just a couple of influencers liked it and started this trend, but it's really gotten big.

As *Refinery29* observed, "Because of this *'gram-it-or-it-didn't-happen* mentality, certain It items blow up once one celebrity or influencer posts about it…Before you know it, your feed is clogged with the same scalloped bikini or designer-collab sneaker" (Coscarelli, 2015). Indeed, in interviews, several industry professionals shared anecdotes about the increase in the production of goods seemingly made for the visual culture and instant commerce of Instagram, which can in turn further inform what "good" aesthetics look like, in a sort of endless feedback loop.

For brands and influencers, the "made for Instagram" mentality eventually moved beyond products and the way they were photographed and presented on the app and into the realm of experiences. As the *Business of Fashion* urged its readers, "Stop thinking *product* and start thinking *productions*" (Stephens, 2017; emphasis added). Brands of all types heeded this call. For example, while Karl Lagerfeld's work at Chanel instigated the spectacle-as-norm for high fashion runway shows in the pre-digital era, the brand explored new heights in the social media age, staging an entire supermarket scene for one runway season and a controversial feminist-themed protest march for another. "These photogenic, shareable, 'Instagrammable' moments are now essential for designers seeking global publicity," a fashion writer opined for *Quartz,* "Our first impressions of a fashion collection no longer come through the pages of a newspaper or magazine or the windows of a store, but through our phones" (Avins, 2015).

Maria*, a marketing director for an American fashion designer, explained her approach for optimizing the brand's social media presence:

> What I do is pick interesting venues and create experiences that engage all of the senses as much as possible. Something that we found that's really popular is

repetition. So doing something that's incredible like, you can't even believe your eyes that there are so many of something that have been stacked up so high or arranged in such an incredible way that it creates this super lush texture.

Something else that we've noticed and that we've been talking about a lot on our team is where a few years ago, and more even than a few years ago, it felt like people really wanted there to be a designated photo moment, like a photo area that was prescriptive in a way, like 'this is where you take your photo of yourself.' And now, everybody is so kind of—everybody is so used to being a content creator and like, a creator of content of themselves, that people respond more, I think, to just having an environment that feels like very photogenic so that they can decide how to position themselves in that environment and create content that feels more original and authentic to them. So it's less about having, like, a beautiful step-and-repeat—although if you have a beautiful step-and-repeat, people will use it—they'd rather have, like, an art installation that they can decide whether they want to pose in a formalized way, or take a selfie, or have somebody take something that's a little more tongue in cheek, or, you know. People want to be able to do more of their own thing in a space where—that reflects their personality more than a step-and-repeat moment did.

And then lots of details. Like, an obnoxious attention to detail. We've done thing like putting a fill in the blank mad-libs letter pressed on paper cocktail napkins. So it's like down to the tiniest detail where, when somebody gets their drink and they're handed whatever the napkin is from catering they realize it's actually

really clever copy that speaks back to the brand voice. And that's an easy instant

photo for them that we're just kind of serving up, like a million tiny details that

they can take photos of and those often seem to be hits.

Experiences designed for social media success extended beyond the world of fashion

brands. In 2014, the media outlet *Refinery29* launched "insta meets," wherein they

brought prominent Instagram influencers to their studio, "surrounding them with models

and props like edible Pantone chips, brightly colored candy and disco balls" (Rosman,

2014). "It was a playground," *Refinery29*'s executive creative director told the *New York

Times* (ibid). "The event generated 128 posts tagged "#r29instameet" that drew more than

78,000 likes. That day, 590 followers joined the *Refinery29* Instagram feed, more than 50

percent above the usual daily rate."

While the goal of the creators of these experiences was to access and leverage

influencers' audiences for their own ends, participants often viewed it as a quid pro quo.

"I don't have a problem with it," an influencer told the *New York Times* in the same

article (Rosman, 2014). "I have my own brand and they match with it a hundred percent."

Further, the likes and subsequent visibility that images like these garner is valuable for

the influencers, as well. *Refinery29*'s "instameets" later evolved into their 29 Rooms

exhibit, a traveling "funhouse of style, culture, and creativity" ("29 Rooms") that charges

roughly $40 for entrants to "create, play, and explore our multi-sensory playground"

(ibid.). Others have cropped up in its wake, tweaking and amplifying the impetus for

influencers and other users to "do it for the 'gram" and take advantage of the opportunity

to build their digital influence. In 2016, for example, the Museum of Ice Cream opened in

New York City, selling out tickets for its 45-day run in less than a week. The waitlist

included more than 200,000 hopeful attendees, some of whom slept outside the museum's pop-up location in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, waiting for an opportunity to enter the "sprawling warren of interactive, vaguely hallucinatory confection-themed exhibits," as *New York Magazine* described it, "with seemingly infinite backdrops against which to take a cute selfie" (Weiner, 2017). By 2018, influence marketing agency Village Marketing bought and began renting out a New York City apartment designed for the express purpose of Instagram photoshoots. The apartment is

> "awash in natural light, with high ceilings, gleaming hardwood floors and a rooftop deck. The living room area includes a sofa in the rosy hue known as millennial pink, the kitchen comes equipped with a floor-to-ceiling wine fridge, and the library nook is filled with books chosen for their appearance, not their contents. The white walls are spotless, and there is never any clutter. Nobody lives here. The 2,400-square-foot space—which rents for $15,000 a month—was designed as a backdrop for Instagram stars, who have booked it through October" (Maheshwari, 2018).

Some start-ups and researchers have attempted to answer the question of *why* these particular visual trends become significant. Curalate, a Philadelphia start-up that works with brands to optimize their social media posts, released in 2013 a series of reports on analyses they had conducted of Instagram and Pinterest images, listing findings such as:

- Single-colored images were more popular than images with multiple colors, with 17 percent more likes

- Images with a high amount of lightness receive 24 percent more likes than dark images, and low saturation images received 18 percent more likes than photos with "vibrant colors"

- Images that had a high amount of background receive 29 percent more likes than those without backgrounds. Images with texture get 79 percent more likes (Gesenhues, 2013)

Curalate's founder Apu Gupta told *Wired* that eventually, Curalate and companies like it "will be able to predict image performance as soon as a photo is uploaded, based on past results. The prediction engine will even adjust itself to the peculiarities of a particular group of Pinterest or Instagram followers" (Tate, 2013). Brands, influencers, and other social media users embraced the release of such data, which seemed to confirm the anecdotal evidence that there really were particular things they could do to optimize their aesthetics for maximum metrics benefit.

As influencers, marketers, and brands became better at predicting what types of content, brand partnerships, and audience interactions would best help them gain visibility, profit, and influence, their behaviors brought into question the very nature of the system's alleged authenticity. In 2015, the influence industry received a noteworthy level of validation when Harvard Business School created a case study on fashion blog *The Blonde Salad* and its related entities. Its founder, Chiara Ferragni, had started *The Blonde Salad* in 2009 while studying law in her native Italy, and by 2014 had grown the business to include a shoe line, a talent management division, and a range of other projects carried out under the parent company she created and ran, called The TBS Crew. Boasting millions of Instagram followers, high profile advertisers and brand collaborators

such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, and several international magazine covers, Ferragni

was widely regarded as one of the top social media influencers in the world. That

Harvard Business School deemed her and her company a worthy subject of one of the

school's notorious case studies provided industrial validation and represented wider

normalization for the personal brand-as-business model, which had become particularly

salient in the fashion/lifestyle genre. *Bustle* raved about Harvard's decision, "Can we get

a hell yeah?" adding, "Maybe the coolest part about this particular study is that it's the

first of Harvard's case studies to focus around a blogger—a testament to the

unstoppable growth of bloggers and their future in business" (Florendo, 2015).

Yet in the midst of 2015's influencer fervor, cracks in the system—built on

converting arbitrary metrics of influence and perceptions of authenticity into saleable

commodities—began to show. In November of that year, Australian teenager Essena

O'Neill—who had more than half a million Instagram followers and had been earning

roughly $2,000AUD per sponsored post—deleted thousands of images from her feed,

updated the captions of those that remained to detail the sponsors and emotional

turmoil she had obscured in each one, and uploaded a tearful video to YouTube in

which she proclaimed "social media is not real life" (Hunt, 2015; O'Neill, 2015). Her

17-minute testimony focused on the hidden industrial dynamics of being a social

media influencer and her belief that they did not serve pro-social ends. She continued:

> There is so much I want to say…I have an insight into a world of social media
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> that I believe not many people are aware of, in terms of how it works with
>
> advertisements…and just how fake it all is. And I say fake because I don't
>
> think anybody has bad intentions, I just think they're caught up in it like I was.

I was surrounded by all this wealth and all this fame and all this power, and yet they were all miserable. And I had never been more miserable…I was the girl who had it all, and I want to tell you that 'having it all' on social media means absolutely nothing to your real life.

Everything I was doing was edited and contrived and to get more value…everything I did was for views, for likes, for followers. Social media is now a business…if you don't think it's a business, you're deluding yourself.

O'Neill's video garnered feverish worldwide attention and became a flashpoint for discussion about the alleged authenticity of social media and its attendant, unseen pressures. O'Neill also received sharp criticism by people who suspected that it was all a hoax (Saul, 2015). While her critics appeared to be incorrect in their assumption that O'Neill staged the event in order to leverage attention for greater visibility and branding deals—O'Neill soon stopped posting to social media altogether and press coverage faded—the nature of the backlash was telling. It revealed a growing cynicism amongst social media users and industry watchers who had come to expect that influencers were simply using the norms and tools related to the influence industry to construct a Russian doll of publicity stunts, wherein one seemingly authentic "reveal" just obscured the next round of payments and machinations behind the on-screen persona.

Conclusion

In the first half of the 2010s, the influence industry rationalized its business through streamlining its basic activity of evaluating, selecting, and pricing influencers for advertising campaigns; exploring more pervasive and efficient means of commercializing

the space; and figuring out how to optimize both the metrics and aesthetics that powered the industry. The externalities of these new tools and practices—such as stricter rules for influencers creating sponsored content, particular aesthetic trends pervading both on- and offline experiences, and rampant self-commercialization—undermined the industry's democratic and authentic self-image. At the same time, these activities enabled the industry to grow at a startling rate, with an estimated value of more than $1 billion by the middle of the 2010s (Drolet, 2016), and its logic to infiltrate day-to-day social and cultural experiences as social media platforms, particularly Instagram, became increasingly central for both socializing and shopping. This is not all surprising; as Marwick (2013a) pointed out, "the technical mechanisms of social media reflect the values of where they were produced: a culture dominated by commercial interest" (p. 5).

These rationalization efforts, of course, did not introduce a flawless business model, even as the industry strove for assembly-line efficiency. (As Hennessy of Hearst explained, "my job is a very teeny tiny part of a giant machine that's happening when somebody makes a buy…there are so many things happening. There's an entire team that's in charge of hitting the KPIs and conversion and—that has nothing to do with me. I don't even have to touch that stuff because that's how nuanced we are. My only job is to find the influencer, figure out how much she costs, and do her contract. Once she arrives on set, she's somebody else's program. Then we have a production team and they're doing the shoots, then it goes to post-production and they're editing, then it goes to somebody else. It's a long assembly line. I step in for my part, do my part, and step back out.)

Indeed, the attention received by Chiara Ferragni and Essena O'Neill—while very different—reminded the public that influencers are working people. Importantly, it also revealed that even these aspirational lifestyle exemplars were subject to various industrial pressures that could determine, to an extent, how they present themselves—and that behind even their most "authentic" content was a complex system of stakeholders. In the next chapter, I examine how the influence industry evolved in the late 2010s as it continued to grow—and as the public became more aware and suspicious of its inner workings.

CHAPTER FOUR:

REASSESSING AND REPOSITIONING THE INFLUENCER

Introduction

April 2018, the tenth annual Shorty Awards—which honor "the best content creators and producers on social media" ("The Shorty Awards")—made headlines for having been a particularly raucous event. Adam Pally, an actor who had agreed to present an award, went off-script during his time on stage and instead delivered a meandering 10-minute speech that roasted the social media influencer landscape. In particular, Pally criticized the fact that no creative professional seemed to be able to escape the influencer industry's logic, and noted that he was "really worried" about the young influencers who were being celebrated that evening purely for their social media presence. "I struggled as an actor for, like, a really long time," he huffed, alluding to absurdity in the fact that he was now presenting an award for social media marketing. When an audience member called out, "delete your account!" (a phrase typically levied as an insult in online communities), Pally responded, "God, I wish I could." Presumably returning to script, he said, "This award honors brands who have the best year-round presence on Instagram…considering how many brands are putting resources into Instagram, it's very impressive." He then added, "…*Is it*?" Eventually telling the crowd, "this is hell," Pally was later escorted off the stage.

Video of Pally's performance circulated widely, gaining nearly unanimous support from the many media outlets that covered it. Characterizing Pally's diatribe as

"hilarious" (Epstein, 2018) and the Shorty Awards as "terrible" (Wanshel, 2018), press outlets piled on to construct a portrait of the social media influencer industry as unilaterally toxic and Pally as the respected outsider who dared say it to their faces. "Pally's exasperated and wildly out of place monologue still seemed genuine—and for those of us dealing with social media overload, relatable," observed *Quartz* (Epstein, 2018). "We can't say we blame him," wrote *The A.V. Club* (Rife, 2018).

Indeed, Pally's outburst seemed apropos amidst a wider sense of social media saturation and mounting distrust of technology companies and the governments tasked with regulating them. In 2018, more than three-quarters of American adults aged 18-49 used social media[4], and most used multiple platforms; more than one-third of all American adults used Instagram in particular (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Three-quarters of American adults owned smartphones, which facilitated near-constant connectivity to social platforms—a situation upon which marketers worked feverishly to capitalize ("Mobile Fact Sheet"; Hund & McGuigan, 2019). More pressingly, in the 18 months immediately preceding the Shorty Awards debacle, a rash of gravely serious and far-reaching scandals—including near continuous reports of Facebook's wrongdoings, from their leak of user data to political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica to the user manipulation and misinformation campaigns that went unchecked by the company for years—meant that anxiety about the social-mediated world was nearly inescapable, and imaginings of its potential ill effects overwhelming. In particular, a sense of anxiety about fakery—from "inauthentic" social media personae to corporate and governmental

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[4] Further, 64 percent of adults ages 50 to 64 and 37 percent of adults 65 and older used social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

misrepresentation of facts—marked this period of the late 2010s. Influencers, of course, were an easy target for collective disdain: weren't these aspirational exemplars really just wealthy and vain (Abidin, 2016), using their "authentic" self-brands to, at best, sell products—and at worst, participate in a system that is rife with fraud and perhaps even contributing to civic crises?

The one Pally detractor published in the popular press, Taylor Lorenz writing for *The Daily Beast,* characterized his rant as "rude, entitled, insensitive," and urged others, "don't call him a hero" (Lorenz, 2018). As Lorenz pointed out, hundreds of creative professionals—social media content creators as well as various marketing and advertising teams—were in attendance, and these were people who were just trying to do their jobs well. Indeed, while the late 2010s brought a nearly palpable cultural shift toward questioning the ethics and motives of those involved in the influence industry, none of the structural conditions, outlined in this dissertation's preceding chapters, that had rendered their existence not only possible but thriving, had substantially changed. Personal branding and entrepreneurship continued to be valorized while for many, the professional "scars" inflicted by the recession persisted (Lowrey, 2017). As people came to view advertising as inescapable (and even traditional journalistic outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, and others set up in-house sponsored content studios), ad-blocking and other forms of "tuning out" had only become more prevalent—meaning that advertisers continued to seek ways of sharing their messages through unassuming channels. Social media use increased substantially, and each year advertisers continued to direct more and more resources toward influencer marketing on the belief that the "real people" of social media fame were more impactful than traditional celebrities. Indeed, in

2017, *Entrepreneur* reported that fully 92 percent of consumers trusted influencers more than traditional advertisements or celebrity endorsements (Moss, 2017); in 2016, the Collective Bias agency reported that people spent seven times more time looking at influencer content than looking at digital display ads (Collective Bias, 2016). In other words, at an estimated value of more than $2 billion in 2018 and projections to reach $10- to $20 billion by 2020 (Contestabile, 2018; InfluencerDB, 2018) influencer marketing was bigger and more powerful than ever, even as public trust in the technological and regulatory establishment had experienced a potent and fundamental rattle. As a general skepticism about the hidden mechanisms of social media grew, grassroots social media campaigns like #DeleteFacebook encouraged users to disengage from social media. The influence industry's stakeholders had to reckon with the damage done and determine how best to move forward.

In this chapter

The Chiara Ferragni and Essena O'Neill events described at the end of Chapter Three differed substantially in their nature, but they shared a role in revealing to the public just how thoroughly commercialized the social media landscape had become. They also began to expose some of the influence industry's underlying—and sometimes unpleasant—issues that had heretofore been hidden from public view. In the ensuing years, a series of significant events continued to expose cracks in the industry's foundation, which—against the backdrop of larger social media scandals such as Facebook's wrongdoings—contributed to a so-called "influencer backlash" (Pathak, 2018). In this chapter, I outline three particular events that issued significant public

challenges *specifically* to the influence industry. I will then explore how various industry stakeholders made strategic decisions in an effort to continue to be successful in an environment where influencers' authenticity was no longer easily believable—and their work was increasingly met with suspicion and, as evidenced by the Pally event and resulting coverage, cynicism. Finding new forms of defining and expressing authenticity became critical to maintaining their influence.

Public Controversies

Federal crackdowns

In June 2015, the Federal Trade Commission updated its endorsement guidelines for the first time since 2010. Maintaining their long-held position that "material relationships between brand and endorser on social media must be 'clearly and conspicuously' disclosed" (Beck, 2015), the FTC added detailed guidelines about various social media advertising issues that the agency had not previously addressed, from specifying where in a caption disclosure must appear (before any links), to which hashtags are appropriate (#ad and #sponsored are acceptable; #spon and #thanks are not). Many marketers interpreted these updates as a signal of an impending crackdown (ibid.)—and they were correct.

In perhaps the most noteworthy case, the FTC filed a complaint against department store chain Lord & Taylor for coordinating a deceptive influencer marketing campaign. In March 2015, Lord & Taylor partnered with 50 Instagram influencers as well as *Nylon* magazine to promote a particular dress from its new Design Lab line. The influencers and *Nylon* posted images of the dress during the same weekend (using Lord &

Taylor-approved language), and *Nylon* also ran an article (edited and sponsored by Lord

& Taylor) about Design Lab. Influencers were given the dress for free and paid between

$1,000 and $4,000 for the posts ("Lord and Taylor Settles FTC Charges"). The dress sold

out in a matter of days. "The program was designed to introduce Design Lab to this

customer where she is engaging and consuming content every day," Lord & Taylor chief

marketing officer Michael Crotty told *Adweek* (Griner, 2015).

"The goal was to make her stop in her feed and ask why all her favorite bloggers are

wearing this dress and what is Design Lab? Using Instagram as that vehicle is a logical

choice, especially when it comes to fashion" (ibid.). However, none of these

partnerships—from the exchange of goods and payment to Lord & Taylor's role in

creating copy—were properly disclosed.

In settling the complaint, the FTC explicitly prohibited Lord & Taylor from

"misrepresenting that any endorser is an independent or ordinary consumer," established

"a monitoring and review program for the company's endorsement campaigns," and

noted that future infractions would carry "the force of law" and result in major fines

("Lord and Taylor Settles FTC Charges"). Industry watchers viewed the case as a

potential harbinger of what was to come if brands, marketers, and influencers did not

change their approach to sponsored content. An advertising attorney interviewed by the

Wall Street Journal emphasized that the Lord & Taylor event was a "good example of the

rise and extensive use of integrated campaigns" and that advertisers "need to ensure their

processes and systems are in place and that what needs to get done gets done" (Tadena,

2016).

Government bodies aside from the FTC also became ensnared in influencer marketing issues. In 2015, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a public reprimand to Kim Kardashian West, the "reality star turned mega influencer" (Amed, 2018), and the drug company Duchesney after the two parties collaborated on a post for Kardashian West's Instagram account, which has more than 130 million followers. The post featured an image of Kardashian West holding a bottle of Diclegis, a medication for morning sickness, along with a caption praising the drug for helping her feel well during pregnancy. The post failed to include information about potential side effects or risks, as well as the fact that it had not been studied in women officially diagnosed with the condition (severe morning sickness, or hyperemesis gravidarum) it was intended to treat. The FDA issued public warning letters to Duchesney and Kardashian West, requiring that the post be taken down and replaced with a new one that noted their mistake and contained the extensive details omitted in the original.

Federal agencies and departments continued to closely monitor influencers. (Even the Department of Homeland Security compiled a list of "media influencers" to monitor in order to "identify any and all media coverage related to the Department of Homeland Security or a particular event," causing waves of worry about the government's interest in protecting or monitoring a free press (O'Reilly & Snyder, 2018).) But the FTC remained the most prominent and active agency in monitoring social media influencers and enforcing regulations about sponsorship. Between 2016 and 2017 the agency issued more than 100 warning letters to top influencers regarding lack of adequate sponsorship disclosure. It also updated its guidelines several times in order to stay abreast of industry's rapid changes to technological capabilities and social norms around disclosure.

Instagram, for example, introduced the option to tag a brand as a location on a photo in order to denote a relationship. Doing so would note the brand's name in small type at the top of the post, but the FTC ruled that doing this alone was inadequate disclosure (Fair, 2017). "We don't say you have to use a specific word or term, but disclosure has to clearly convey a financial relationship or exchange between brand and poster. The disclosure also has to be placed in such a way the consumer isn't going to miss seeing it," Mary Engle, the FTC's associate director for advertising practices, told *PRWeek* (Daniels, 2016).

Fyre Festival

In December 2016, dozens of so-called mega-influencers—including Bella Hadid (23 million Instagram followers), Emily Ratajkowski (22 million), and Hailey Baldwin (20 million)—posted a solid orange square to their Instagram feeds. The accompanying captions expressed excitement for something called Fyre Festival (#fyrefestival), but provided few details other than links to the festival's website. A promotional video was released the same day on Fyre Festival's website and on YouTube, showing the influencers and others (including rapper Ja Rule, who was involved in the festival's planning) frolicking on a Caribbean beach, jumping off yachts, racing jetskis, and enjoying frozen drinks. The video promised "two transformative weekends" of "an immersive music festival" to be held on "a remote and private island…once owned by Pablo Escobar" (Fyre Festival, 2017). *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino characterized the video as a "perfectly generic fantasia of what an Instagram come to life would be…nothing but backdrop with montage-friendly bliss" (Furst and Nason, 2019). The

video did little to provide real details about the event (information about performance lineup or travel and lodging logistics was absent), but the coordinated influencer marketing effort proved immediately fruitful. Tickets—which cost thousands of dollars and claimed to include entrance to the festival, luxury accommodations, and in many cases, private airfare from Miami to the island—sold quickly.

The festival was scheduled for the last weekend in April and first weekend in May 2017. In the months leading up to the festival, the seemingly over-the-top promises in the festival's marketing began to raise questions. The advertised location for the festival, Fyre Cay, was not a real place but rather the name festival promoters gave to a small Bahamian island where they hoped to hold the festival. The island's lack of infrastructure, however, proved to be too big a hurdle for festival planners to mount, and they moved the event to a larger island called Great Exuma. New marketing materials indicated that the festival's location was still remote and exclusive, but maps of the site provided by Fyre Festival seemed to be heavily cropped aerial views of a stretch of concrete behind a Sandals resort, as pointed out by an anonymous Twitter account called @FyreFraud that appeared in March 2017 and regularly tried to draw attention to Fyre Festival's inconsistencies and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. As the event drew closer, organizers began contacting ticketholders with odd requests. One message announced that the event was going to be cashless and requested ticketholders immediately upload cash to accounts that would be associated with wristbands they would receive on the island; the organizers recommended uploading several hundred dollars for each day the ticketholder would be there. In April 2017, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that none of the supposed headlining acts had been paid, and argued that the festival was "woo[ing]

wealthy to stay afloat" (Karp, 2017). In the days leading up to the event, ticketholders had still not received information about their flights or lodging, and their attempts to gain answers from the organizers were ignored. Fyre Festival began deleting Instagram comments that questioned or expressed negativity about the festival. Finally, the day before the first weekend was to begin, one of the headliners announced that they were pulling out of the event.

Despite the series of red flags, hundreds of hopeful attendees boarded planes to Great Exuma with the conviction that the influencers had been honest: the luxurious event that they promoted would still come to fruition. Yet what happened upon attendees' arrival, journalists observed, was a "fiasco," "disaster," and the "world's biggest flop" (Burrough, 2017; Ohlheiser, 2017; Baggs, 2019). Rather than the luxury transportation and lodging attendees were been promised, school buses brought them to the festival grounds, which were still under construction aside from disaster relief tents and wet mattresses that had been set up to serve as accommodations. Electricity, food and water, and bathroom facilities were all extremely limited. Panic ensued as attendees rushed to claim resources—or back to the airport to await a return flight. Social media posts documented the festival's unraveling in real time, with angry attendees sharing images, videos, and descriptions of their experience with hashtags such as #fyrefraud and #dumpsterfyre, and journalists amplifying these reports to a wide audience. A *Vice* reporter characterized the situation as "A *Lord of the Flies* situation with Instagram's top influencers" (Smith, 2019). After 24 hours, festival organizers officially canceled the events and all incoming concertgoers' flights; instead, empty planes arrived from Miami

in an effort to "rescue" those on the island (Smith, 2019). As *Vanity Fair* observed, "the Fyre Festival, built on Instagram, dies by Instagram" (Bryant, 2017).

Within days, several lawsuits were filed against Fyre Festival's organizers, specifically its founders Billy McFarland and Ja Rule. The lawsuits alleged fraud, negligence, and violation of consumer protection law; one specifically noted that McFarland and Rule "tricked people into attending the event by paying more than 400 social media influencers and celebrities" to promote it (Gaca, 2017). McFarland was arrested in July 2017 and in 2018 sentenced to six years in prison for fraud (Flanagan, 2018). While the influencers who were central to the festival's marketing strategy were paid (Marine, 2019), almost none of the other people involved—from local Bahamian laborers who worked to set up the site to the ticket buyers—had received payment or restitution as of late 2018 (Furst and Nason, 2019).

Fyre Festival gained instant notoriety for its total collapse that was live-updated on social media. Watchers seized upon the juxtaposition of wealthy and aspirational attendees with the circumstances—stuck, after following the call of glamorous social media stars, in a situation wherein they lacked basic necessities—as well as the nearly unbelievable level of hubris required of Fyre's founders in order to scam thousands of people out of millions of dollars. These narratives were so salient that they became the focus of two documentaries released in early 2019. (In another testament to how financially and culturally powerful the influencer industry had become, the Netflix documentary *Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened* was also produced by Jerry Media, a company started by an Instagram influencer who was also involved in the promotion of Fyre Festival.) Yet what is most interesting about Fyre is the way it

revealed just how much trust influencers had cultivated with their followers. Despite all indications that the festival was never going to be what it claimed, festivalgoers continued to hope for the best, boarding planes to the island even while reports were already surfacing about what awaited them. Influencer marketing was so effective—followers trusted that what the influencers represented was real, and that they could be relied upon even in the face of contradictory information because of their authentic and friendly personas—that it overruled logic. "The cacophony of sound that they were able to create using the influencers and their social media strategy was so overwhelming that not only did various financial guys give them money, but facts were basically ignored," said one participant in Hulu's documentary *Fyre Fraud*. Further, the Fyre calamity offered a meta-comment on the precarity that undergirds even the most aspirational corners of the influencer landscape, where the pressure to continually gain money and higher status is so high that even those at the top take deals that promise to deliver these things, even if the details are foggy. (This might also help explain the concurrent rising popularity, in the late 2010s, of influencers promoting other suspicious products, such as weight-loss teas (Lieber, 2016) Followers' willingness to buy into the lifestyles promoted by influencers—going so far as to spend thousands of dollars on an event that showed little evidence, aside from a social media campaign, of actually happening—was a powerful signal of influencers' increasingly critical role as cultural mediators.

Fake followers

In January 2018, *The New York Times* released an in-depth report about the rise of "fake followers" on social media (Confessore et al, 2018). While bloggers and

influencers had for years addressed unsavory practices related to boosting follower count (e.g. Leiber, 2014; also discussed in Chapter Three), the *Times* report exposed the extensive ecosystem, or what they called a "black market," that had developed to provide bloggers and other content creators as well as journalists, politicians, and actors with the "real" followers needed to become a bona fide influencer. The report focused on a company called Devumi, a Twitter bot supplier that promised, "Our followers look like any other followers and are always delivered naturally. The only way anyone will know is if you tell them" (ibid.). But it revealed trends that pervaded social media's influencer landscape.

The most obvious of these was the basic logic of the influencer economy: that being visible on social media, cultivating a following and being able to leverage that into financial and social opportunities, was necessary for professional success in the digital age. "You see a higher follower count, or a higher retweet count, and you assume this person is important, or this tweet was well received," a founder of a search engine optimization company told the *Times* (Confessore et al, 2018). "Everyone does it," an actress said (ibid.). It also revealed the lengths to which people would go in order to effectively participate in this system, sometimes spending thousands of dollars to boost their social media follower count. Caving to the influencer economy logic was not limited to aspiring influencers or struggling wannabes; the report exposed that established professionals such as the actor John Leguizamo, billionaire Dell Computer founder Michael Dell, and member of British parliament Martha Lane Fox had purchased Devumi followers.

Most disturbingly, the *Times* report described how this underbelly to the influence system threatened the privacy and wellbeing of countless people. Many of Devumi's accounts for sale were actually facsimiles of unsuspecting users' real online identities. Among others, the *Times* highlighted the case of a 17-year-old high school student whose name and likeness were stolen to create an account, available for sale by Devumi, that tended to retweet controversial or questionable content, including graphic pornography. Further, bot retailers like Devumi did not make the fake accounts themselves, but tended to purchase them from a "thriving global market" of wholesalers (Confessore, et al, 2018). In providing detailed analyses and graphics illustrating the rise of the fake follower marketplace and the means of detecting them, the *Times* showed just how complicated, and often obfuscatory, this corner of the influencer industry had become.

Just a few months later, in May 2018, Unilever Chief Marketing Officer Keith Weed—who oversees the $8 billion-plus marketing budget for one of the world's biggest advertisers (Geller, 2018)—announced that the company would no longer work with influencers who bought followers. Further, he called on social media companies to "help eradicate bad practices throughout the whole ecosystem" (Brooke, 2018). "There are lots of great influencers out there, but there are a few bad apples spoiling the barrel, and the trouble is, everyone goes down once the trust is undermined," Weed told *Reuters* (Geller, 2018). Weed's announcement made waves at Cannes Lions, the annual global marketing conference where he spoke, and beyond. *Econsultancy* argued that it was "a wake-up call for other brands that have applied less scrutiny to the influencers and influencer agencies they work with" (Robles, 2018). And indeed, many brands voiced support for Unilever's decision and echoed the call to "clean up" influencer marketing (Vranica, 2018). Yet

monitoring the legitimacy of influencers' followers would be an enormous task, since—

among other issues—at any moment an influencer who was previously free of fake

followers could purchase them. While Weed's announcement was a powerful indictment

of fraud in the influencer space just months after the *Times* report spurred it into public

consciousness, the practical hurdles his call entailed showed just how difficult restoring

authenticity to the influencer industry could be. "The reckoning," *Racked* observed,

"comes in fits and starts" (Brooke, 2018).

Strategic repositioning

Marketers

In order to restore credibility to their own practices and to the influencers they

backed, marketers intensified their focus on data collection and analysis, as well as

expanding their definition of what an influencer could be. Throughout all these

adjustments, marketers were agreeable and often enthusiastic about adhering to new FTC

guidelines and requiring obvious and clear disclosure in social media posts. "It's hard,"

Hennessy, the influencer booker, admitted. "It's a lot of keep up with…are we using #ad

or is this sponsored or what's the FTC doing this day, oh they just put out another 200-

page guideline, let me go read that." But, "the fact is that the consumers are listening to

influencers," said Corey Martin of the 360i agency. "The demographic range of people

that are listening to influencers are not deterred by the fact that someone is paid by a

brand that often. The great thing about influencers is that the people that follow them put

the same kind of credibility on a relationship…as they do with friends. So even though

there's not an actual personal relationship there is a digital relationship that equates to—

that delivers credibility."

Berger of HYPR confirmed that clearly disclosing sponsorship turned out to

often benefit influencers and brands. "I think people really understand how it all works

and how it all goes down," he said. "If you're doing it the right way, you're gonna put

#ad or #spon on any of the social posts, right? But these posts…actually provide better

ROI when it says #ad or #spon… So here are all these companies scared to put it on there

because of what it means, but it doesn't seem to take away anything. In fact, in

everything I've seen, it actually increases the engagement."

Beyond the general repositioning to be on the side of disclosure and regulation,

marketers developed more specific strategies for ensuring their continued success. In

order to ferret out influencers who misrepresented their followings, marketers shifted deal

structures in ways that aimed to hold influencers individually accountable for the

audiences they promised to deliver. Instead of flat-rate or per-post pricing, where, as one

co-founder of an influencer marketing platform wrote in *Forbes*, "you can't guarantee

quality or if the content is even seen," industry professionals recommended goal-based

pricing based on impressions, engagement, clicks, or acquisition. "When influencers are

compensated on their performance, not only do they return higher-quality content that is

proven to perform, but they also deliver an engaged audience that is inspired to take

action," she continued (Sipka, 2017).

Marketers also took steps toward more sophisticated data-driven products for

influencer selection and identification. As a means of evaluating influencer effectiveness

and potentially circumventing follower fraud, marketers looked to tie influencer

campaigns to sales of the advertised products in a more granular way. The founder of

influencer marketplace TapInfluence told *eMarketer*, "what I'm really excited about is

what we're doing right now. We have partnerships with Datalogix and Nielsen, where we

can actually get loyalty card data and use it to tie influencers to offline purchases"

(Banks, 2015). Further, he explained, "we can do marketing mix modeling, meaning that

we can correlate spikes in influencer marketing to spikes in sales. We can put that model

into our software, and it will tell you on a per-influencer basis how many sales each

influencer is driving" (ibid.). Other agencies developed artificial intelligence-driven

products to do the work of influencer campaign planning and to send clients the message

that influencers would be thoroughly vetted and analyzed, beyond human capabilities, in

order to ensure trustworthiness. Public relations and digital marketing firm Lippe Taylor,

for example, debuted its Starling AI product, promising:

> "As the problem of 'fake followers' increasingly plagues the reliability of
>
> influencer marketing, Starling AI counters this issue by qualifying influencers
>
> according to their connectivity to fellow influencers, thereby ensuring their
>
> audience is genuine. Additionally, Starling AI's tracking of 'influencer
>
> momentum' ensures that identified influencers are likely to continue to rise in
>
> influence throughout an engagement, locking in value for clients longterm"
>
> ("Starling AI").

Even as marketers leveraged more sophisticated software for influencer analysis,

they also reoriented themselves to more openly recognizing influencers' personhood

rather than continually characterizing them with nonhuman metaphors, as explored in

Chapter Two. Sabina* emphasized, "It's really important to view influencers as people,

not just marketing devices." This dual focus on data analysis and personal relationships further pushed forward the already-growing trend toward micro-influencers and nano-influencers, as more sophisticated software detected influential users with ever smaller followings but more intimate and "real" relationships with their followers and with brands. Sabina* continued, "I truly feel like [micro-influencers are] just the next step. This generation really isn't watching television. They're not seeing that Neutrogena commercials with Mandy Moore that we saw. Which, how is that any different? Brands have always leveraged celebrity, so why not leverage this new generation of digital celebrities?" Nano influencers also offered financial incentives to marketers and brands; because their followings were so small, they typically did not "influence" for a living—and would therefore make fewer demands related to travel and compensation. One executive called them "the hometown girls," (McCall, 2016), noting their small but dedicated followings and the fact that they tended to be "based out of smaller pockets that are still fashion based, but not New York or Los Angeles" (ibid.). By embracing social media users with ever smaller followings, marketers were able to highlight the greater proportion of truth in their "just like us" positioning.

Ultimately, the changes marketers made during this time served to exert greater control and minimize exposure to ethically questionable influencers or campaigns. This was most clear in the growing phenomenon of nonhuman CGI influencers. "CGI influencers are the future," said Nadia*, a trend forecaster for a global firm. "You can control that behavior then. If you're crafting your own celebrity you don't have to worry about the possibility of any controversial behavior or anything like that." In 2016, for example, a character named Miquela Sousa—also known as Lil Miquela—gained

widespread attention for her Instagram presence, which showed her seemingly attending Hollywood events, hanging out with celebrities, and producing branded content. "No one knows who or what @lilmiquela is, but everyone has a theory," wrote Caitlin Dewey (2016) in *The Washington Post.* "Since she posted her first Instagram in April, the Internet's latest 'it girl' (or hoax, or art project, or marketing stunt) has become something of a cult mystery. The problem with Miquela, you see, is that she acts like a real person but doesn't look like one. Her skin's a bit too glossy, her shadows slightly too flat—she has the telltale uncanniness of a computer animation." By 2018, Miquela had amassed more than one million Instagram followers. *Dazed* magazine named her a contributing editor, and she had collaborated with brands on multiple campaigns.

Beth*, marketing manager for a brand that collaborated with Miquela, explained their reasoning:

> I think that's the biggest thing that really…makes the team excited to work with Lil Miquela because she is—obviously she's not real, but at the same time she definitely embodies this idea of thinking outside the box, doing things a little bit differently, which is what our brand is all about. I think we're always about pushing those boundaries of technology and digital…so, that's sort of the way the partnership came about, and it was super exciting.

However, she said, the brand believed their decision could be construed as controversial, and they prepared themselves for blowback.

> We were super—just cautious about it, and we knew that like, just anything new that gets brought out, that gets shown to people, there's going to be a positive and a negative reaction. And so I think that we were kind of prepared for that.

Ultimately, though, we really didn't see the negative reaction that we anticipated. We were really surprised, or not even surprised, but just excited about how open and interested our followers were about, like, learning about this girl, and [also] who knew her and were excited about the partnership. And so, ultimately, it ended up being a good thing for us.

Indeed, the case of Lil Miquela showed that a nonhuman influencer's seeming lack of "authenticity" would not necessarily be a problem. In the aftermath of the unveiling of social media's hidden orchestrations, the key to conveying authenticity seemed to be strategic deployment of *honesty*: if something is sponsored, disclose it; if someone or something is not "real," have fun with it. "The effects of social media are multifaceted and hard to quantify, so it feels pointless demanding more authenticity from something that doesn't necessarily require it," observed a writer for *Refinery29* (Jones, 2018). "When something is authentic it works best. That said, in today's world it doesn't need to be anywhere near as authentic as it used to be," said Berger.

Brands

In their efforts to maintain appealing brand personae and connections to their customers in an era of increasing distrust, retail brands sought to bring influencers deeper into the fold, cultivating closer and longer-term relationships. Brands saw these relationships as more effective and, ideally, with less room for the kinds of errors of authenticity that could ignite controversy or damage their bottom lines. (According to *MediaPost*, in the second quarter of 2018, brands spent $211 million on influencer marketing in the U.S. and Canada—but "$11 million of that was for influencers' fake

followers" (Sullivan, 2018) The long-term approach meant brands could get to know influencers better on an individual basis, and more thoroughly vet them for dodgy practices (like buying followers) that could more easily remain hidden when engaging with influencers in a transactional way. This long-term approach also provided brands access to influencers' own social media strategies and expertise—and cache with the public, when aligned appropriately.

Rather than one-off partnerships, wherein an influencer would be hired to create content for a specific campaign, brands cultivated closer, and ideally more permanent, relationships with influencers. Often this translated to hiring influencers in a sort of consulting role to provide feedback on product and marketing, and then also promote the products later. As Lake, the SVP for Digital Brand Architects, explained:

> I see that influencers are providing brands strategies. We do a lot of meetings with brands and talent where the brand is using the talent as like a consultant when it comes to developing new products or the marketing or the promotion. But then we'll also see brands are now creating product *with* talent—so having the talent actually be part of the brand.

In response to this trend, Lake's company launched a licensing division, with the goal of enabling their influencer clients to create and sell product—"not necessarily just through amplification, but using their image and likeness," she said. "Brands are definitely using talent to root campaigns, but also now build products around. I think that we're going to see a lot more products created by talent and influencers." Indeed, in the late 2010s several major retailers worked with influencers to release influencer-branded product lines, including Nordstrom with Chriselle Lim, Atlantic-Pacific, and Something Navy,

and Target with Wit & Delight (whose founder was a participant in this study). "The money is pretty much just rolling in," as a result of these sorts of collaborations, reported *Fashionista* (Mau, 2018). Writing about Nordstrom specifically, the journalist noted that influencer brands have "undoubtedly been one of the things that has helped the retailer maintain relevance while its competitors struggle for it" (ibid.)

Part of the appeal of these sorts of collaborations is the mutual investment on the part of brands and influencers in the products' success: both have made creative investments, and the influencer will naturally share information about the product in both the development and launch stages. Further, because an influencers' social media presence is the centerpiece of these brands, retailers are able to reduce financial (and public relations) risk by garnering input from potential buyers along the way. "Through social sharing and polls on influencers' platforms, we've been able to receive real-time feedback on the design process, inviting them to be a part of the fashion journey in a way that has never been done before. For example, Arielle Charnas of Something Navy has been sharing fabric swatches and design elements from her upcoming brand launch with her audience over the past few months. We have been able to consider customers' feedback and edit accordingly," a Nordstrom executive told *Fashionista* (Mau, 2018).

Even when brands do not go so far as to create product with their influencer partners, they worked to ensure their trusted influencers felt valued as "people, not advertising space" (Goldberg, 2017), and as respected expertise-providers for the brand. Writing for *Adweek*, an agency executive advised brands to have members of their marketing team speak directly with social media influencers rather than transacting through a third party (Gahan, 2017). "It changes the paradigm from rote regurgitation of

talking points to integrating the message into one's life," he wrote. Indeed, the writer

went on to advise brands to work for total integration into influencers' lives rather than

dealing in a transactional manner. If brands could influence the influencers—convincing

them of the brand's lifestyle value rather than simply the merits of a single product or

campaign—then their efforts could reap rewards for years to come. "You're best off

thinking about influencers as scaled-down celebrities who are ready to be turned into a

long-lived mouthpiece for your brand…to maximize that return, brands ought to have

their influencers drinking the Kool-Aid before sending them into the great unknown to

rep their products" (ibid.). A writer for *Forbes* urged retailers to "use your brand to

enable [influencers'] ability to create, not to inhibit it" (Goldberg, 2017).

Brands continued to build on the strategy of thorough, long-term influencer

relationships as they looked for new influencer partners. In 2018, brands were looking

ahead to the "next crop of influencers [that] is really going to redefine the business," as

Nadia*, the trend forecaster, said. These are child influencers, sometimes given the

generational nickname "alphas," who are "between the ages of zero to seven," according

to Nadia*. These young social media stars develop social media personal brands with the

help of their parents, and can earn tens of thousands of dollars for a sponsored content

depending on the platform and their metrics. As *The New York Times* pointed out, the

Federal Communications Commission has not yet updated their rules for children's

content—which are television-focused and explicitly limit product placements and

require separation between content and advertisements—for influencer content

(Maheshwari, 2019). Further, the work of so-called "kidfluencers" calls into question

child labor laws and other regulations. Yet until regulation is enacted, social media's

youngest power users offer brands an opportunity that seems too good to miss: "you can essentially have a *really* long-term partnership," Nadia* said.

Social media and technology companies

Some social media and technology companies also took steps to respond to the questions raised about the influencer industry. In 2017, both Facebook and Instagram updated their branded content policies to explicitly require users to "Comply with all applicable laws and regulations, including by ensuring that you provide all necessary disclosures to people using Facebook or Instagram, such as any disclosures needed to indicate the commercial nature of content posted by you" ("Branded Content Policies"). Instagram also launched the aforementioned disclosure tool, which would allow influencers and other content publishers to tag a sponsoring brand and display the partnership at the top of a post. Instagram also announced that they would "begin enforcing branded content that isn't properly tagged" ("Instagram for Business") though provided few details on what, in practice, "enforcing" meant. The companies framed these tools as "bring[ing], transparency around Branded Content to the Instagram community," touting transparency as a "value" of "businesses and creators" ("Instagram for Business").

Beyond tools for disclosure, the companies creating and managing the technologies upon which the influencer industry relied looked further ahead. "What's next is the shift from social media to social marketplaces," *Forbes* predicted in 2016 (Agrawal, 2016). And indeed, social marketplaces—wherein influencers sold directly to followers on social media and other platforms—offered a solution to many issues facing

the industry, including the need for transparency, the demand for the authenticity of sharing one's whole "lifestyle," as well as retailers' search for new viable business models. As one marketing journalist wrote, "For influencers…moving into e-commerce is a natural next step in their evolution. Digital storefronts provide these content creators with another avenue to monetize their personal brands" (Angulo, 2016).

Selling directly through influencers' social media presence worked particularly well for fashion and consumer products. "For certain verticals I could see [sponsorship] being a problem, like if you're promoting software and people paid you to say it. But if it's fashion, and it's a really great looking dress and you're needing one and it's the right price and some blogger has it and by the way they sponsored it, I'm like, great, I needed this!" said Jung, founder of influencer platform theShelf. Further, it dovetailed nicely with how "you're always shopping now," as Nadia*, the trend forecaster, said. "It's just right there and you're just like, 'This is what I'm going to do to kill time while I'm waiting at the dentist,' or whatever."

Influencers

Long before the federal crackdowns, Fyre Festival, and fake follower scandals opened up the influencer industry up widespread backlash, influencers themselves were exposed to negative and sometimes hateful feedback—which perhaps uniquely prepared them to navigate the broader environment of skepticism and distrust in the late 2010s. For years, influencer criticism occurred most publicly on *Get Off My Internets* (GOMI), an online forum "where participants criticize individual bloggers, picking out and tearing apart examples of all things staged, insincere, unethical, exaggerated—in short, all things

inauthentic" (McRae, 2017, p. 14). Increasingly, critics also appeared on Instagram and blog comment sections—and in rare and the most disconcerting of circumstances, in person.

Jeanette, a budget fashion blogger, described "a really painful couple of years with being in the public eye" in her interview. "I've had, like–how can I even explain–attacks on my personal life to the point where I felt unsafe to go out of my own house," she said. But more commonly, she received comments on her posts and was a frequent subject of ridicule on the *GOMI* forums. Followers have posted "malicious, crazy stuff," she said, from conspiracy theories about her personal life to sexist criticism of her appearance.

I think it's—it's almost like that celebrity culture, which…I didn't realize how crazy people get and, like, the rumors that they come up with. Because people really think that they own you, and that's what people will say: It's my right, you put yourself on the internet and I can say whatever I want. And it's like, that's actually not true.

I think it's almost become worse for bloggers because we are real people. And so for [followers], when they see these things like you're getting to go on a free vacation or you're making money from this, it makes them more angry. They see Kim Kardashian doing it; well, whatever; she's untouchable. But they can get a hold of you a lot easier because I don't have that kind of protection. So it's just–it's all become like a bigger issue…I'm definitely not special. I'm not the only one that gets this kind of attention; it's kind of everybody.

Similarly, Lindsay, a décor and lifestyle blogger, reflected:

> I've definitely gotten my fair share of negative comments, and unfollows, and
> things like that. And I think it's just human nature that it hurts. Because the blog
> for me is such a personal thing, and I'm sharing things that are in my heart and
> soul and what I spent time creating, so it definitely feels like a personal attack. It's
> hard not to find your personal worth in the blog because it's you, I mean, so much
> of it is you. And so those are definitely hard things, but I think I've developed
> kind of a tough skin.

Indeed, many bloggers and influencers spoke of the need to develop "tough" or "thick skin;" as Jeanette said, "you can say just about anything to me and I just don't even bat an eye, which is really sad."

Yet the harsh critiques that had previously been limited to a subset of "anti-fans" (McRae, 2017) seeped into public discourse in the late 2010s, with outlets such as *New York Magazine, The Guardian, GQ,* characterizing the influencer industry as a bastion of fakery, superficiality, and other social ills (e.g. Silman, 2018; Noor, 2018; Goodwin, 2017). As public suspicion about their work increased, influencers, too, grew wary of the various systems in place that made their work possible and valuable. Instagram in particular became a frequent subject of debate. Because it was not always clear how the platform's algorithm worked—and therefore, what sort of visibility or engagement their posts might receive—influencers came up with folk theories and collective solutions to the problems they perceived. A common solution was to join a "pod"—groups of typically a few dozen influencers that mutually agree to like and comment on each other's every post in order to boost "authentic" engagement. Yet platforms worked to

shut down pod activities, claiming they were "inauthentic behavior" (Petre, Duffy &
Hund, forthcoming). Further, influencers debated the practice amongst themselves. "I
don't really want to be the person that's commenting on everyone's stuff on Instagram. I
want to be true and only comment on people's stuff that I love and look up to," Danielle,
a fashion microinfluencer, said in an interview. "I'm hoping that in the long run, my
honesty will start to pay off. People notice those things. I notice those things."

Some influencers also became critical of their growing roles as drivers of
consumerism or models of alleged "perfection" and took steps to remediate it. Kate, the
designer and lifestyle blogger, explained how she had noticed

"a shift, in a way, where people who aren't bloggers are feeling the pressure to
make their own life look perfect. Because for me, I can look at a room in a
magazine and I know what work went into making it like that. So I don't look at
the [social media] world and think, 'my gosh, her life is perfect,' but I look and
think about look at how great that styling is.

When I realized that people didn't have the professional experience that I had on
understanding how that works, they look at it and say, 'my gosh, this is real'—
and only heightened by the fact that normal people are able to produce this on
their phone and then share it. I think that…I felt sort of a social need to lift the
veil."

As such, Kate made a strategic decision, ahead of a product launch with a major national
retailer, to share on her social media channels more about her personal struggles with
mental illness. "I think I really felt like if I was gonna have that many eyeballs on me, I

didn't want to be known for just having perfect images," she said. "I told my story. I'm not gonna dwell on it or tell it over and over again…but it was just the time to do it."

While influencers could be self-critical and self-correcting, they were still part of and dependent on an industrial influence system that required them to cultivate authenticity in recognizable ways. With heightened scrutiny on their practices and added financial pressures of shifting deal structures, influencers looked to display even more transparency and "realness" in ways that allowed their continued success. Aside from taking up the "clear and conspicuous" disclosure practices required by the FTC, influencers shared more casual, less staged content, often using new platform affordances like Instagram's Stories feature, which allows users to upload short videos that disappear after 24 hours. Stories enabled influencers to share different types of content, and to further expand their "lifestyle" personae rather than adhering to a particular genre.

At the same time, influencers spoke of the need to expand their personal brands into businesses beyond social media as a means of regaining control over their income, status, and messaging. "You have to keep finding new ways to keep your business going besides what you have," Brittiny, the city-focused fashion blogger, said. Grossman, the talent manager, observed, "to be able to maximize on the amount of opportunities out there, and to be able to stay authentic and true to what their individual brand is, [influencers] really need to be able to pivot pretty quickly and just be able to be nimble with the technology and the innovations and everything that's changing just as the industry changes as a whole."

Several influencers described efforts to rebuild their blogs or personal websites or start entirely new companies after years of posting content to platforms like Instagram.

"At the end of the day, as much as I love Instagram and that's my main platform, I don't own Instagram. I own my blog. So that's what I work really hard towards growing each and everyday," said Audrey, a fashion blogger. Heidi explained in detail the financial, industrial, and social realties she and her peers were navigating:

> I am still an influencer, but I am building this amazing social media digital agency and we're doing well, and I like to say it gives me some sort of peace of mind knowing that, let's say tomorrow Instagram shut me down—it's unlikely, but let's say that happens, or maybe influencers fall out of favor, nobody cares anymore, and sponsors don't want to pay us money, I would be fine. And in a way it gives me more authenticity because I can just work with brands that I want instead of like worrying in a way, oh gosh, every month I need to secure a certain number of sponsors or X dollar amount. That is pressure. I have friends who have millions of followers and you'd think they're happy, but when I talk to them they feel kind of worried because they know things are changing.
>
> I feel that influencers who don't piggyback off their platform and build something more lasting that is not all on social media, they're gonna be in trouble. The writing's on the wall. Every single day there's more influencers or people who want to be influencers coming on board…If you're an influencer who has any sort of platform or reach it's time to leverage that and go into something else. Whatever. Go into TV, have a content company, build a fashion line, whatever it is—you need to get something that you have more control on.

The changing pricing and deal structures in the wake of the exposure of fraudulent practices and the growing micro- and nano-influencer trends had material impact on established influencers. Heidi continued:

The benchmark to become an influencer is quite low: you need to get an account, have style, know how to pose. That's not that difficult. Because of that, the money that is being spent for influencers is decreasing. For example, brand X last year would pay me $5,000 for a campaign this year it's $3,000. Especially with the rise of micro influencers, brands have been finding they don't even have to pay. Instead of getting that one influencer with all the followers, they'll say, OK, we'll just go to 50 micro influencers and just give them product and that's it, we don't even have to pay.

For these and other reasons, influencers worked to build out their personal brands on social media as well, sharing more aspects of their lifestyles online rather than focusing on billing themselves as experts in a particular area as they had in years past. This served the dual purpose of bolstering their authenticity—by sharing more "realness" from their daily lives—as well as offering additional merchandising opportunities. "Most people in the beginning were only in one industry. They were beauty bloggers, fashion bloggers. But then…it was like, 'oh, the more you do, the more money you can make.' So now people who were all beauty are starting to do fashion…everyone's doing fitness," said Hennessy, the influence booker.

Renee*, a marketer, confirmed:

I think that there are definitely a lot of people who are trying to break into more product categories, or just categories in general. Because 1. That gives them the

opportunity to work with brands outside of just beauty or just fashion but 2. It authentically—there's that word again—tells the story of what they're experiencing in their own lives. I think as people try to incorporate content that showcases more of a snapshot of what they're doing on the day to day versus just look at these beauty looks, for example…they're able to give an insider look to their audiences of what they are as a real person versus just here I am, full face of makeup, I look perfect all day everyday. And so with that comes an evolution in their lifestyle. So as these influencers start to 'grow up,' entering new life stages, that brings them into new opportunities to speak about different topics. We were actually just talking about this the other day internally—that, like, an influencer who may have started out on YouTube as a teenager, she grows up and goes to college you know you have that whole back to school thing. As she ages out of that, she gets her first job and she's speaking from the point of view of young professionals. She gets engaged, gets married, that's a whole new life stage. Has babies, that's a whole new life stage. Through all that comes new content.

By presenting a seamlessly and thoroughly "shoppable life"—with posts about self-care sponsored by an essential oils brand, an apartment entirely furnished by a big box retailer, and gatherings with friends sponsored by a beverage company, all clearly and conspicuously disclosed—influencers were able to send the message that yes, the content was sponsored, but only because it was a natural extension of their lives.

Given the unpredictable nature of public favor, of social media's technological affordances and company policies, and of federal regulation, influencers had grown accustomed to near constant instability as the state of being for their work. "I've always

kind of known that was the industry I signed up for. It's like, nobody knows what's going to happen. It's very 'whatever,' so you just have to be kind of prepared for it. I could get thrown some crazy opportunity tomorrow that would just totally change my path, too. So, I'm just trying to stay open to whatever," Jeanette said.

Conclusion

In the later 2010s, a series of significant events related to the influencer industry, including federal government cracking down on misleading sponsored content, the Fyre Festival fiasco, and the rise of "fake followers" on social media, forced the influencer industry to reexamine their practices and reorient themselves for a future where social media users were more suspicious of social media's hidden mechanisms. Against the backdrop of wider-reaching events of global concern, such as Facebook's leak of user data, these led to a fundamental rattling of trust between people and social media companies, and pushed concern over the role these companies play in mediating nearly every aspect of the social world into public debate.

The various stakeholders in the influencer industry experienced the influencer backlash in different specific ways, and accordingly, they adjusted their approach to their work. But what these repositionings shared were an intention to be a public repudiation of fakery and endorsement of disclosure—and a private means for gaining control over a sometimes unruly environment. Through embracing artificial intelligence and data science for influencer selection and campaign matching; exploring the development and use of CGI, rather than human, influencers; and cultivating the commercial potential of micro- and nano-influencers, marketers worked to prove to their clients and the public

that cared deeply about fraud and worked to control it through more thorough vetting and control over influencers. Brands, meanwhile, looked work more closely and longer-term with influencers in order to reduce the risk of controversy that comes with engaging on a campaign-basis and moving on. By using influencers as marketing consultants *and* marketing channels—and sometimes cultivating deep enough relationships that they launched products in partnership with each other—brands hoped to shield themselves from the errors of authenticity (from fake followers to inadequate disclosure) that contributed to controversy. Social media and other technology companies introduced tools for disclosure in an effort to support the growing cultural (and regulatory) requirement of transparency. Influencers, accustomed to the precarious work/lifestyle of social media content creation, looked ahead to prepare themselves for any number of potential scenarios. In expanding their businesses *beyond* social media (such as by creating products, starting consulting companies, and countless other ventures) as well as expanding their personal brands *on* social media (by sharing more lifestyle content, often through embracing newer technological affordances such as Instagram Stories), influencers positioned themselves to continue to get by in the current environment and various potential scenarios that could come to fruition.

The various moves by the influencer industry's stakeholders served to bolster a reinvention of authenticity for the space—one that was still a construction (as outlined in Chapter Two), but that was harder to critique because of the nearly excessive transparency associated with it. Despite the sometimes daunting challenges to the influencer space, including public cynicism and mocking, it continued to grow—perhaps because, given the broader socio-political environment, it seemed easier to rebuild one-

to-one trust than trust in a larger media outlet or company when they increasingly seemed to blend together in a mass of bodies that did not work in the public interest. As the influencer industry repositioned, it moved toward becoming a more thoroughly but casually commercialized sphere, wherein influencers branch out across content forms and verticals and present lifestyles that are more "authentic" as they are branded, disclosed, and shoppable. Ultimately, the influencer industry joined—and in some ways, modeled— media industries' broader push toward ever more casualized integration of products into depictions of lifestyles (Hund & McGuigan, 2019; McGuigan, 2018). While these other forms have met resistance (shoppable television, for example, never took off in the way its proponents hoped) influencers were able to present themselves as branded personalities whose work had become understandable and acceptable; after all, in a world where so much seems uncertain, as Hennessy said, "wouldn't you take the money?"

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

In late 2018, *Wired* published an article that detailed "the pricey war to influence your Instagram feed" (Martineau, 2018). The article centered on the story of Lashify, a once-promising eyelash extensions company that found itself on the wrong side of influencer marketing. The founder recalled to *Wired* that before the company's launch, an investor told her, "if she wanted Lashify to succeed, quality didn't matter, nor did customer satisfaction—only influencers." Further, the investor told her to budget "$50,000 to $70,000 per influencer just to make her company's name known" and that "there was no way around it; that's just how things worked" (ibid.). The founder reacted with disbelief and chose to market the company's launch with Instagram ads rather than an influencer campaign. The company gained a measure of traction, and soon, the founder was thrilled to receive a paid order from a top beauty influencer. Yet after receiving his order, the influencer uploaded a video review trashing the company and the product, and—most tellingly—using affiliate links to recommend *other* eyelash products without disclosing that he would earn commission from users' clicks and purchases. The *Wired* article suggested that the influencer in question was either paid by competitors to furnish a negative review, or simply did the math and determined that creating a harsh, attention-grabbing video could lead to more income through affiliates than he could hope to gain through a potential partnership with Lashify. As a result of the negative review, Lashify became the target of vitriolic attacks and threats from certain influencers and

their avid followers, and "the brand became toxic" (ibid.). Yet just two months later, an

anonymous comment on Reddit about the potential collusion between the influencer and

Lashify's competitors sparked a passionate discussion within the same community, and

soon, Lashify "was no longer the villain" (ibid.). "Looking back now, [Lashify's founder]

realizes how horribly naive she was. She may have avoided forking over cash, sure, but

she ended up paying for her decision nonetheless," *Wired* reported. The founder

expressed regret to *Wired* about not taking the time to "understand the climate" before

launching her business, and "wonders where Lashify would be if she had better

understood influencer marketing when she began" (ibid.).

Lashify's story illustrates what a complex system the influence industry had

become by the late 2010s: one that ensnares business owners and brand executives,

professional and aspiring influencers, ordinary social media users, technology companies

of various sizes and scopes, regulators, and more in a marketplace whose rules and

system of value are constantly shifting and being renegotiated, yet whose successful

navigation is increasingly required for professional creative success. Most critically, it

shows how getting by in this variable environment often requires flexibility in normative

social values—including honesty, personal privacy, and fairness.

This dissertation shows how the development of the influence industry was

premised on individuals' desires for security and autonomy—with their finances,

creativity, and time—that was felt pointedly in the face of professional destabilization

and heightened economic insecurity in the 2000s. In redefining social influence as a

digital commodity, *theoretically* available to anyone to cultivate and sell[5], the industry's various participants created and enacted a system of arbitrary value that privileged social media visibility, minimized creative risk-taking, and required that participants entwine their online self-representations with commercialism—all while using the performance of authenticity as a measuring stick. One needs only to flip through a magazine, browse the local big box or department store, stop into a trendy café or restaurant—or speak to an aspiring or established creative professional—to see how this system has completely reconfigured processes of cultural production. Popular media outlets often use influencers who have established themselves online as contributors; major retail chains feature product lines created in partnership with influencers; food and drink establishments increasingly utilize safe, "Instagrammable" aesthetics to market themselves; and aspiring creatives of all stripes, from writers (e.g. Spatz, 2018) to musicians (Baym, 2018) to models (Wissinger, 2015) to academics (Duffy & Pooley, 2017) and countless others experience the impetus to cultivate digital influence most profoundly, while its logic trickles out to encompass even those not intentionally in its path. These findings also point to even broader social consequences, primarily changing understandings and expectations around what it means to represent oneself in a forthright manner and the advanced erosion of boundaries between individuals' inner lives and commercialism. In what follows, I highlight the dissertation's significance for the central scholarly conversations in which it is based (see Chapter One), and further discuss the pressing social issues raised by the influencer industry's development.

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[5] As the work of Duffy & Hund (2015), Duffy (2017), Hearn (2018), and others makes clear, the popular idea that "anyone can do it" obscures persistent social inequalities.

The industrial perspective on influence and authenticity

As described in Chapter One, social influence and authenticity have long been studied by researchers, prized in the public imagination, and leveraged together by organizations interested in creating effective messaging, from commercial advertising firms to government groups. Overwhelmingly, people and groups looking to become influential rely on long-held popular beliefs about social influence that distill—or in some cases dilute—academic models for who is influential and how. Further, academic models have typically defined influence as a quantitatively measured concept, studied by quantitative methods. This dissertation seeks to intervene in scholarly thinking about both influence and authenticity in order to (1) push accepted methodological approaches for studying influence into the qualitative realm (2) draw attention to the industrial construction of influence and authenticity and (3) expand upon the prevailing scholarly conversation that defines authenticity as a social construction, highlighting its instrumental purposes. In so doing, it aims to highlight the social challenges brought about by the continued—and accelerating—marketization of selfhood.

This dissertation builds upon existing understandings of social influence first by taking a qualitative approach to the influence process. Through the voices of the influence industry's stakeholders, it reveals how what influence means and who can successfully enact it can shift depending on context. In a world where social media influencers continue to gain power and reroute the production of culture, the mechanisms by which influence is changing in meaning, scope, and value requires the attention of a community of researchers attending to different contexts and levels and forms of articulation. My hope is that these findings provoke researchers of social influence to

consider qualitative approaches, or to attend to the qualitative nature of the influence process. For example, quantitative scholars of influence might consider assessing how influence is defined and constructed by the people and groups they study. What is its meaning and significance to those experiencing it in various contexts? Does this change how we can measure or observe influence in action?

This dissertation is also premised on—and further develops—the idea that in the contemporary media environment, social influence is *not* just a process, but a commodity: it is something that can be assessed and assigned material value by interested stakeholders. In the influencer industry, authenticity is the means by which influence is valued. Influencers, brands, marketers, and various other parties cultivate authenticity through a range of tactics, and assess others' authenticity as a means of judging whether they are, or could be, influential. For example, as many of my interviewees pointed out, if an influencer meets traditional metrics benchmarks of influence (such as having a high follower count), but her social media feeds contain the wrong balance of sponsored and "organic" content, then her authenticity—and therefore her potential for social and financial gain—suffers.

The complex and constantly re-negotiated industrial dynamics make it such that the rubrics for evaluating authenticity continually change. Further, it is nearly impossible for the industry's decision-makers to actually verify authenticity (as discussed in Chapter Two), as they have neither time nor resources—nor a solid definition from which to work. Indeed, authenticity means many different things to many different people. Is it being open about all of your likes and dislikes rather than specializing in one content genre? Is it about responding back to your followers and cultivating personal

relationships? Is it best indicated by the appearance of rejecting financial gain, or is it better served by radical transparency about sponsorship and pay? As this dissertation shows, all of these criteria are relevant for different people and at different times. As such, what becomes significant is the ecosystem that renders this definitional slipperiness possible.

Scholarly conversations around authenticity have evolved such that there exists some agreement that contemporary authenticity is a social construction that can be used for strategic purposes (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013a, 2013b; Gaden & Dumitricia, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Lingel, 2017). The present study highlights its instrumental and industrial nature. What began as a belief, perhaps naïve in retrospect, about the "realness" of early bloggers and digital content creators has, through the influencer industry's development, been transmuted into a particular aesthetic and textual vocabulary (discussed in Chapter 3) leveraged for pecuniary gain. Authenticity amongst digital content creators is not necessarily spontaneous, if it ever was; it is inextricable from the commercialism that now ensconces digital interactions. At the time of this writing, a trend away from carefully curated social media feeds and toward unedited, unpolished sharing is gaining steam (Lorenz, 2019). Yet this trend seems to be a direct response to the established forms and norms of influencers' self-presentations—and was instantly heralded as a "new" form of authenticity that could signal a change in the prevailing aesthetics of digital influence (ibid.). In other words, shifts in authenticity in this digital context continue in this same system of cultivation and commodification—just with a different look.

To this end, this dissertation raises questions about the continued convergence of self-representation and identity with commercial culture. When the central tools for digital communication all but require users to adopt a marketplace mindset, a reorganization of the way people know and understand themselves and others seems unavoidable (see also Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Critical scholars must continue to attend to this continued encroachment of commercial scripts into everyday life, locating these dynamics in their particular industrial and political-economic contexts, to help translate this reality and offer critical tools to navigate it. Recent survey and experimental research, meanwhile, has begun to address the complicated relationship between social media use and understandings of the self and others, often focusing on self-esteem and mental health (e.g. Hunt et al, 2018; Kelly, 2019). Future research in this vein might also look to understand the role of social media's call to self-commercialize within these dynamics.

That an industry has grown up around particular meanings of influence and authenticity, constructing particular ideas that increasingly became guidelines for how people and brands display lifestyles and sell products in the social media age, is indicative of distinct power shifts amongst marketers, creative professionals, and their followers, with power accumulating in the hands of companies at the expense of users. Moreover, the influence industry's logic and dynamics of engagement have significant everyday implications for the evolution of social media technology, the means and meaning of engaging in creative labor, and the advancement of consumer culture.

Returning to the fashion industry

Before exploring these practical implications, I would like to return to the specific site from which this research originated. This project began in 2015 as a study focused on the changing, mediated dynamics of influence within the fashion industry. As fashion bloggers were some of the earliest and most visible harbingers of the changes to cultural production that would be wrought by social media self-publishing—and because influence has historically been such a central concept to the industry—this seemed a logical choice. Yet as the research progressed, it became impossible to maintain this scope. The boundaries between the fashion industry and others blurred as influencers and brands embraced "lifestyle" messaging and aesthetics, with clothing companies sponsoring vacations, influencers sharing advice and personal experiences unrelated to their previously defined area of expertise, marketers embracing the consequently expanded opportunities for brokering sponsorships, and social media companies developing tools and rules to both advance and encumber influencers' work. Indeed, it soon became clear that it was the burgeoning *influence industry* that was driving the digital reconfigurations of cultural power that I was interested in examining, and that other cultural industries—including but not limited to fashion—were being swept along, even as they participated in its development. This phenomenon surely signals some complications for other researchers looking to isolate the dynamics of production and marketing in other cultural industries.

Despite its increasingly fuzzy boundaries, fashion does remain one of the more visible and lucrative verticals in the influencer industry (HYPR, 2016). As such, some of the influence industry's significant externalities—which include the speeding up of production and marketing cycles, products increasingly made for short-term use, and

minimized creative risk-taking related to the need to "do well" on social media—are
acutely observable within this space. In 2015, former Lanvin designer Alber Elbaz
reflected:

> We designers started as couturiers with dreams, with intuitions and with feelings.
> We started with, 'What do women want? What do women need? What can I do
> for women to make their lives better and easier? How can I make a woman more
> beautiful?' That is what we used to do. Then we became creative directors, so we
> have to create, but mostly direct. And now we have to become image-makers,
> making sure it looks good in the pictures. The screen has to scream, baby—that's
> the rule. And loudness is the new thing. Loudness is the new cool, and not only in
> fashion (Chan, 2015).

That same year, Li Edelkoort, often dubbed one of the most globally impactful trend
forecasters, proclaimed that "the perversion of marketing is killing" fashion: "marketing
has taken over power within the major companies and is manipulating creation,
production, presentation and sales," she said in a widely circulated manifesto (Cordero,
2016). Nadia*, the trend forecaster who participated in this study, described this in her
interview:

> [Social media] just distilled everything down to its lowest common denominator,
> and it's made these very specific visual trends. There is an aesthetically pleasing
> style that is very digestible to the masses, and if you are an influencer or brand
> that is wanting high engagement…You're looking at your numbers and certain
> posts are going to gain higher engagement than other posts. I think it's pretty
> obvious that you're going to do more posts like that…and a lot of times that is this

very simplistic visual narrative that comes through that makes everybody the

same.

Indeed, the pressure to keep up with the visual trends that are safe bets for gaining likes,

comments, and other metrics of influence has led some people to buy clothes "just for the

'gram" and then return them; a U.K. study, for example, found that nearly one-in-ten

British shoppers engage in this behavior (Kozslowska, 2018). Further, some online-only

fast-fashion companies have cropped up in order to explicitly leverage the "churn and

burn" ethos of influencer-driven social media commerce. The Los Angeles-based

company Fashion Nova, for example, offers around 1,000 new styles each week, each

"meant to be worn once, maybe twice, photographed, and discarded" (Davis, 2018). This

is in addition to older, global fast fashion companies such as Zara and H&M, whose two-

week production time has enabled them to continually ship new items in response to

trends, many of which are scouted via social media (Howland, 2017).

It was in this vein that some influencers I interviewed for this study brought up

one of the unseen and unglamorous burdens of their jobs: dealing with the high volume

of packages they regularly receive from brands. Processing the influx of products they

receive in the mail on a daily basis takes "so much of my time, and I work super hard,"

Audrey said. This issue helps illustrate the broader environmental impacts of a speeded

up consumer culture, of which the influence industry is only one—though not

insignificant—mechanism. In considering the technology influencers who receive

countless plastic-constructed, lithium battery-powered items, the intricately packaged

cosmetics sent to beauty influencers, the toys sent to "kidfluencers," and the immense

volume of clothing implicated in all this—products that are typically manufactured by

underpaid workers in developing countries—one can only imagine the human and environmental costs related to this system (and one must, as there is no comprehensive data available on the subject). While individual influencers, in interviews for this study as well as on blog posts and Instagram feeds, sometimes report their efforts to donate or sell the gifted products they do not use, as of yet there is no real means of tracking the influence industry's material impacts.

At the same time, fashion offers illustrative examples of the influence industry's more positive externalities. While the popular "democratization" narrative that has surrounded social media since its inception, implying that this technology enables anyone to have a voice in formerly inaccessible halls of power, is limited and problematic, there *is* some evidence that the rise of bloggers, influencers, and other digital content creators changed the fashion industry's approach to representation, and helped empower some people looking to develop and share their points of view. As *Bitch* magazine pointed out:

> "For a generation of predominantly young women and nonbinary people of color, fashion and beauty blogging mainstreamed the internet in crucial ways. Young users learned—sometimes without even realizing it—the basics of both coding and writing; equally important, they developed an aesthetic and language outside of fashion's normative standard-bearing magazines and retailers, one that centered more expansive views of beauty and style" (Afful, 2019).

Indeed, many interviewees for this study expressed pride in the way they maneuvered their careers, learned new skills, and helped build a new industry that would allow them to get closer to doing the type of work that they felt was fulfilling.

Practical implications of the influence industry

As the scope of this study changed in response to the influence industry's growing size and scope, so too did its practical implications become broader reaching. What began as an "influence economy"—an apparent tweak in the internet's equation of visibility and social power that first reared its head in cultural industries like fashion—spun into a complex "influence industry" of its own, drawing together people, products, and profit-schemes into a discernable enterprise marked by competing interests, often precarious actors, and unevenly distributed returns (both financial and reputational), through which billions of dollars moved annually. As this dissertation has shown, it made an indelible impact on the production of culture, as its earliest inklings indicated it would, but also introduced other technological and social consequences.

As discussed in Chapter One, questions about influence are ultimately questions about power. In answering the study's original question of "who controls notions of influence and authenticity?" this dissertation traces an overarching trend of power shifting *away* from individuals and individual ownership (such as with blogs) and *toward* social media platform companies (particularly, in this case, Instagram), as well as companies proffering various technologies of commercialization (such as RewardStyle and others of its ilk). Part of how this happened was through corporate buyouts or copying of smaller platforms. Some of the most notable buyouts include that of HelloSociety, which changed corporate owners several times and ultimately ended up under ownership of *The New York Times*; Twitter's purchase of the Niche agency; and Google acquiring the influencer marketplace FameBit. Perhaps the biggest "win" for corporate power in this space was Instagram offering robust analytics to users with

business accounts and, in early 2019, introducing the long-denied technology to make Instagram feeds shoppable *without* a third party app. Another contributing factor to social media companies' aggregation of power in the influence industry was the congregation of users on a few social media sites; over time, internet users simply spent more and more time on these sites. But perhaps the most significant factor came from influence industry stakeholders' desire to maximize efficiency (as emphasized in Chapter Three) and minimize risk (described in Chapter Four): individual participants, particularly influencers, wanted to gain income and visibility, brands wanted consistency and predictability in content, and marketers sought to make these processes efficient. Technology companies increasingly courted and catered to these stakeholders because of how sizeable and lucrative the space had become. They did this by hiring big-name professionals from various creative industries to lead "partnerships" divisions (for example, former magazine editors Eva Chen and Derek Blasberg went to Instagram and YouTube, respectively, to cultivate fashion partnerships), as well as by dedicating resources to researching the influencer space and introducing tools to improve their experiences using the platforms. This, in turn, changed these social media platforms, which are used by billions of other people, providing tools for these users to more deeply engage with and follow in the influencer paradigm, from making one's presence shoppable to posting more frequently and "authentically" in hopes of boosting follower counts and garnering positive audience feedback.

The larger shift in power toward media and technology companies can be broken down into a smaller "ping pong match" of power shifts as experienced by the influencers in this study: influencers came to exist in their current form, in part, because they lacked

power in their planned career paths and repositioned themselves away from them; soon advertisers noticed and wanted to utilize them, and influencers gained considerable negotiating power; later, marketers and other platforms got involved in hopes of bolstering and profiting from the situation, and influencers lost a measure of power by needing to reposition themselves to "succeed" on various platforms (which, as illustrated by the quick rise and fall of the Vine platform, were precarious in and of themselves) and cede ownership of their content to these same platforms. These and other trends (such as the drive toward data-driven identification of smaller and smaller subsets of influencers) led to a growing chasm between "classes" (or "buckets," described in Chapter Three) of influencers—between those who could be paid handsomely for their work of promotion and persuasion and those who were expected to work for free or for gifted products. This is most clearly illustrated in the contrasting experiences of two of this study's participants: Danielle, a fashion micro-influencer, believed that she was "kind of robbing someone" by asking brands for remuneration for the promotional work she carried out. Meanwhile Heidi, the fashion and lifestyle influencer with hundreds of thousands of followers who later started her own agency, felt able and equipped to charge for her work in a manner that afforded a comfortable lifestyle—though she, too, had recently found brands less willing to pay what she believed her efforts to be worth as they looked to smaller influencers like Danielle who would ask for less.

Indeed, power has tilted so decidedly toward the influence industry's technological gatekeepers that it is their agendas that are most clearly observable in the industry's continued evolution. The way the influence industry developed—with individuals entwining their self-presentations with commercial brands, marketers helping

brands and influencers identify individuals' potential commercial impact, and social media tools enabling users to "buy now" from the content they encounter—has empowered and accelerated the creep of commercialization across the web and into people's perceptions and presentations of self. As an industry observer wrote in *AdExchanger*, a crucial part of an influencer campaign is "inspiring UGC [user-generated content] that follows" (Hercher, 2015). In other words, brands and marketers see a critical part of influencers' modes of expression—which this dissertation shows are increasingly similar and marked by a call to shop—is inspiring other, "regular" social media users to mimic them. When every digital social interaction becomes a potential point of commerce, the influence industry advances advertisers' and marketers' long-held aim of separating consumers from their money with less and less friction. This intimacy between self and commerce is unprecedented on such a widespread scale. It not only disrupts people's understandings of themselves and others (recall Erica's* description, in Chapter Two, of trying to "capture" other people with content), but also obscures the larger social and material problems with the influencer space, including the labor issues, lopsided power dynamics, and potential environmental effects discussed above—illustrating what Hill (2019) referred to as platforms' "moral injury."

The question of empowerment

The above becomes particularly fraught when one considers that the majority of the influence industry's participants are women (Hennessy, 2018). On one hand, participants in this study sometimes frame their experience as empowering—on the other,

they show how it is tied, in some ways, to the larger structural limits placed upon women in the workplace.

One of the most talked about aspects of the influence industry is the money to be made by those who successfully cultivate and monetize their social media followings. Often, headlines tout the tens of thousands of dollars that top influencers charge per sponsored post, or the millions to be made in a year through collaborating with brands (e.g. Schaefer, 2015). As Jeanette, a blogger focused on affordable fashion, explained in her interview:

> I've been so tempted to, like, publish something about myself, but it just sounds like bragging. But my purpose is, I want women and kids in college and stuff to know what's possible. Not even in blogging, but just as an entrepreneur, like what you can do. It's such a huge success story for me personally because I come from a farm in Kansas and my whole family, like, has never been to college—all have blue-collar jobs. My dad's the only one that's been to college. I feel like [blogging] totally changed paths for me, and making [what I was] before the age of 30…like, way more than my dad ever did in his life as an engineer. It's crazy. It's so inspiring, and I want to be able to share that.

Earnings potential is not limited to influencers; brand and marketing agency executives and founders are also largely women—and the influence industry is also the rare industry where women out-earn men (Hennessy, 2018).

Exciting as these anecdotes and statistics are, they also obscure larger, structural issues. As Duffy & Hund (2015) found, for example, top bloggers' digital self-presentations tend to re-inscribe them in the traditional role of consumer, a depiction of

women with origins in the industrial era that Peiss (1998) argues, "obscures women's important contributions to economic and political life." Additionally, "the underrepresentation of women of color, LGBT, and plus-size models reveals how the playing field for 'top-ranked' bloggers is highly uneven—even despite the outward countenance of 'real women'" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9). Indeed, to succeed in constructing these visuals often requires existing social and economic capital, such as savvy in dealing with advertisers and money to buy clothes and accessories. Finally, the more recent trend back toward gifting rather than paying nano- and micro-influencers indicates a resurgence of exploiting the digital labor of countless social media users, mostly women. It was in this vein that Duffy (2017) showed how social media content creation distributes financial returns unevenly, and often amounts to a "winner take all" environment.

The gendered nature of the influence industry also points to issues that women face in more traditional workplaces. When asked about the enjoyable aspects of her work, for example, Lindsay, a design blogger, said:

> Just the flexibility of it is really nice. Very few jobs would allow me to be a full-time stay-at-home mom and a full-time worker. I mean, there's obviously a difficult side to that, you know, trying to find the time to fit in what I need to fit in, but–you know, for us, that works really well, and I really enjoy that.

The time during which the influence industry's development accelerated has also been a time during which women continue to face structural discrimination in the workplace (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015) and where mothers, even those in dual-career couples, disproportionately shoulder the burdens of care- and house work (Holland, 2015) while

having few resources for support such as guaranteed paid parental leave, the ability to

request flexible, part-time, or job-sharing schedules without fear of being sidelined, or

other potential remedies (Schulte, et al, 2017; Stone, 2007). It follows, then, that women

looking to begin or to continue doing work that they enjoy would turn to social media at a

time when it promised to deliver professional autonomy, creative fulfillment, and

potentially enviable pay and flexible schedules[6]. That young women are largely the ones

driving the influencer industry is symptomatic of larger structural issues with

contemporary work as well as stereotypes and tropes—namely, that women are primarily

consumers and that using social media is just for fun and not work—that remain

entrenched despite individual and collective efforts to the contrary. Importantly, the

feminized nature of this field obscures it's seriousness and widespread impact (Duffy &

Hund, forthcoming).

In practical matters, then, the development of the influence industry is also about

the enterprising things people do to get by in the face of policy failures. The economic

and industrial crises outlaid in Chapter One as part of the "perfect storm" of events that

triggered the industry's blossoming, as well as *who* flocked to the industry and why, are

all intimately bound up with policy of the time. In exploring the development and

impacts of the influence industry, this dissertation also points to the continued need for

scholarly attention to what happens when industries construct and profit from social

values and processes—and the means by which they are able to do it.

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[6] In this way, the harassment and criticism that many content creators face (also discussed
in Chapter Four) might also be understood as resentment over some women's abilities to
find ways to achieve business success within the bounds of patriarchal restrictions, an old
phenomenon outlined by Peiss (1998b).

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