Article

Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers

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Abstract

While Instagram influencers may have started out as ordinary people documenting their everyday life through a stream of photographs, they are increasingly emerging as an intermediary between advertisers and consumers. This study examines the professionalization of Instagram influencers, combining data from 11 interviews with travel influencers with a visual and textual content analysis of their 12 most recent Instagram posts ($N = 132$). We show how the increasing professionalization of the influencer steers their relationship with their audience, the advertisers they work with, and the platform Instagram. We argue that, for the Instagram influencer to be perceived as successful, they need to negotiate a tension: they need to appear authentic, yet also approach their followers in a strategic way to remain appealing to advertisers. Although Instagram influencers are seen as more trustworthy than traditional forms of advertising, this tension ultimately leads to a standardization of the content shared by influencers.

Introduction

Although social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram have been popularized as user-generated content (UGC) spaces, the content on these platforms is becoming increasingly

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professionalized (Abidin, 2017; Hou, 2018; van Dijck, 2009). Not only are corporations uploading professionally produced content (Fuchs, 2013, 2017) but amateurs are also creating increasingly professionalized content to maximize and commodify their audiences (Smythe, 1977). One of the newest UGC contributors, the social media influencer (SMI), has been widely mediatized as the next big phenomenon in marketing and advertising, with Forbes magazine declaring that 'Influencers are the new brands' (Weinswig, 2016). Stories of the fame and fortune of SMIs sustain the myth that regular people can make a living out of something they love to do (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). They reproduce previous UGC-related hopes of fostering demo-cratization, autonomy, and community-building (Duffy, 2015). These promises are premised on the idea that the cultural power held by the media and entertainment industries is being redis-tributed as a result of 'the growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users' (Khamis et al., 2017: 197).

Yet, as the advertising and marketing industry increasingly regards SMIs as 'the next big thing' (Adweek, 2015), it becomes important to understand the impact of this process upon SMIs' own practices of developing and circulating content. In addition to this, influencers also have to deal with the functionalities and constraints brought along by the social media platform they use. While the myth of UGC as an expression of one's creativity and passion suggests influencers can gain fame and fortune by simply following their heart, the integration of SMIs into the advertising and marketing industry and their dependence on social media platforms mold the influencer's content production and their relationship with followers. Starting from these premises, this article focuses on how influencers respond to and adapt to the different expectations growing out of their inter-action with followers, advertisers, and the platform itself. Indeed, the earlier hype surrounding UGC suggests a propensity toward the co-optation of disruptive potential into existing cultural industries. However, this is less researched in the case of SMIs. Echoing Huo's (2018) discussion of the institutionalization of YouTube celebrity, we foreground self-professionalization as the process through which SMIs internalize the market logic in the production of their own cultural content, aligning themselves with and becoming integrated into the existing marketing and advertising industry. We show how this self-professionalization takes place at the intersection of three dynamics: the influencer's own understanding of their relationship with both advertisers and followers, the platform's instrumental ethos to followers/audiences, and the demands and expectations of advertisers.

The politics of UGC

The rise of Web 2.0, characterized by 'the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement' (Bruns, 2006: 2), has expanded Internet users' abilities to create and share their own content. Initially, the UGC phenomenon was interpreted through an 'infectious rhetoric of empowerment' (Chia, 2012: 422), as the roles of advertisers, media producers, and content consumers seemed to be converging (Deuze, 2009). Against the background of apprehension toward 'passive' consumption of cultural content, UGC promised a shift to a more 'active' audience (van Dijck, 2009). This enthusiasm led to the development of celebratory concepts such as 'participatory cultures' and 'prosumption', capturing the idea of audiences or consumers gaining the power to shape the products that they are consuming (Ritzer et al., 2012). In this approach, UGC becomes an expression of pleasure, rather than a form of work: individuals 'seem to enjoy, even love what they are doing and are willing to devote long hours to it for no pay' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010: 21–22). It is a form of creativity and an ethos of

collaboration, where everyone builds upon everyone else's content in ways that can lead to new and unanticipated outcomes (Berthon et al., 2012; Potts et al., 2008)

Critical approaches to UGC, however, focus on its embeddedness in the capitalist cultural industries system (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). They draw attention to the integration of the free labor undertaken by individuals online into the existing economic exchange cycle – for instance, by piggybacking UGC as a channel for advertisement or by collecting valuable marketing data about consumers (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Petersen, 2008). The disruptive potential of UGC is reappropriated, as 'media industries are becoming very adept at disciplining produsage' (Bird, 2011: 507). This also means that, sometimes, produsers latch onto the opportunities conferred by participation in the established capitalist exchange within the cultural industries, becoming increasingly professionalized, hierarchical, and market-driven (Duffy, 2015; McQuarrie et al., 2012). Furthermore, in the attention economy generated by social media, UGC is subject to algorithmic steering rooted in 'promotion and ranking tactics, such as measuring of downloads and the promotion of popular favorites' (van Dijk, 2009: 45). This affects the production and circulation of UGC, suggesting the latter is incorporated into the existing capitalist structures, with content creators becoming subordinate to more powerful sociocultural actors.

Such dynamics problematize the vision of UGC as a form of agency, where the user's 'role as facilitator of civic engagement and participation' merges with 'his economic meaning as a producer, consumer and data provider, as well as the user's volatile position in the labor market' (van Dijck, 2009: 55). This article contributes to this argument by shedding more light on the processes through which the production of UGC becomes realigned with the market-driven logic.

Social media influencers

The SMI is someone who

> accumulate[s] a following [. . .] through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday [life], upon which paid advertorials – advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions – for products and services are premised. (Abidin, 2016b: 86)

A form of UGC, SMIs have also been conceptualized as potential disruptors of the culture industries. From a marketing perspective, SMIs represent a new and potentially more effective form of advertising (Booth and Matic, 2011; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). Consequently, they have been approached in terms of their ability to attract followers and impact purchasing decisions (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). Of interest here is the literature examining SMIs' persuasive power as a function of the trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity of the influencer's presentation of the self (Abidin, 2015; Djafarova and Ruhsworth, 2017; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2018; Gannon and Prothero, 2016; Kádeková and Holienčinová, 2018). This literature sheds light on the different communicational strategies SMIs espouse to build and maintain an online following but also on the tensions arising precisely from their position outside the traditional culture industries.

The status of 'regular people', crafting new ways of claiming their own routes to both financial and symbolic power within existing structures, participates in the wider claims of the democratizing effects of social media. Unlike traditional advertising practices, SMIs appear 'more real' and therefore more relatable to their audiences (Senft, 2008). Their 'power' stems from being 'laypersons' whose cultural content production is grounded in their personal lives. Yet, it is precisely this authenticity that influencers have to carefully produce and manage in their online persona, by

selecting and sharing intimate and personal snippets from their everyday life (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Whitmer, 2019). This may entail using different types of selfies to convey authenticity. For example, beauty bloggers use selfies that 'record the transition from a bare face – a "no make-up selfie" – to a partial or 'full face' of make-up' (Gannon and Potehero 2016: 1866). They may also project passion and transparency, by creating original content, mixing information about a product (e.g. product placement disclosure) with emotional stories of their own relationship to it, and featuring only products that are a good fit with their online persona (Audrezeta et al., 2018). Paradoxically, then, authenticity becomes carefully choreographed, turning into a strategic form of self-presentation (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2014).

Yet, as soon as influencers write about commercial products, followers can perceive it as a loss of authenticity, accusing the influencer of selling themselves out and of writing for the money rather than for the community (Hunter, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2010). As a result, influencers seek to proactively balance the perceived expectations of their followers with those of the advertisers they work with. Some conceal the presence of advertisements on their page, whereas others choose to openly evaluate the implications of sharing sponsored content (Kozinets et al., 2010). They may strategically integrate commercial products into their signature selfies (Abidin, 2016a) or promise to take their audiences with them into the 'backstage' of their private life, for example, by inviting them to participate in their 'shower' or in their 'getting ready' routines (Huo, 2018). Since their following is what makes an influencer appealing to the advertising industry, investing in audience management is essential. Influencers aim to build a 'perceived interconnectedness' (Abidin, 2015) with their followers – a seemingly intimate relationship through which the latter's loyalty can be maintained. To do this, they cultivate a 'close' relationship with followers by responding to, acknowledging, and publicly appreciating their audiences (Ashton and Patel, 2018). Influencers also engage in rejecting the status elevation and distance that characterizes mainstream celebrities, emphasizing instead their 'ordinariness'. This can be achieved by carefully balancing professionally looking content with less crafted images of everyday life. This form of 'calibrated amateurism' gives 'the impression of spontaneity and unfilteredness despite the contrary reality' (Abidin, 2017: 7).

The SMI's production of an 'authentic' persona and of a loyal audience remain, however, fraught with difficulties, requiring extensive labor from the influencer herself (Abidin, 2016a; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Scolere et al., 2018). Research embedding a more critical perspective is calling attention to how influencers continue longstanding self-branding practices informed by a neoliberal ethos (Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017; Whitmer, 2019). As in the case of UGC, this approach casts doubt on the empowerment thesis, reinserting SMIs within larger economic structures and drawing attention to the ongoing negotiation between individual agency and the still potent cultural industries.

Constructing oneself as a brand enables the influencer to become an entrepreneurial subject, crafting new spaces of agency by retaining control over and reasserting their own economic worth. Yet, this also means the internalization of 'ideas that were designed for the marketing of commodities' (Khamis et al., 2017: 200), reinserting the individual within the marketplace logic. Furthermore, this also obscures the growing precarity of labor surrounding the SMIs work, transforming work into an expression of 'fun' and 'passion' (Duffy and Pooley, 2017). For women, in particular, this presents another double-bind: becoming an SMI can bring flexibility and emancipation from traditional (and often patriarchal) work structures; yet, this type of work also entails postponing remuneration. Duffy (2016) refers to this as 'aspirational work', where individuals produce cultural content on their own time/money in the hopes that, eventually, it will lead

to recognition and remuneration. From this perspective, the work involved in the maintenance of 'strategic authenticity' and of a loyal following remains 'a productive myth that enables aspirational laborers to carve out a space at the margins of "traditional" industrial professions, while downplaying their existing social and economic capital' (Duffy, 2016: 449). Occasionally, aspirational work does get rewarded; yet, this is the case for only a select few, romanticizing the idea of precarious work as a stepping stone to (financial) success.

While the SMI scholarship draws attention to the strategies through which influencers construct and maintain their authenticity, our project adds self-professionalization to the mix. In particular, we focus on how, in having to constantly and proactively negotiate the relationship with their followers to the demands of advertising, influencers come to internalize the marketplace logic and professionalize their own cultural content production. In addition to followers and advertisers, we also add the influencer's negotiation of the impact of the platform's algorithm upon their cultural content production and circulation.

Method

To investigate how influencers on Instagram negotiate their relationship with their audience, the advertisers they work with, and the platform Instagram itself, this study combined in-depth interviews with a visual and textual content analysis of Instagram posts. These two methods complement each other: the interviews provide insight into how the influencers conceptualize their own role within the media landscape and how they take the presentation of their content into consideration, while the analysis of their Instagram feeds shows how they put this into practice. The sample for this study was obtained through purposive sampling and consisted of 11 Instagram travel influencers. Previous research has shown that people often come across UGC platforms when searching for travel information online (Cox et al., 2009; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Thus, influencers are likely to play an important role on the travel market. Nevertheless, the results of this study can also be of use in other sectors, as travel influencers are also using aspirational lifestyles as a strategy to advertise products.

Participants were recruited by searching Instagram for potential interviewees and contacting them directly via e-mail or the Instagram direct messaging system. As one of us was already a follower of Instagram travel influencers, we started from accounts that we followed and enlarged the search by using travel hashtags on Instagram. Two participants were recruited while attending an Instagram workshop that they had co-organized (March 2018).

The selection of participants was informed by three criteria. First, they had to have at least 5000 followers, as this number is often used by influencer marketing agencies when setting up influencer campaigns for brands (Brand Ambassadors, 2018; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). Second, their feed had to include sponsored content. We sought to include influencers that had worked together with companies or brands and judged the presence of sponsored content by looking for indicators such as the hashtag #sp (sponsored post) or #spon or the explicit mentioning of a brand name in the caption. Third, the content had to focus explicitly on travel (i.e. showing locations, buildings, nature, etc., where the influencer travelled). As the theme of travel is highly international and many influencers in this domain share English content, the sample was not limited to influencers from a specific country. The study included participants from the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovenia, and Australia.[1] Some travelled on their own, while others travelled as a couple. One travelled with a significant other, who was also the photographer. Ten interviews were carried out via Skype or Facebook Messenger, and one took place in person. Giving participants, the option of completing

Table 1. Coding frame for the Instagram posts.

Photo	
Subject	- Nature wide angle - Nature close-up - Architecture wide angle - Architecture close-up - Person - Animal - Other
Use of color	Most salient colors in image noted down
Product position (sponsored content only)	- Central - Peripheral - Product not shown
Topic (sponsored content only)	- Travel related - Not travel related
Caption	
Style	- Formal - Informal
Written in the first person?	- Yes - No
Audience addressed?	- Yes - No
When is the product mentioned? (sponsored content only)	- Beginning - Middle - End

the interview online made it easier to access a wide range of people, including those who are travelling long-term or are based outside of the Netherlands. This sample, however, remains small and focused on European countries and a specific group of (travel) influencers. Although it provides useful insights on the phenomenon of Instagram influencers, the sample is too limited to provide a generalizable picture.

Once the interviewees had been recruited, the first part of the study consisted of a visual and textual content analysis of their feeds. This provided an insight into how influencers construct their feed. The analysis encompassed the 12 most recent posts on each influencer's feed as of the date of analysis ($N = 132$) and looked at manifest meanings in both the image and the caption (Bell, 2000). Each post was thus examined along the lines of three elements: thematic and esthetic consistency (Abidin, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017), the relationship with the audience (Abidin, 2015), and the integration of advertising into the feed (Kozinets et al., 2010; see Table 1).

The second part of the study consisted of interviews with the influencers. The interviewing process was informed by Holstein and Gubrium's (1999) active interviewing principles and was structured around the following topics: the development and changes in the influencer's Instagram use as they become more professional, their advertising practices and decisions, and the ways in which they negotiate the affordances and limitations of the Instagram platform. All interviews were transcribed and coded using qualitative analysis software QDA Miner Lite v2.0.1 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Codes and subcodes used in the interview analysis.

Code	Subcodes
Production	Production of posts
	Development of production
	Routine
Audience	Who is the audience
	Growth of the audience
	Interaction with the audience
Advertising	How it starts
	Who to work with
	How it works
	Production of sponsored posts
	Worries
Instagram	Why they use Instagram
	Limitations of Instagram
	Development of Instagram

The coding proceeded in a deductive manner, focusing first on identifying interview data dealing with one of the following topics: production of content, audience, advertising, and platform. Within each of these topics, subcodes were created inductively to enable the researcher to identify and compare recurrent problematics across the interviews (Fielding, 2008; Saldaña, 2009).

Analysis

The average participant in this study is a female influencer who maintains her Instagram feed as a hobby besides a regular day job. This echoes prior research suggesting areas such as family, fashion, beauty, or lifestyle are dominated by female influencers (Abidin, 2017; Audrezet et al, 2018; Hou, 2018). Anecdotally, male influencers are often part of a 'travel couple' sharing an account or (semi-)professional photographers showcasing their photography skills. *Wired* magazine suggests that the very term 'influencer' is gendered, calling to mind a woman rather than a man:

> Many men of the internet will fracture their own vertebrae to avoid being called influencers, even when their work . . . fits the definition. They prefer terms like 'digital content creator' or 'content producer' or industry-specific terms like 'gamer', usually because they think of themselves as artists or members of the entertainment industry. (Grey Ellis, 2019: n.p.)

In our sample, there were no sponsored posts for some participants, whereas for others, there were one or two. However, all participants had posted content in collaboration with a brand at least once in the past.

Our average participant started her Instagram account as a place to share moments in her life with friends and family. Over time, she noticed people liked her travel photos and this prompted her to use the app more carefully, invest in better equipment, and work more on her posts and responses to others. She has about 20,000 followers, and, although interested in growing her account further, she simultaneously feels that making a living from this hobby is somewhat unrealistic.[2] Working with travel advertisers could bring her some income (we did not ask for the

Table 3. Overview of participants.

Name of interviewee(s)	Follower count (as of June 20, 2018)	Nationality	Gender
Barbara	5568	Dutch	Female
Esther	6821	Dutch	Female
Nina	22,100	Australian	Female
Sanne	20,200	Dutch	Female
Karen	38,100	Belgian	Female
Elisa	107,000	Dutch	Female
Amy and Stephanie	20,100	Australian and Belgian	Female/Female
Jessica and David	6981	Slovenian	Female/Male
Eva	35,500	Dutch	Female
Martha	7834	Dutch	Female
Iris	18,100	Dutch	Female

exact amount), but most of the time she only gets free or discounted hotel stays. She also advertises other products, such as clothes, shoes, backpacks, jewelry, or watches. In general, she has positive experiences with advertising, though two recurrent things bother her: being asked to promote products that have no relationship to her online persona and being asked to do it for free. This transition from a regular user to an influencer 'mindset' is captured in Barbara's account:

> At that point, I had about 3,600 followers. And then . . . I thought . . . maybe I should take this further, so I contacted some people, bigger accounts . . . asking them 'how do you do that, taking the step toward more followers, does it actually lead to anything, do you get things for free . . . '. And then I thought: yes, there are definitely possibilities and I then I started liking more, following more people and posting more.

The transition entails an explicit investment in identifying 'best practices' and emulating them. As we shall discuss next, this is an important element in the self-professionalization of the influencer, as learning from 'success' stories often leads to standardization in the production and circulation of UGC.

Table 3 provides an overview of our sample (all participants have been provided with a pseudonym). In analyzing the strategies participants employ to negotiate the clashing expectations of their audience and the advertisers they wish to work with, we first consider how these influencers imagine their audience and how this may affect the personalization strategies they use. This illustrates how these influencers, despite their vocal concerns about authenticity on Instagram, carefully work to present a strategically authentic persona and feed that meet the expectations of that imagined audience.

Imagining the audience

The SMI's audience is often so diverse that the influencer cannot possibly know all the individuals that make it up. Hence, they rely on an 'imagined' version of their followers (Litt, 2012). Given the networked UGC nature of Instagram, it is unsurprising that influencers conceptualize their relationship to their followers as a personal one, bound by norms of reciprocity and care. Yet, as they work toward a more established influencer status, the construction of their imagined audience

becomes increasingly guided by the commodification of their following (Hunter, 2016). Thus, participants in our study talked about closely monitoring their follower-related metrics.

Sanne, for example, liked 'connecting' to her followers. Posting a photo without any subsequent interaction with people was not satisfying. Nina embraced an actively open stance toward her audience, explaining that she is 'very easy to reach, very eager to help people with tips, very eager to communicate'. In a similar vein, Stephanie and Amy's Instagram account was 'personal', which meant they were vested in the interaction with their followers: 'we do have a really close contact with them, like we talk...every single day with them'. Similar to social norms of reciprocity in relationships, follower comments are akin to gifts to be properly acknowledged and addressed: Eva, for instance, responded to every comment, 'even if it's just a thank you. I think that if they make the effort to comment on your photo, you should also do something back'.

Yet, the influencer's own 'worth' is, in the eyes of advertisers, measured via their audiences: 'the emphasis on audiences, ranking, and reputation is endemic to our larger reputational or attention economy where work assumes an "eminently social element" (Grandini, 2016: 136; see also Hearn, 2010)' (Scolere et al., 2018: 9). This pressures influencers to think of their audiences in an instrumental way, constantly managing their reactions to gauge the most 'effective' post in terms of retaining their follower's attention. The influencer's focus on who their audience is, or who they would like their audience to be, affects the choices they make in their own self-presentation. For example, Nina had an Instagram business account which allowed her to monitor her post's metrics. She explained that her audience is 'pretty evenly split between boys and girls' which she attributed to not posting pictures of herself in 'floaty dresses', but rather presenting herself as 'an ordinary person who likes to go hiking and likes to go into natural areas'. Similarly, Elisa said she denied a request to create an advertisement for a bathing suit because she does not want a whole hoard of 'horny men' following her, and she would rather focus her feed on the scenery she encounters during her travels than on her face or body. Thus, these influencers attempt to guide the demographic of their audience by adapting their self-presentation strategies. As these comments suggest, this dimension of their work remains gendered.

Once the influencer has built up an audience, they need to maintain their loyalty. The continuous engagement of the audience with the influencer's content is key in negotiating the threat of invisibility created by the algorithm (Bucher, 2012). Hence, to ensure a constant level of engagement, the content shared needs to meet the expectations of the audience. The influencers in this study felt they were generally aware of what it is that people are 'following them for' (Nina). Thus, whenever they shared a new post, they also carefully monitored whether 'people will really like it' (Elisa).

Such expectations also create tensions for the SMI. On the one hand, the influencer sees herself as building a relationship with her followers based on care and reciprocity, echoing earlier findings on bloggers imagining their audience as friendly and supportive (Brake, 2012). In turn, this builds the audience's expectation of the influencer as authentic and present, as if they were a trustworthy friend (Abidin, 2015; Kulmala et al., 2013). On the other hand, the influencer focuses on building herself as a brand, where staying positive and friendly becomes a feature of that brand. In the end, it is hoped that this personal relationship builds loyalty: 'Loyalty...they're actually more interested, engaged with your content when they feel like they know you' (Stephanie and Amy). While engaging in social relationships and taking an instrumental approach to followers can coexist, influencers who become increasingly interested in the latter come to invest more in creating a
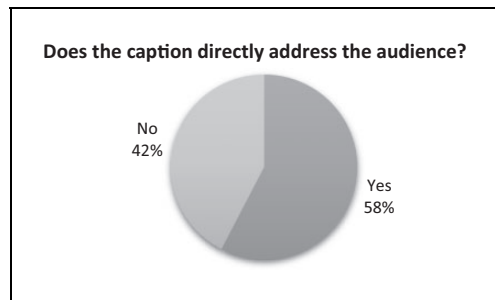
Figure 1. Direct address in Instagram posts ($N = 132$).

consistent presentation of the self (Khamis et al., 2017). This furthers the tension between the desire (and demand) for authenticity, while also creating highly planned content that meets the expectations of the audience.

Presenting an authentic persona

The interviews revealed that coming across as a 'genuine' personality (Amy) remains an important marker of the value of an influencer (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). As discussed earlier, the authenticity of the SMI is premised upon the honest communication of their own opinions (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2014; Hou, 2018) as well as the perceived closeness to their audience (Abidin, 2015). However, this authenticity becomes highly strategic, as it is shaped by the influencer's goal of developing a commodifiable audience, which is of interest to advertisers. As Nina explained, this strategic authenticity is part of the influencer's self-branding strategy. Being 'seen as a nice person', she explained, forms 'a positive connection to your brand'. Furthermore, Amy noted that personal interaction with your followers is important, because the audience becomes 'more interested, [more] engaged with the content when they feel like they know you'. Engagement with the influencer's content in the form of likes and comments can be used to prove the loyalty of their audience to potential advertisers. It can also be used to negotiate the threat of invisibility that results from the algorithm (Bucher, 2012), as it seems that the current algorithm prioritizes posts with higher engagement levels.

The interviews, as well as the analysis of the content of the participants' Instagram posts, revealed several strategies that these influencers employ in performing an authentic persona. Some aim to develop a perceived interconnectedness between them and the audience (Abidin, 2015), whereas others seek to ensure honest and transparent communication (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2014). In the first of these two categories, one of the most simple and frequently used strategies is addressing the audience in the caption, often in the form of a question. As can be seen in Figure 1, within the sample of posts analyzed more than half of the captions directly addressed the audience. As Karen explained, asking the audience a question can serve to 'generate engagement'. A simple question like 'who's also ready for spring?' (Sanne) ties into a current topic, making it more enticing for people to leave a comment. Another strategy, which serves to develop a connection with the audience, is the sharing of snippets from the influencer's backstage, everyday life to create a persona that the audience can relate to (Abidin, 2015). These snippets of everyday life that the influencer shares on their feed have to align with the persona they have chosen to present. For example, Amy and Stephanie announced their engagement by posting several photos of the
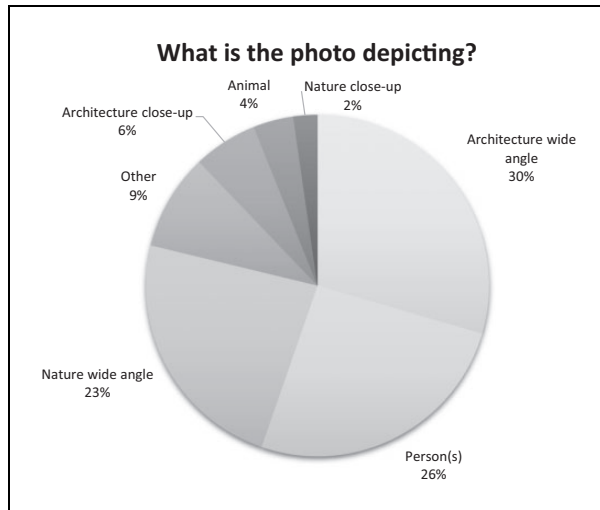
Figure 2. Subject of the photo in Instagram posts (N = 132).

occasion on their feed, which aligns with their thematic focus on being a travel couple. But an influencer may also choose to simply share some of their feelings. By talking about 'being homesick', Martha shows that she is also just a normal, relatable person, and her life is not as perfect as her Instagram feed might suggest. Even those participants who value their privacy share some personal elements to appeal to their followers. For example, Elisa said that she prefers to stay anonymous, but she does post a photo of herself every once in a while because she found that those posts tend to receive the highest levels of engagement. As shown in Figure 2, despite their focus on travel, participants frequently posted images with a person as the subject, adding a personal element to their feed. Finally, although the content participants posted to their Instagram stories were not analyzed as part of this study, some participants said they use this feature to share moments from their everyday life. Eva said she uses the feature to share 'more personal things' and 'random stuff' that does not fit within her feed, for example, by showing herself cooking dinner. By posting this content to Instagram stories, the influencer can keep their main feed tidy – the importance of which will be discussed below. By adding these details from their everyday life, influencers give the audience the impression that they know the person behind the feed.

However, this feeling of community and authenticity may be affected when an influencer starts working together with brands (Kozinets et al., 2010). The question of how to maintain authenticity while selling brands remains disputed among the participants of this study. As will be discussed in the next section, some prefer to embed sponsored content in such a way that it does not stand out too much. Others, however, argue that one has to be 'transparent' and 'honest' about working with brands (Nina). Therefore, when they work together with advertisers, these influencers attempt to select only those brands that align with what their account 'stands for' (Esther). By maintaining consistency in their presentation of self, they can also maintain their authenticity. Thus, it is clear that the SMI has to make careful decisions to construct and maintain their authenticity and ensure that their audience remains interested in their content. These considerations also affect the kind of

content that the influencer creates, as the expectations of the audience can lead to an increased standardization of content on Instagram.

Standardizing content and posting practices

In direct, opposition to the expectation of authenticity stands the increasing standardization of content and posting practices on Instagram. As influencers become more invested in the economic success of their account, they look toward those with large followings in an effort to emulate their practices. They also become more astute at recognizing and adapting to changes in the larger Instagram use culture.

One such change was the growth of 'highly curated and over-edited' posts. Nina explained that such 'over-curated scenes that would just never happen' are now becoming the norm on the platform, and people are responding 'well to things that are quite clearly edited'. Although the participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of being real and authentic, lamenting the increasing standardization of content, they also engaged in careful planning of their own content. To meet the expectations of their imagined audiences, they worked on creating homogeneity in their authentic self-presentation and across the content on their feed (Khamis et al., 2017). Elisa found out that

> a sunset or a sea or green palms, those photos always did the best. So, then I started posting that more instead of a detail of a temple which I actually liked. But that didn't score, so I stopped doing that.

Nina decried the excessive preparation of the photo that some influencers engage in:

> I've notice that when some girls do beachy shots, they've got, you know, pineapples and puppies and . . . straw hats and drink bottles that look like watermelons. And I just think: holy moly, how could you travel with all of that?'

Instead, bringing along only a couple of sarongs was enough for her: 'and [the sarongs] turned out to look quite nice in the picture, because they were bright, and I was beachy and it was summery'. Fewer props became an expression of authenticity. Yet, as she had previously told us, 'people are drawn to bright colors' and obviously this was also something that she kept in mind while (minimally) staging her scene. After our study, some of the participants started actively resisting the expectations surrounding their practices as an influencer. In fact, Nina now even states in her Instagram biography that she is 'not an inFLUenza', distancing herself from the influencer culture.

Influencers also invest in improving the quality of their photos by migrating toward professional equipment. This allows them to produce polished images, taken from angles inaccessible to regular tourists. Stephanie and Amy explained: 'we've bought more stuff, a better camera . . . we've got a drone as well, which takes shots above the water and below the water'. In this way, the travel influencer's Instagram content comes to closely resemble an advertisement rather than a regular person's travel selfie. This was further confirmed when Eva explained that that when her account grew bigger, she started taking down her own Instagram photos that had a 'mundane' topic and look to them, such as photos of having drinks with her friends.

The growth of an account was also accompanied by the development of (new) posting practices. For instance, as participants grew more aware of the need to have fresh content, they took to posting regularly. Sanne explained that at first, she 'posted randomly' and when she felt like it. Once she started investing in growing her following, she started 'post[ing] at least three times per week', something she 'would not stick to' if her account were private. They also paid more

attention to the timing of their posts and developed schedules that sought to maximize their followers' availability:

> I have a business account with Instagram, so it tells me when people are online. I would never post in the morning, that's when people are busy and getting ready for work. So I would usually post at 15:00, 18:00 or 21:00. 15:00 is when people are bored at work and thinking about going home. 18:00 is when they are on the train home thinking about . . . dinner and they're bored. And 21:00, they've had dinner, they're having a glass of wine, they're relaxing before bed. So those are my three times. (Nina)

As their accounts grew, influencers became increasingly concerned with their imagined audience. Anticipating what followers might like started to determine what they posted. Several participants admitted that they had changed the style of their posts to be more appealing to their audience. For example, they might choose to post solely landscape photography and not share detailed close-ups, which are often found to receive less engagement. This thematic and stylistic consistency was also reflected in the outcomes of the visual content analysis of the posts. As shown in Figure 2, more than half of the 132 posts in the sample were wide angle shots of landscapes or buildings, whereas only 8% were close-ups. Furthermore, to ensure that a new post fits within the existing feed, some of the participants use a second account or a dedicated app to check the fit of their photo before publishing it. Eva explained that she 'started a second account' where she posts 'all the photos that are also on [her] Instagram account now', and whenever she wants to post a new photo, she posts it to the private account first 'to see how it looks in [her] feed'.

The need for consistency also extends to the sponsored content created by these influencers. This also entailed a learning process: Barbara explained how, in the beginning, she wanted all the free product she could get by posting sponsored content. In time, however, she learned to be more selective in choosing products that fit her persona. Esther also started to fit advertisements in her feed with her audience in mind; instead of going for the product she would like most, she was now carefully anticipating which products would work for her audiences. On the other hand, she was also concerned with how she would integrate ads into her feed so that they are not 'in your face'. When they collaborate with a brand, influencers do not 'want the post to look too sponsored' and still want it to be 'a nice photo for [their] followers' (Sanne).

Going somewhat against the importance of transparency discussed above, most interviewees felt that sponsored content should be properly integrated into the feed, as 'you can immediately see [it]' when someone is 'really selling themselves out' (David). Nonetheless, this thematic integration can also help the influencer in carefully selecting those products that align with the consistent, and, therefore, authentic, persona that they aim to present. One of the ways in which sponsored content can be integrated into the feed is by using a slider, where the first photo shows the product in a 'subtle' way and the second photo shows it more 'zoomed in' (Esther). Although the sample of posts analyzed in this study contained relatively few sponsored posts, the results suggest that photos of sponsored products are often taken in a travel setting to maintain continuity in the feed. More than three-quarters of the sponsored posts were photos taken in a travel-related setting (Figure 3). Besides the visual element, the caption may also be used to integrate a product into the narrative of travel. Figure 4 shows that the product is often not mentioned until the end of the caption, as in this example: 'Nothing better than a morning stroll in the old medina of Rabat to test my new shoes from @bonbaisersdepaname'.
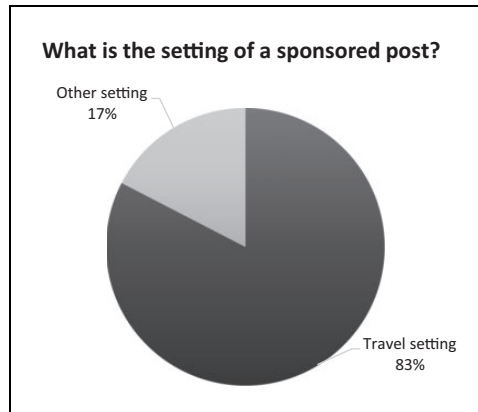
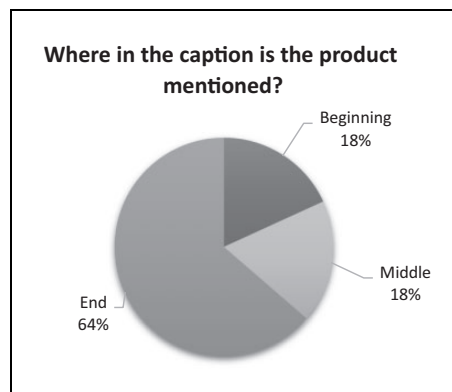**Figure 3.** Setting of the sponsored Instagram posts ($N = 23$).

Figure 4. References to the product in sponsored Instagram posts ($N = 23$).

Discussion

The influencers in our study are not yet making their living (exclusively) from their Instagram activity. As such, their struggles around reconciling the desire for self-expression and socialization with an instrumental approach to their online persona and followers are more prominent. Our study shows that as influencers orient themselves toward monetizing their account, they are forced to consciously invest in balancing the strategic approach to their Instagram account with their position as authentic (at the very least in the eyes of their followers). Professionalization may help them legitimize their efforts to attract a stable flow of income in the eyes of their advertisers, but it also leads to a standardization of their content. Striking such a balance demands ongoing work from the influencer. Yet, this work remains largely invisible. This echoes previous discussions on the invisibility of influencers' work, which is often written off as a mere investment that will pay off later on (Scolere et al., 2018). Importantly, such an invisible investment may not be affordable to everyone in the long run.

   In an effort to monetize one's Instagram account, influencers have to work on building an audience appealing to advertisers (Hunter, 2016). To do so, they invest in developing a vision of

who they want their audience to be. They then internalize the expectations they believe their followers to have, which are often based upon the content produced by more successful influencers. Thus, although no one actually tells these influencers what content they should be producing, they naturally orient themselves toward (perceived) successful standards to build and maintain a loyal audience. As a result, one's Instagram content becomes increasingly planned and curated, bringing influencers closer to traditional advertising content production (Hou, 2018). Although initially SMIs could position themselves as more authentic than an advertisement, the tensions which they have to negotiate actually result in their content becoming more and more like traditional advertising content: standardized and highly curated. In the long term, this could further the assimilation of SMIs into the advertising sector, submitting them to the same regulations present in this sector.

Yet, even as influencers bring themselves in line with the advertising industry, their work remains precarious. Unless one has amassed an impressive following, the advertising industry still sees influencer marketing as a freebie, and most influencers like the ones in our sample receive little compensation for their work. Nina, for instance, explained that she was no longer 'willing to devote long hours to [her work] for no pay'. While at the beginning of the UGC trend, this was a reason for celebrating the prosumer as the new game changer in the culture industries (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010: 21–22), influencers like Nina wanted their work to be acknowledged as such. As she further explained, creating a post is

> not as simple as just uploading [. . .], you have to think about a scene where [the product] would work [. . .], then there's editing, and then there's a caption, looking for hashtags, engaging with people who engage on the photo. [. . .] It's not as simple as just uploading one picture. (Nina)

The costs of this work for the individual herself should also be considered here. In some of the cases in our sample, the transition toward a professionalized Instagram content producer was experienced as a loss of value. If posting practices had their own intrinsic rewards stemming from the pleasure of leisure, self-expression, socialization, and creativity, now their value is externalized and derived from revenue generation. Our sample prompts us to question whether the loss of intrinsic rewards is indeed matched by the revenue that most mid-scale influencers are able to generate from the professionalization of their Instagram account. Some interviewees admitted that creating content during their travels has now become a stressful experience rather than something that they enjoy doing. When asked what she does not like about her account anymore, Esther responded: 'The amount of time that goes into it . . . that you are actually more and more focused on what will do well on Instagram, instead of enjoying your holiday'. Similarly, Nina felt her Instagram account had become 'energy zapping', while Esther explained that 'it takes the pleasure out of traveling, out of Instagramming'.

Finally, the professionalization work that the influencer engages in also includes a constant investment in dealing with the changing Instagram algorithm. Each change threatens to render the SMI's content invisible (Bucher, 2012). Of course, if the SMI is to work together with advertisers, their content needs to be seen by as many people as possible. Although participants were aware of ways of 'cheating' the system, for instance, by buying followers to bypass the difficulty of accumulating them organically, none of them condoned it. Indeed, being able to maintain online visibility was described by the influencers in our study as proof of not only their authenticity but also of their hard work. The algorithm remains a powerful external force to which influencers have to adapt and they often do so by adopting 'best practices' for content production and curation in their field.

The integration of SMIs into the advertising industry thus follows the appropriation route already discussed for other forms of UGC. This appropriation represents a 'process of channeling collective labour (even as cultural labour) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices' (Terranova, 2004: 80). This article shows how this appropriation is experienced and enacted by influencers themselves, as a dialectical 'interplay between liberation and domination involved in [social media] technologies and the practices of the self to which they become conduits' (Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012: 411). While the transformation from an Instagram user into an influencer seeking to monetize her cultural production skills can be seen as 'a way to retain and assert personal agency and control within a general context of uncertainty and flux' (Khamis et al., 2017: 200), critical studies of SMIs need to further explain how the interplay between agency and the wider neoliberal (cultural and economic) practices investing it with meaning is experienced and dealt with by individuals themselves.

Although our study unveiled some strategies employed by influencers in negotiating their position in the media landscape, our sample is limited to influencers who are still working on monetizing their accounts. Further research on both social media users who have not yet engaged in such practices and on influencers who are living off their accounts remains needed to understand the changing professionalization practices in this field. Second, the sample of sponsored posts in our study was somewhat limited. Recent public discussions on the regulation of influencer advertising are constantly shifting the cultural resources through which social media users come to understand their own practices. More research is necessary to explore how the creation of sponsored content differs from that of regular content. Although some participants were sure that their audience is aware of the presence of sponsored content, others said that the advertisements they post are so similar to their regular content that their audience probably does not see a difference. It is thus important to study how the audience perceives this content but also how SMIs may work toward reproducing not only the marketplace logic but also the intrinsic value of self-presentation.

Notes

1. Our sample is located in the larger Western imaginary. Although seven of the participants were Dutch, we could not observe any significant differences between them and the other influencers in our sample neither in terms of their posts nor in terms of their experiences shared during the interviews. This, however, may well be a limitation of our sampling process. Opportunities and/or choices of travel destinations may indeed vary with cultural context. In our case, the influencers in our sample post in English, suggesting that they address an international – rather than local – audience. Anecdotally, we have noticed that travel influencers addressing their followers through an identity lens (i.e. sexual orientation or race) may rely upon different self-presentation and audience management strategies.
2. This remains a limitation of the recruitment process, as travel influencers with higher numbers of followers contacted for this project declined or were unavailable. In fact, in one case, the reply we have received came from the influencer's team, suggesting a higher degree of professionalization than among those included in our sample.

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