The Exposure Economy Model: Navigating Visibility on Instagram

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Abstract

To be seen on social media is a crucial concern for content creators, who have developed visibility practices to stand out in overcrowded online markets. 'Exposure', the state of being publicised to new audiences, has hence become increasingly valuable and is treated as a reward to be utilised as currency. This thesis shifts thinking around the social media landscape by offering a new model to view the participants and practices involved in the production, consumption, and trade of exposure. The Exposure Economy Model (EEM) compares the operations of the Instagram platform and its users, influencers, and agencies to respective economic stakeholders, namely retail institutions, consumers, brand manufacturers and distributors. This comparison is grounded in digital ethnography, consisting of participant observation, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis. Through investigating the exposure-seeking practices within EEM, the research design examines algorithmic structures that lead to disproportionate visibility outcomes online. Subsequent research findings introduce new categories to segment social media users, namely engaged users, private participants, and need-centric consumers, and illustrate how variables such as aesthetics, aspiration and authenticity are crucial to the construction of influencer branding. By focusing on Instagram, this thesis explores the app's specific use by key stakeholders, how they navigate capitalist systems and the social and cultural impacts of exposure inflation. Beyond the example of Instagram, however, these discussions build on existing research on influencers, micro-celebrity, and the creator economy by drawing attention to digital inequalities and providing suggestions for mitigating and adapting to social media change.

Keywords: Instagram, exposure, visibility, platforms, influencers, algorithms.

Statement of Originality

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources has been acknowledged.

Brittany Ferdinands

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After writing approximately 90,000 words for a PhD thesis, the irony is not lost on me that I am now struggling to express how I feel about finishing. Upon completing my Honour's year in 2016, I was so eager to dive back into the field of academic research and writing—so excited to finish what I started in my study of monetising digital influence. Five years on, I feel a sense of pride. I am proud of my research, proud of the work I have produced, but perhaps most of all—proud of myself for enduring the journey. As cliché as it sounds, the past five years were not an easy ride. My research period was infected by a global pandemic, which meant a crucial pivot of methodologies, countless cancelled conferences, and a transition to complete working from home—in a safe, albeit noisy, household of six family members and two exigent pets. My face-to-face supervisory meetings turned into Zoom calls, my bedroom became a full-time office, and WIFI connectivity - the bane of my existence. Alas, yet here we are, and with a completed PhD thesis, an accomplishment my one-year younger self did not think would be possible. My one-week younger self would even be surprised…

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's media landscape, digital technology permeates our everyday existence. No longer can a member of our 21st century wholly participate in western society without having a personal presence online. This is because social networking platforms function as a fundamental product of the 'self', which has become commodified over recent years as the economic impacts of society have infiltrated the production and consumption of both real and symbolic goods and services online. One social media platform that manifests commodification is Instagram. Initially a creative space for content creation, the platform now more appropriately embodies a marketplace for attention, commerce and the re-defining of social norms. I, therefore, argue that Instagram exists as an economy: a system of making and trading value and perpetuating an inevitable supply of capital. Whether such capital is physical or service-based, a medium of exchange is prevalent, and the following thesis explores precisely what such medium constitutes and how different stakeholders trade it.

1.1 Research Background

Social media commerce has grown exponentially, resulting in new forms of digital practices and a modern financial infrastructure formed with competing stakeholders. Within this economy exists a specific group of investors—"everyday Internet users who manufacture themselves into a form of social media microcelebrity" (Abidin & Ots, 2016, p.153). The term 'microcelebrity' is "a state of being famous to a niche group of people that involves the curation of a persona which feels authentic to readers" (Marwick, 2013, p. 114). In the context of Instagram, a microcelebrity is most known as a digital influencer - an 'ordinary' social media user who textually and visually produces online narratives of their personal lives and accumulates large followings in the process (Abidin, 2016). Also known as 'content creators' and 'bloggers', these individuals, at a basic level, upload personal photos onto social

networking sites (SNS) and receive markers of visibility in the form of 'likes',[1] 'saves',[2] 'comments',[3] and 'shares'[4] by their followers. When an influencer's following is of a certain size or targeted towards a specific segment of engaged consumers, they are deemed influential enough to generate social mobility and be utilised by corporations to assist in their marketing and promotional sales efforts. In turn, these individuals fundamentally alter how consumers mediate cultural value, with the premise of their content being 'advertorial'[5] in nature as they provide information about a product or service in the style of a narrative designed to elevate their personal brand and the companies natively endorsing them (ibid).

While the "commercial use of influencers is a global marketing phenomenon" (De Veirman et al, 2017 p. 800), it is essential to note that not every individual can turn a 'microcelebrity persona' into a lucrative career. Central to the success of influencers is the practices they engage with both online and offline as, while anyone with internet access can undoubtedly create media content, there is no guarantee that online content will 'reach' or 'influence' an audience (Whitmer, 2015). Instead, influencer practices must embody a process of transforming from 'citizens to corporations' vis-à-vis a proprietary organisation of the attention of others (Senft, 2012, p. 42), and subsequently, individuals experience online visibility in "staggering uneven ways" (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Due to this vexed nature of visibility, I argue that digital influence is not simply a series of specific traits as once assumed, but rather; an individual's potential to navigate a hierarchical, new-economic self-promotion system.

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[1] A 'like' is a social metric on Instagram. Individuals 'like' an image or video by pressing a relevant button if they receive value from the content.
[2] A 'save' is a feature on Instagram in which users can store the piece of content in the back end of their app in order to revisit it again later.
[3] A 'comment' allows individuals to respond to another user's content through texts or emojis.
[4] A 'share' enables users to send the content to another user on the app and has become a symbol of value.
[5] An 'advertorial' is a fusion between an ad and editorial piece—meaning a narrative is created around a sponsored message in order to "not come off as a hard sell to audiences" (Abidin, 2016, p. 8).

In my previous research, I conceptualised this notion through the ‘Digital Influencer Pyramid’ (DIP)—a model indicating a series of stages that Instagram bloggers move through to gain ‘influencer’ status: i) content ii) branding iii) exposure iv) profit v) capital (Ferdinands, 2016). The research ultimately sought to discover if a regular social media user could simply mirror the ‘qualities’ of a successful influencer to become one themselves. Results revealed many variables that play significant roles in succeeding the DIP. One was the importance of accumulating enough ‘exposure’ from larger, more credible figures located towards the top of the hierarchy, in order to be awarded capital in social, cultural, and financial forms. Through this research, it became clear that successful influencer progression requires involvement with an array of strategic practices embedded within what I dubbed ‘regram culture’—the practice of gaining followers by creating content suitable for other clout-pertaining profiles to ‘repost’,[6] thus increasing visibility. The crux of this process indicated that an influencer’s content can only be leveraged once a marketable persona has been curated and subsequently exposed to greater public audiences. In this vein, the study confirmed that mastering the art of ‘microcelebrity’ does not, in all cases, guarantee digital influencer status (Mavroudis, 2018; p, 85). In fact, research revealed that the most critical practices for monetising digital influence are those that heighten one’s reception of visibility.

Literature on visibility has proliferated over recent years as academics agree that being an “internet celebrity is contingent upon high visibility on the internet” (Abidin, 2021, p. 78). A surface-level understanding of this concept implies that the more one is seen online, the higher their success, as aspiring professionals attain “competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace” (Shepherd, 2005, p. 597). This finding reflects attention-economy frameworks, which assign value according to one's capacity to attract ‘eyeballs’ in a media-saturated, information-rich world (Fairchild, 2007). However, the current Instagram algorithm, which

6, A ‘repost’ is defined as the act of an individual posting a photo from someone else's account to their own.

shifted a chronological newsfeed to one based on engagement, was non-existent during the fieldwork of my previous project when attention-economy literature was widespread. The prevalence of algorithmic newsfeeds has functioned as a critical disruptor in the social media landscape, as it is now challenging for influencers to rely on organic visibility, making it a scarce entity and subsequently inflating the value of exposure. I hereby argue a crucial distinction between these two concepts, which are often used interchangeably in literature: visibility is the state of being seen, whereby exposure is a currency[7] used to publicise[8] individuals and subsequently increase social capital[9].

In turn, I hypothesise that visibility is no longer valuable on its own accord. In fact, it must be both complemented with additional variables and constructed by specific influencer practices to convert into exposure and extend to fame. To explore such a premise, my research delves beyond the prominence of influencers by examining other essential stakeholders within the economy, such as platforms, users, and agencies. This thesis argues that these actors exist in a multi-sided, symbiotic relationship and determine the success of an influencer by circulating exposure.

1.2 The Exposure Economy Model Research Aims

The immense popularity of social media and influencer culture has garnered widespread interest from several fields, "including multinational corporations, politics, education, social and humanitarian organisations, and the mainstream media" (Abidin & Ots, 2017, p. 156). Media literature related to such fields frequently likens the social media landscape to that of an 'ecology' or 'ecosystem', which will be discussed in Chapter 2. However, my thesis offers an alternative lens by suggesting that its social media activities are structured around the production and consumption of exposure, which functions as an economic currency. This

[7] Currency in this context is a resource that is accepted to have value as a medium of exchange.
[8] To 'publicise' is to make (something/someone) widely known both online and eventually offline.
[9] Social capital is the capacity of individuals to "command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures" (Portes, 1995, p. 12).

setting is outlined through 'The Exposure Economy Model' (EEM), which has four critical drivers: Social Media Platforms, Everyday Users, Influencers, and Agencies. These actors operate respective to participants within financial markets, specifically Retail Institutions, Consumers, Brand Manufacturers, and Distributors. As previously mentioned, these stakeholders all trade the currency of exposure, yet experience digital visibility in profoundly uneven manners. The following research thus explores the intricacies behind such vexed nature by attempting to understand the disproportionate outcomes that exposure yields.

This brings forth a series of questions, the first is *what are digital influencer practices?* This question is regarding 'practices,' which are defined as everyday routine and habitual activities in and around digital media, which can both reproduce and resist social and cultural norms (Pink, 2012). I seek to investigate the practices deeply ingrained within the fabrics of influencer behaviour and learn how these practices are operationalised via 'exposure'. Next, I ask *in what way are these practices operationalised via algorithms*? This question prompts discussion on the way algorithms impact the economy and how influencers alter their practices to overcome the implications of its structures. I also seek to discover *how players in the economy learn the rules* to establish how the economy rules are known and who teaches said rules to stakeholders. Finally, this thesis will examine *how the interrelated systems within the social media economy operate?* This question explores the symbiotic structures within the economy and how the evolution of one structure influences the other players. Here, I posit whether *exposure is the key currency that drives the social media economy?* This is to explore whether exposure is a powerful currency on its own or whether its economic value depends on other trait variables such as relevance and engagement. I then ultimately require knowledge on *what and whose interests these structures favour*? This question probes the economic dimensions of the social media economy and who it fundamentally serves.

1.3 Research Groups

This thesis engages in research with individuals from specific stakeholder groups within the Instagram Economy: everyday social media users, profit-making digital Influencers, and agency professionals. These three stakeholders fundamentally alter the mediation of cultural and economic values, making them integral to my study.

Here, 'social media users' are everyday individuals who operate on SNS on a non-professional basis, engaging with its affordances for such reasons as keeping up to date with friends, researching, or as a creative outlet (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Users not only exist as an essential group of consumers and producers of content; they also provide data to the platform. The absence of this stakeholder group would hence correspond to a notable lack of engagement and information, which are converted to monetary value and are critical to the profitability of Instagram, influencers, and agencies. In this thesis, there are three fundamental types of social media users under observation: 'Engaged Users', active users who both create and consume content; 'Private Participants', users who primarily consume content behind the scenes; and 'Need-Centric Consumers', those that participate in content creation and consumption on a need's basis. These broad groups of social media users mirror the shared characteristics of marketing customer segments because they function as profitable sub-groups of consumers to the platform and can control market production with their demands, thereby warranting deep examination.

Moreover, my thesis examines the emerging practices of social media Influencers as a core component of research. In focus are those situated within the 'lifestyle' genre, who primarily promotes products and services within verticals of fashion, wellness, beauty, and travel. This group commonly consists of young females who model an 'inspirational life' as their central output theme on social media. An inspirational life entails one that appears aesthetic yet still relatable to the ordinary social media users mentioned above. However, it is

noteworthy that such a life is typically upper-middle-class, heteronormative, and consumption-based in nature and not accessible by all -a notion this thesis will discuss in detail.

Nevertheless, lifestyle bloggers function as effective marketing agents, as they have the power to shape tastes and affect character, development, or behaviour (Fraser & Brown, 2002). This group are a significant case study for research as they are popularly consumed as endorsements of distinction by both brands and audiences alike (Abidin, 2013). Despite a general lack of professional expertise in their areas of influence, they sell their 'lifestyles' to followers through a series of self-conscious meta-narratives constructed by images drawn from visual codes "for the ultimate goal to achieve cultural value and material profit" (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). In this vein, the main disparity between 'influencers' and their 'followers' is the construction of personas that inspire and sell; something lifestyle bloggers excel in and at which they make a full-time living. Therefore, this thesis discusses how influencers monetize their social media use and assist in the circulation of exposure within the social media economy at large.

Lastly, agencies are "located between content producers and platforms" as they function by enabling increased visibility through several strategies including a "nuanced understanding of platforms and technologies, along with the collective publishing power of multiple online content producers" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 2). Agency professionals are the third research group explored in this paper as they have become a vital signifier of the increase in activity within the social media economy. Their role is like traditional public relations (PR), by connecting brands to public figures who can create positive press around their product or service. A derivative of these agencies is the evolution of influencer platforms, namely app- or web-based businesses that specifically work with brands and social media influencers to facilitate social media marketing campaigns and foster relationships between networks - all within one application. My thesis, therefore, expands on current literature regarding traditional

PR agencies and influencer platforms to cement their importance in the commercialisation of the social media economy.

1.4 Research Methodology

The following thesis engages in rich, qualitative empirical data through a digital ethnography of participant observation, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis. Throughout the project, I employ a self-reflective process of research and writing by systematically analysing my unique role as an influencer, with approximately 11k followers at the time of writing, to critically understand my discourse practices on social media, while empirically analysing the media economy from an external perspective. Having 11k followers, and monetising my own Instagram use, places me in the micro-influencer category and thus provides insider knowledge of the field from an individual that engages with influencer practices on an aspirational basis, as it is not my full-time job. As such knowledge is subjective and personalised, I thereby also draw on various other ethnography-based methodologies.

Firstly, I conduct a walk-through method of the Instagram platform to contextualise the app and highlight the structures in which it currently operates. Here, I establish the app's 'environment of expected use' and identify and describe its "vision, operation model and governance" (Burgess & Duguay, 2018, p. 7). Next, I had surveys completed by 142 ordinary Instagram users as a methodological tool to analyse "the social world from the interacting individual" (Denzin et al., 2011, p. 13). Here, user behaviours and perceptions were the focus of questions to provide an empirical depiction of the digital landscape, noting trends to decipher their consumption habits. This allowed for comprehensive discussions regarding how users "represent forms of creator labour and operate within the structural and material interests of social media" (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 84), and was critical in segmenting the market for research purposes.

Finally, I conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 lifestyle Instagrammers and four agency professionals to gain insight into how these actors navigate the digital economy. All interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom and then transcribed, coded, and analysed, utilising a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Interview findings are also accompanied by textual analysis to evaluate the "evidence that people produce in the course of their everyday lives about how they make sense of the world" (McKee, 2014, p. 1).

This methodological framework will be further explained in Chapter 3 to highlight its value in analysing emerging media subjects and adapting old media to new contexts (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2019). I will also illustrate how such an approach can be extended to studying future subjects and adaptation processes, which is crucial in our forever morphing, fast-paced media economy.

1.5 Significance of Research

My research describes the digital discourse practices stakeholders employ through a comprehensive examination of 'exposure' and the correlation it has with advancing in our social media economy. Investigating exposure in this manner is important because it is habitually utilised as the currency traded for goods and services. This manifests through the commonality of brands requesting unpaid content from influencers, promising exposure in return. Similarly, influencers ask businesses for complimentary products or services in exchange for coverage on their profiles, signifying value. The premise of these transactions is that promotional messages must reach and impact audiences to be utilised effectively as marketing tools. This understanding is significant because it highlights that social media success is no longer simply about content production. Rather, it entails an understanding of the relative value of new currencies within contemporary media environments, whereby elevated

digital visibility fuels both online monetisation and social media elitism - because it is a determinant of social capital wealth.

Moreover, in the last decade, "influencer commerce has experienced an exponential growth, resulting in new forms of digital practices" (Abidin, 2016, p. 1) Thus, the actors circulating profits and constructing affective affinities with audiences inevitably create responsibilities for media and communication scholars to understand the processes in which they shape cultural identities and form communicative repertoires. This occurs by observing the system through a media lens that intersects political economy and marketing studies to reveal valuable insights regarding an influencer's cultural values and how they shape preferences steeped in lifestyle and consumption aspirations. Such dichotomy brings to the fore tensions surrounding 'new media subjects' and the consequences of information distribution from lay experts (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2017), which will be explored.

In sum, comparing the Instagram landscape to that of an economy shines a light on the commercial nature of social media platforms and, perhaps, more importantly, how our online behaviours are driven by algorithmic systems that provide a more comprehensive range of access to production but simultaneously, create new tiers of social elitism. This unequal playing field makes it challenging for users to succeed on Instagram, as displayed through findings that influencers pursue exposure by gaining knowledge of algorithmic rules and formulating tactics accordingly. In these settings, when visibility is scarce, the value of exposure is inflated, resulting in content becoming manufactured for material profit rather than symbolic, cultural enlightenment, thus impacting the market. These conclusions have the power to bring media and communications closer to understanding the social and financial implications of our new media economy and will be further unpacked throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The digital environment permeates our everyday life and enables a wide variety of professions, practices, and opportunities (Deuze, 2011). Scholars subsequently note a shift in modern media dynamics, as traditional forms of communication have been bolstered by a more personalised and direct networking service. Social media is defined by Kaplan and Haenlein as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0", allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC) (2010, p. 61). The proliferation of social media has undoubtedly altered how people interact with each other, and such participation has evolved into use that can be "entrepreneurial in nature" (Cunningham & Turner, 2014, p. 1). This re-engineering of producer-consumer relations unsettles paradigms of professional expertise, and thus demands academic research on the new media-consumer landscape that has manifested. While a systematic review of literature relating to social media can inform such research, most papers seem to be all-inclusive (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015; Kapoor et al., 2017); or specific to a particular domain like marketing, innovation, and co-creation (Rathore et al., 2016; Bhimani et al., 2019); or rather, discuss social media in relation to an ecology (Zhao, et al., 2016; Ruotsalainen & Heinonen 2015; Velásquez, 2018; Hearn et al, 2014; Barnes, 2008). This thesis expands on such offering by comparing the Instagram environment to a financial economy, with the following literature review providing the theoretical groundwork to preface the parallelism. This is achieved through viewing media literature predominately from the perspective of political economy and marketing studies, two contradicting frameworks. In doing so, Chapter 2 unpacks the relevant academic and literary research through a broad yet in-depth discussion of the critical drivers of the social media economy, namely i) platforms, ii) users, iii) influencers, and iii) agencies.

2.1 Platforms, Frameworks and Algorithms

On a conceptual level, social media platforms are infrastructures that are programmed and constructed (Bogost & Montfort, 2009) as well as mediating services between the interactions and relations of two or more parties (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). According to Bucher et al. (2017), these services constitute an environment composed of both pathways and features. However, social media variations and types exist through different, unique platforms. Thus, while many social media platforms share similar features and functionalities, such as likes for example, no two are alike.

In the context of western social media platforms, which are the focus of this literature review and thesis in its entirety, the leading social networking sites are, in no order: Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, TikTok, YouTube, and, of course, Instagram – which will now be broadly described. Here, Facebook is a social network primarily for communication and keeping up to date with friends and family. Snapchat is an instant photo-messaging application where users share 10-second videos that disappear after ten seconds. Twitter is a microblogging application where users share brief messages of 140 characters. LinkedIn is an employment-oriented social networking service utilised for business purposes. Pinterest presents a 'catalogue of ideas' in the form of mood boards for creativity and inspiration. TikTok and YouTube are video-sharing platforms (with the former short-form and the latter long). Finally, Instagram is a curated photo- and video-sharing application. While these platforms represent different types of social media, each with nuances and unique architectures, cultures, and norms (Van Dijck, 2013), all operate "as digital intermediaries that negotiate" among "different stakeholders such as end-users, developers, and advertisers, which in turn come with their own aims and agendas" (Bucher & Helmond, p. 19).

Previous conceptual articles sort social media platforms through different dimensions (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2015). Zhu and Chen (2015)

present a typology based upon two characteristics of social media: “nature of the connection, profile-based versus content-based, and level of customisation of messages, the degree to which a service is customised to satisfy an individual’s particular preferences” (Voorveld et al., 2018, p. 40). In such research, these dual characteristics establish four categories of social media: i) ‘Relationship platforms’, which encompass social media that is profile-based and consist primarily of customised messages, for example, platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn. ii) ‘Self-media platforms’, also profile-based, however, afford people the ability to manage their own social communication channels, such as Twitter. iii). ‘Creative outlet platforms’, content-based and enable users to share interests and creativity, as YouTube and Instagram enable and iv). ‘Collaboration platforms’, which are similarly content based, except built on co-creation, such as Pinterest (Voorveld et al., 2018). It is thus apparent that social media platforms are fundamentally characterised “by the combination of infrastructural” modelling as “programmable and extendable”, as well as their “economic model of connecting end-users to advertisers” (Bucher & Helmond, 2019, p. 19).

Other areas of existing literature on social media platforms view them technologically and for their political ‘mediation’ between stakeholder relations (Gillespie, 2010). One such example is Instagram’s ‘like’ button, which on a technical level “enables Instagram to extend into websites and apps”; however, “the data produced on and collected through these external sources” is ultimately returned to the platform and thus has dogmatic significance (Bucher & Helmond, 2019, p. 19). This leads to discussions regarding the synergies of the digital environment, a notion that is further explored.

Social Media Ecology vs Economy Frameworks

When discussing platforms that reside within the digital environment, most studies compare the media landscape to an ecology to describe how media, technology, and communication affect their corresponding human environments. Marshall McLuhan (1962) introduced the theory underpinning this literature, arguing that no medium has an isolated meaning or existence, as it is in constant interplay with other media. He proposed that media influences societal progression and that significant periods in history can be categorized by the technological medium utilised during that time, and how it affected civilisation (McLuhan & Staines, 2004, p. 271). Neil Postman then coined the term 'media ecology' in 1968, asserting that "the medium is a technology within which a [human] culture grows" (2016, p. 5). Postman focuses on the way media communication "affects human perception, understanding, feeling, and value", and how interactions with such media facilitate, or impede, our chances of overall survival (Postman, 2016, p. 5). The diction 'ecology' thereby indicates a study of environments: "their structure, content, and impact on people ... a complex message system which imposes on human beings' certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving" (ibid). The crux of this literature broadly compares media to an infrastructure that connects the nature and culture of a society and studies the movement between the two (Postman, 2016). According to Strate, media ecology scholars employ broad categories of "oral, scribal, print, and electronic cultures: alternatives to divisions such as agricultural, industrial, and information societies, based on the notion that "communication, not economics", influences social life most significantly (2008, p. 134). In this context, the evolution of speech and language, and therefore media, is viewed as intrinsic to the human species.

When it comes to social media ecologies, then, society presents vastly different categories to explore. As mentioned previously, social media is broadly defined as software tools that create shareable UGC (O'Reilly, 2005). In this network, users engage in interpersonal

yet mediated internet communication by creating online identities, interacting with others, participating in online communities, and activating groups to respond (Lipschultz, 2018). In the past decade, social media platforms have infiltrated the mechanics of our everyday life, impacting informal interactions between individuals, institutional structures within society, and professional routines (van Dijck, 2013). While media ecology theorists such as McLuhan suggest that media structures work together synergistically, a study by Zhao et al. (2016) revealed that online users simultaneously consider both their audience and content when sharing online, and such needs are in constant competition with one another. Social media users accordingly pertain to both maintaining "boundaries between platforms, as well as allowing content and audiences" to permeate across such boundaries (Zhao, et al, 2016, p. 91). They strive to stabilise "their own communication ecosystem yet need to respond to changes necessitated by the emergence of new tools, practices, and contacts" (ibid, p. 1).

This nexus among social networking platforms, mass media, users, and social institutions are conceptualised by José van Dijck (2013) as 'social media logic'—the norms, strategies and mechanisms that underpin contemporary online dynamics. Here, van Dijck (2013) considers platforms such as Instagram as 'microsystems' that comprise an ecosystem of collective media when combined. In this vein, it is argued that each microsystem is sensitive and functions by the changes apparent in other ecosystem components. Subsequently, the traditional 'media species' (for example, radio, film, television, print) must compete with the new (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) and simultaneously adapt and adopt attributes from the new interactive environment as a tool to survive (ibid). The concept of evolution hereby "creates a theoretical framework for studying the history of media and suggests new concepts and questions about media extinction, survival, and coevolution" (Scolari, 2012, p. 1). This literature on media competition refers to the theory of the niche, which derives from

the field of biology and the study of ecosystems (see Dimmick & Rothenbuhler, 1984), and attempts to understand how different species compete for scarce resources to survive.

The enquiry of how different media firms compete with each other has also been of interest to researchers studying the media *economy*. Gomery (2009) in his paper "Media economics: Terms of analysis", argues that the mass media, namely television, film, print, and radio industries, are economic institutions that exist in a competitive landscape. He created a framework to explore "the structure, conduct, and performance of the industry" (ibid), acknowledging the connection between culture and the economy. Christian Fuchs (2015), a leading theorist in this field, reinforces such link by applying cultural materialism to social media, examining "how social media companies make profits, which labour creates this profit, which creates social media ideologies, and the conditions under which such ideologies emerge" (Fuchs, 2015, p.1).

This resonates with Albarran (2016) who explores the way media companies compete for advertisers and audiences to gain competitive advantage. His study deals with the allocation of scarce human-made and natural resources and is built on the concepts of supply and demand. "In its simplest form, suppliers create goods and services from limited resources to meet the wants and needs of consumers" (Albarran, 2016, p. 15.). Media economics therefore illustrate how media industries "use scarce resources to produce content that is distributed among consumers in a society to satisfy various wants and needs" (Albarran, 2002, p. 5). In this paradigm, media is historically analysed according to its structure—a theorized construct defining market activity (Gomery, 1989). Bringing this thought in line with the subject of this thesis, it can be argued that social media platforms exist in the structure of monopolistic competition (Albarran, 2016). In such configuration, many sellers or suppliers of products are similar, but not "ideal substitutes for one another", leading to firms engaging in product differentiation to slightly distinguish their products from one another (Albarran, 2016, p. 54).

Due to stronger competition, "price is set by a combination of market forces and the firms themselves" (ibid) – which is comparable to the way competing social media platforms toggle algorithms to control the way users receive visibility to achieve a monopolistic advantage - a notion that will be revisited in depth throughout Chapters 4 and 5.

An alternate way to look at media markets within media economy theory would be to identify them by their primary function. This perspective is evident in literature that suggests that individual businesses, particularly media businesses, "no longer compete as solely autonomous entities but rather as supply chains" (Christopher, 1998, p. 1). In an economic context, supply chains are a network of multiple businesses and relationships whereby business process management across stakeholders determines the success of single enterprises (van der Vorst, 2000). Mentzer et al. defined a supply chain as "a set of three or more entities (organisations or individuals) directly involved in the upstream and downstream flows of products, services, finances, or information from a source to a customer" (2001, p. 4). This aligns with Nguyen and Kobsa's (2006) work on supply chain management, who simplify the production and consumption chain for consumer goods to four key stakeholders: i) manufacturers who make the actual products; ii) distributors who transport the products from the factories to the stores; iii) retailers who sell the products to people; iv) consumers who consume the products.

Like ecology theory, Forrester (1961) highlights the integrated nature of organisational relationships between stakeholders in such supply chains. Utilising a computer simulation to discern the influence on production and distribution performance for each supply chain member, Forrester found that because organisations are so intertwined, system dynamics influence the performance of all entities. This was confirmed by Butner (2007) who demonstrated various disruptions to the 'flows of materials and products' that occur within supply chains that ultimately impact end-to-end visibility. Applying supply chain management

theory and economics to media studies in this manner highlights social concerns about what, how and for whom media is produced (Huang, et al, 2019). This links to the philosophy that the economic structure of media inevitably "dictates the conduct of media firms and the extent to which they perform the social, cultural, and political roles" that they are expected to play in society (Picard, 1989, p. 7).

Importantly however, value chain literature of this nature is rooted in a traditional view of single-sided markets. Over the last decade, marketing studies have expanded these concepts to include "value networks" and have theorized markets, such as those operated by Instagram, as "multi-sided" markets **(**Evans, David S. and Schmalensee, Richard and Noel, Michael D. and Chang, Howard H. and Garcia-Swartz, Daniel D., 2011**).** While multisided markets are not new, their prevalence in literature has increased with the rise of digital technologies. These studies frequently adopt a "transactional perspective" to analyse the "relationships among platform holders and between platform holders and users" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 3). A two-sided market of this nature involves dual sets of agents that interact through an intermediary or platform whereby "the decisions of each set of agents affects the outcomes of the other set of agents, typically through an externality" (Rysman, 2009).

Marc (2009) utilises the example of the video game system PlayStation to exemplify such a market, in which the intermediary is Sony, the console producer, whilst the agents are consumers and video game developers. Here the interest in PlayStation relies on mutual interest between the agents, and consumers typically perceive the participation of developers in a negative light. This thesis suggests that the product of Instagram fits neatly into this paradigm as multi-sided platform businesses "create value by providing products that enable two or more different types of customers to get together, find each other, and exchange value" (Evans, et al, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, there are inherent tensions between the platform owners and the platform users of Instagram, who are often left in the dark with algorithmic structures and are

subject to unwanted changes that impact the user experience. The following thesis will expand on the literature regarding how the intermediary (or in the context of social media "the platform") sets prices for both sides of the market (Rysman, 2006) through the trade of exposure.

This understanding is grounded in work by Nieborg & Poell who explore the way in which the political economy of the cultural industries change through "the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content" (2018, p. 1). Utilising the production of news and games as a case-study, their findings demonstrate that platformisation "entails the replacement of two-sided market structures with complex multisided platform configurations, dominated by big platform corporations" (ibid), a concept which will be further explored in the forthcoming section.

The study draws upon research by Turow (2011) who suggest that two-sided configurations allow content developers to control the means of production and distribution. In turn, platforms are subject to indirect network effects as "actors joining (or leaving) one side of the platform indirectly affect the (perceived) value of the platform for actors on the other side" (Nieborg & Powell, 2018, p. 4). For example, there is a positive effect when more ordinary users join a social media platform because it heightens the experience for other end-user, subsequently enhancing the value for other stakeholders, such as influencers and agencies. Thus, relevant cultural content producers are forced to frequently adapt to "seemingly serendipitous changes" in platform governance, ranging from content curation to pricing strategies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 1). This is of similar nature to Instagram and its key stakeholders whereby these producers are "enticed by new platform services and infrastructural changes" (ibid). Whilst Nieborg and Poell (2018) demonstrate disparities between cultural industries in trajectories of platformization, I seek to broaden the scope by developing a

framework that fundamentally highlights the way such trajectories have led to Instagram stakeholders becoming contingent commodities that trade exposure as a currency within a social media economy.

In sum, theories comparing media to ecologies and economies share fundamental properties. They are both “adaptive, cooperative systems where agents—individuals and groups—compete for locally limiting resources needed to live and reproduce” (Vermeij & Leigh, 2011, p. 1). These philosophies suggest that each of the mechanisms involved in the landscape is interconnected and bounded by the rules of the system, which impacts the way in which they operate. However, I argue that these rules are primarily commercial in nature, whereby cultural production is contingent on a “select group of powerful digital platforms” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 1). In turn, exploring a social media economy is more useful in contemporary society, as evidenced through the literature on interconnectivity which can be further explored through discussions surrounding platformisation.

Platforming and De-platforming

As touched on earlier, platformisation defines “the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governance frameworks of platforms in different societal sectors and spheres of life” (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck, 2019, p. 5). It “entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data platform ready” (Helmond, 2015, p. 1), and refers to platforms as dynamic, rather than identifying them as objects (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Studies on platformisation “explore the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences” (Helmond, 2015, p. 1). For instance, literature by van Dijck et al suggests that the platformisation dynamic occurs in a "corporate space that in the Western hemisphere is dominated most notably by the Big Five tech companies known by the acronym of GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft)” (2021, p. 4). These “competing and

cooperating tech companies have built a sociotechnical infrastructure that they rely on for their own financial health and global reach but on which entire public sectors and public communication spheres have also become dependent (Van Dijck et al, 2021, p. 4).

Several scholars have envisioned this system as a "stack" with various layers to facilitate the connection between numerous data flows (van Dijck, 2020; Bratton, 2016). The Big Five companies, as previously mentioned, are in a unique position to control connectivity by operating more platforms. For example, "while Facebook deploys several social media networks across the same layer, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, the firm also operates one of the largest online advertising platforms, allowing it to integrate data flows both horizontally and vertically" (van Dijck et al., 2021, p. 5). Thus, as traditional media and social media continue to interact across ideological boundaries (Soo-bum & Youn-gon, 2013), discussions are often raised regarding the conflict between commercial interests and the public good (Cunningham et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2006a; van Dijck, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016), a matter which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Moreover, the platformisation dynamic is vital in its differentiation of "deplatformisation". In this context, de-platforming applies predominantly to specific actors on certain platforms, and occurs, for instance, when an account holder gets deleted, or their content is blocked due to not meeting the platform's community guidelines. The concept of deplatformisation can also be applied "more broadly to the denial of infrastructural services, e.g., browsers, cloud services, pay systems, app stores, advertising services and domain name systems" (van Dijck et al., 2021, p. 5). In the article, "Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem", José van Dijck et al found that the concepts of deplatforming and deplatformisation articulate the need for "acknowledging different levels of governance" (2021, p. 14). Findings showed that deplatformisation strategies deployed by technology companies are not just manifestations of technological prowess but are "just as much economic

strategies propelled by clashing ideological narratives" (ibid.). Here, deplatformisation impacts a platform's ability to operate, which then becomes a threat to its survival within the landscape. In turn, deplatformisation affects not just single account holders because "they may disobey the rules of one platform; instead, platform operators are denied infrastructural services because they cannot (or refuse to) keep their channels clean" (van Dijck et al, 2021, p. 5). Rather, deplatformisation efforts refer to a broad attempt to control the ecosystem's hierarchical structure by responding to each other's actions, suggesting that it, therefore, has a ripple effect across the ecosystem (ibid.).

Moreover, the increasing quantity of de-platformed accounts signals "public pressure on tech firms to keep their social platforms" free of socially deviant content (ibid). Each SNS has subsequently "installed a different set of rules to define which violations warrant deplatforming" (ibid). While there is some "overlap between policies, there is no agreed-upon set of rules that governs the platform ecosystem" (van Dijck et al., 2021, p. 5). This ambiguous concept parallels with literature on shadow banning, which according to Are and Paasonen:

> Is a light censorship technique used by social media platforms to limit the reach of potentially objectionable content without deleting it altogether. Such content does not go directly against community standards so that it, or the accounts in question, would be outright removed. Rather, these are borderline cases – often ones involving visual displays of nudity and sex. (2021, p. 411)

Shadow banning allegedly occurs on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube "to control the visibility of the content uploaded by users" (Le Merrer et al, 2021, p. 1). It is a form of the platformisation/deplatformisation binary, as such platforms hold the power to promote or demote specific content and have responsibilities to, for example, prevent bullying, moderate bots used for influence gain or defend copyright ownership (Are & Paasonen, 2021). However, precise policies are rarely publicly displayed, thus creating

ambiguity regarding what structures are at play regarding what constitutes shadow banning. In fact, in 2020 Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri denied rumours regarding the fact Instagram was even employing shadow banning as a method of censorship, stating that being on Instagram's Explore page is not guaranteed for anyone, attributing it to luck.

One of the first papers to address the credibility of shadow banning on popular online platforms was one by Le Merrer et al (2021) titled, "Setting the Record Straighter on Shadow Banning". This study adopts both a statistical and a graph topological approach by "conducting an extensive data collection and analysis campaign, gathering occurrences of visibility limitations on user profiles" (Le Merrer et al, 2021, p.1). The paper concludes that shadow bans "appear as a local event, impacting specific users and their close interaction partners, rather than resembling a (uniform) random event, such as a bug" (Le Merrer et al, 2021, p. 9). Other literature on shadow banning by Kelley Cotter suggests that the sanctioning of behaviours by Instagram "delineates further rules that limit the range of acceptable growth strategies" (2018, p. 904). For example, "influencers have reported being 'banned' or 'shadowbanned' by Instagram after leaving too many comments or 'likes' in too short a period" (ibid). It is hereby crucial to distinguish that 'banning' refers to disabling accounts, whereas 'shadowbanning' refers to the "perceived suppression of one's post(s), making the user invisible to others" (ibid). Here, Cotter argues that while "influencers are divided on whether shadowbans truly exist or certain users are simply underperforming, fears of sanctions have material impacts on influencers' strategies" (Cotter, 2018, p. 10). This paper demonstrates that it is not enough for influencers to know that Instagram uses deplatformization strategies like shadowbanning, but influencers also "feel obliged to understand how the algorithms work" (ibid.)—which is discussed herein.

Algorithmic Power

Algorithms are computer programmes involving a series of steps that operate on data to produce a certain outcome (Gillespie, 2014). Algorithms intervene in our daily routine tasks as we "leave trails of data upon which algorithms act to make decisions on our behalf" (Cotter, 2021, p. 898). Once an algorithm has classified a user, the classification is able to mobilise decisions about what information or products to show that user based on data (Willson, 2017). This process is now a crucial component of our digital commerciality and manifests through sponsored ads and recommendation systems on the internet and search engines.

The nature in which algorithms intersect with social media is an area of research heavily studied by researchers (Beer, 2009; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014). Most studies discuss how algorithmic rankings on newsfeeds play a role in determining who and which content gains visibility on social media. Here, it is argued that platforms such as Instagram engage in "visibility management" (Flyverbom, 2016, p. 112) by strategically making certain information known to certain actors (Cotter, 2021). Cunningham & Craig describe this as "top-down creator governance", which refers to the exercise of institutional power over creators" (2019, p 3).

This type of governance became apparent in early 2016 when Instagram announced that newsfeeds would become "ordered to show the moments we believe you will care about the most" (Instagram, 2016). While the subtext of such an announcement was that the platform would be changing the chronological timeline for an algorithmic ranking system, Instagram remained vague regarding the platform's explicit algorithmic architecture. According to Cotter, this is because "the threat of invisibility becomes more formidable when platform owners obscure or withhold information about what their algorithms do, how they do it, and why" (2021, p. 4).

In turn, this threat of invisibility has led to users paying attention to the content that attains visibility in an attempt to "discern the participatory norms that algorithms reward" (Cotter, 2021, p. 896). Literature in such a field often refers to tactics that users, particularly influencers, utilise to gain visibility as "gaming the system" (e.g., Gillespie, 2014; Brown, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In this context, "gaming the system" defines the process of users' acting on knowledge about structures that prohibit visibility, such as algorithmic systems (Cotter, 2018). In response, platforms and technology companies have identified this process as rationales for hiding their algorithmic systems (Pasquale, 2015). According to De Laat (2017), this is because 'gaming' is said to "undermine the integrity of a system's outcomes since algorithms make sense of user behaviour based on underlying assumptions about how users will behave and what that behaviour signifies" (Cotter, 2021, p, 899). If usage of a platform departs from what engineers originally envisioned, the corresponding data may not be effectively interpreted by algorithmic systems (ibid).

This notion aligns with Bucher's (2012) research, which employs a Foucauldian-inspired framework to demonstrate how social media algorithms base the conditions and frequency in which users are seen, on assumptions about their 'relevancy' and 'newsworthiness'. In this study, Bucher argues that establishing conditions for visibility via algorithms renders visibility a privilege: "[the] possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough"—the threat of invisibility—disciplines influencers into normalizing their behaviour or risk becoming invisible (Bucher, 2012, p. 1171). In turn, Cotter states that regulations and algorithms arguably serve as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe desirable forms of participation on social media (2021, p. 898). Thus, algorithms primarily function behind the scenes in a manner "so subtle that many users are acutely unaware of their presence" yet play an important role in structuring our online and offline landscapes (Cotter, 2021, p. 896).

This role is emphasised by Cotter who claims that when engineers operationalise concepts that content users "care about the most" (Instagram, 2016) through algorithms, they can impose "certain valuations, meanings, and relationships to objects and actors with which we interact" (2018, p. 4). This is illustrated in literature by Just and Latzer (2017), which found that "engineers designing algorithms are influenced by social, cultural, economic, and political forces" (Cotter, 2021, p. 898). Problematically, however, research highlights how algorithms are "embedded in old systems of power and privilege" (Eubanks, 2018, p. 178) that serve to classify individuals and subsequently have the power to prescribe participatory norms (Bucher, 20212), produce social relations (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011) and form social realities (CheneyLipold, 2011). This supports Bishop's (2018) finding that the algorithm tends to privilege and reward feminised content that is deeply entwined with consumption. This literature ultimately suggests that social media sites like Instagram "reinforce offline hierarchies of social privilege, with "winners" being those with greater access to social, cultural, political, and economic resources" (Cotter, 2021, p. 909). In turn, algorithms "judge similarity and probability" and use "categories to disciplinary action" (Ananny, 2016, p. 102). Cheney-Lippold additionally believes that algorithms act on "measurable types," assigning users identities and categories "directed towards operability and efficiency, not representative enactness" (2017, p. 50) - meaning they predict outcomes without understanding intention and context.

Thus, while there is evidently mounting concern over the power of algorithms in the social realities of the ecosystem (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011), van der Nagel (2018) suggests that users on the receiving end, who consciously interact with algorithms, ultimately know that their behaviour is subject to "a court of algorithmic appeal" (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 129). This knowledge will be further unpacked by exploring these users, and their understandings of their own social media experiences, in greater depth.

2.2 Social Networking Users, Participation and Labour

Social network sites (SNS) are a "particularly vibrant form of social media, well-suited for interpersonal exchanges that serve to maintain and strengthen social bonds" (Elison & Vitak, 2015, p. 208). At its core, an SNS is thus a networked communication platform that relies on user participation to function. According to Ellison & Boyd (2018 p. 9), these user participants have three key characteristics:

> i) uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; ii) publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and ii) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.

Literature on social media use typically derives from discussions on Web 2.0, a communication method responsible for shifting a one-way 'passive' flow between producers and audiences (Kiani, 1998, p. 185). While scholars such as Williams (1973) and McLuhan (1994) claim media exchanges have always been 'active', O'Reilly (2009) infers Web 2.0 as the first type of internet-enabling "conversations" rather than limiting users to passively viewing content. The cultural significance of such a movement was encapsulated by Gee's assertion that, for the first time in media history, digital tools of production became available to "ordinary" individuals without professional digital expertise (2015, p. 10). Academics such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) subsequently claim that Web 2.0 was responsible for the rise of 'interactivity', a concept manifesting within SNSs such as Facebook and Instagram. These types of social media platforms are technologically defined as web applications that 'process', 'store', and 'retrieve' UGC (Gideon et al, 2010). On a cultural level, however, they represent a shift in the way individuals use, consume, and produce content within our media landscape through nuanced participation methods. These notions are further explored below.

Social Media Participation

Social media participation is frequently explored in Web 2.0 literature about social networking's ability to unearth voices previously ignored by traditional media. This is because the modern digital landscape has allowed users to be more actively engaged in communication compared to traditional media (Ruggerio, 2020). Jenkins (2009) links such movement to 'participatory culture', a system whereby consumers can freely create and circulate content through access to online networks. Here, Jenkins states that while not every member is expected to fully contribute to participatory culture, "all must understand that they are free to" (2009, p. 6). This finding suggests there are different types of social media user categories within a participatory culture that differ in characterisation, depending on the degree to which they participate. However, there is not a significant amount of literature that currently discusses this in a social media setting, and therefore it will be studied through this research and explained in Chapter 4.

Moreover, participatory culture is constantly responding to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for consumers to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 8). Turnbull hence argues that the major impact of SNS is user behaviour that "shifts boundaries between experts/information providers and laypeople/information-consumers" (2009, p. 57). This is because social media "includes a multitude of sources of online information that are created, circulated, and used by consumers to educate one another about products, services, and brands that are available in the marketplace" (Whiting & WIlliams, 2013 p. 362). This parallels Burgess' definition of 'vernacular creativity' – which is "the everyday practice of material and symbolic creativity, such as storytelling and photography, that predate digital culture and are subsequently remediated" (2007, p. 3). As a result, academics have attempted to conceptualise the paradoxical identity of new-age online users through portmanteaus such as 'produser'

(Bruns, 2008) and ‘peer production’ (Benkler, 2006). These terms are significant as they embody the disintegrating boundaries between ‘audiences’ and ‘producers’ and describe the ability to create and disseminate content while connecting to other individuals in ‘media-meshing’ behaviours (Deuze, 2007).

Here, it is believed by Bruns (2008) that users are always ready to be producers of shared information collection, taking on a new hybrid role. This is evidenced by the way in which online citizen journalists have shaped the news cycle. In the context of participatory culture, citizen journalism defines the content creation produced for blogs and independent news sites, but also routine participation in the general news process through “re-posting, linking, ‘tagging’ (labelling with keywords), rating, modifying, or commenting” (Goode, 2009, p. 2). While original news productions settings required formal processes including “selecting writing, editing, positioning and scheduling” (Shoemaker, Vos & Reese, 2008), the digital news landscape has seen a blurring of traditional borders between news producers and consumers (Benkler, 2006).

Despite such phenomena undeniably contributing to content diversity (Carpenter, 2010), tensions have been raised regarding professional production versus amateur content creation, and this is extended into other domains (Aranda et al., 2016; Burges & Green, 2009; Hellekson and Busse, 2006). Most theories of social media comparably suggest some degree of collapse between the producer and audience (Bechmann, & Lomborg, 2013), as participatory culture ultimately endows ‘everyday users the power to produce content and communicate information like trained media professional producers. This concept of the ‘ordinary’ social media user, and how they use social media, warrants elaboration.

Living life online has become the norm. According to Highfield, posting everyday personal experiences "in visual form on Instagram, maintaining social connections through Facebook, and commenting and obtaining information on Twitter" are now integral to everyday life (2018, p. 142). Every day or 'ordinary' social media users define a group of individuals who utilise social networking and its features and functions without being paid to do so. As suggested, they do not generate financial profits or income from their social media use, engaging with social networking platforms for the affordances provided to them. However, the media operates in "specific cultural and institutional contexts that determine how and why they are used" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 24), which has become a significant research object in media studies.

The uses and gratifications theory suggests that individuals seek out media that fulfil their needs and lead to ultimate gratification (Lariscy et al., 2011). This is a valuable framework to approach social media, as studies have shown that the gratifications received by individuals are predictors of both media use and recurring media use (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979). Whiting and Williams (2013) utilised this theory through an exploratory study involving 25 in-depth interviews with social media users. The study identified 10 uses and gratifications that users identify with: "social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 362). The paper enhances understanding of the value consumers receive from their use of social media, concluding that ordinary users are goal-oriented, with rationales for their use (and non-use) of various media, which is relevant to my research at hand.

Another theory commonly applied to social media usage is the 'Technology Acceptance Model' (TAM), which Davis (1986) developed to explore the usage behaviour associated with computer technology. The TAM was adopted from another social psychology theory called the

Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen), which attempts to “explain a person’s behaviour through their intent” (1975, p. 2). Through this lens, the intention is determined by two constructs: “individual attitudes toward the behaviour and social norms or the belief that specific individuals or a specific group would approve or disprove of the behaviour” (ibid.). Rauniar et al. explored this parallelism further in their paper, “Technology acceptance model (TAM) and social media usage: An empirical study on Facebook” (2013). This study examined the “individual adoption behaviour of the networking site Facebook through a primary data set of 398 users gathered from a web-based questionnaire survey” (Rauniar et al, 2013, p. 1). The study found that the influences on the intention of using social networking based on an individual’s perceived “ease of use (EU), the user’s critical mass (CM), social networking site capability (CP), perceived playfulness (PP), trustworthiness (TW), and perceived usefulness (PU)” (ibid). The results of this study provide evidence for the importance of additional variables in considering user engagement on social media sites. The study was useful in understanding who is using these sites and for what purposes (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Finally, other scholars utilise higher-level affordances as a lens to understand social media use as it produces work that will still be useful after the sites have changed (Ellison, & Vitak, 2015). According to Ellison and Vitak (2015), affordances examine the connection between the materiality of media and human agency. Therefore, literature of this kind frequently utilises an affordance approach to focus attention on the new forms and features of communicative practices and social interactions, rather than merely the technological interfaces. A range of technology researchers adopt this method (Wellman, 2001; Resnick, 2002; Sundar, 2008; Boyd, 2010; Ellison, et al., 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012;), framing their “insights in relation to higher-level characteristics as opposed to the idiosyncratic features of a particular technology or site” (Ellison & Vitak, 2015 p.4). While some scholars discuss affordance as synonymous with features of technology other academics suggest that media

platforms should be considered in reference to their 'affordances' and 'constraints' (e.g., Baym, 2010; Boyd, 2011; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). For example, danah boyd (2010) describes a set of affordances that includes persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability, noting that they each "introduce new dynamics, such as those surrounding instances of context collapse" (Ellison & Vitak, 2015 p. 5). Here, the "lowered transaction costs of relationship maintenance behaviours on these sites enable users" (Ellison & Vitak, 2015 p. 5) to form "social supernets," defined by Judith Donath (2007) as the large communicative networks made available by SNSs that would be impossible to maintain without the technology of social media. Similarly, Ellison et al. (2007) highlight the affordances social media platforms play in enabling "users to both form and maintain relationships" with an expansive range of contacts" (Ellison & Vitak, 2015 p.2). For example, a study by Joinson (2008) identified seven motivations for using the social media platform Facebook, with social connection having the most importance. Additional motivations included 'shared identities' (activities associated with establishing common ground), as well as 'passive browsing activities' to keep up to date with other users (ibid.).

While there is significant literature pertaining to why everyday users engage in social media platforms, this research tends to view users on a broad spectrum. Most of this research explores users as either 'active' vs 'passive' (Xu et al (2014); Thorisdottir et al, 2019; Trifiro, & Gerson, 2019) or 'professional' vs 'amateur' (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Lange 2008, 2011). There are also several studies that discuss social media users as 'lurkers' to describe the "silent groups" in online communities (Sun et al, 2014, p. 1). Here, researchers examine fundamental reasons for lurking and methods to encourage posting among this group (Bishop, 2007; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008; Beaudoin, 2002, Küçük, 2010). As a result, various models have been proposed to identify factors that influence online performance (Fan et al., 2009, Kollock, 1999, Leshed, 2005, Nonnecke and Preece, 2001, Tedjamulia et al., 2005). Stemming from such research, Sun et al (2014), offers a model to classify motivational

factors into four categories: "the nature of the online community, individual characteristics, the degree of commitment and quality requirements" (Sun et al, 2014, p. 1). Based on this model, four reasons for lurking were identified: environmental influence, personal preference, individual-group relationship, and security consideration - highlighting the nuanced reasons for which users seek not to engage in participatory environments (Sun et al, 2014, p. 14). While this study is useful in understanding lurking and presenting subsequent strategies for motivating participation in online communities, there is albeit, a lack of literature that delves into the other types of users that exist within online communities and the unique impact they have on the media environment.

This is because segmentation of this nature is more prevalent in marketing studies, whereby customer segmentation is considered an essential avenue of research due to its ability to maximise the value of customers (Hong & Kim, 2012). Hunter (2016) proposes dividing retail customers into five main types: 'Loyal Customers', namely, those who are invested in a brand and generate the most sales; 'Discount Customers', who shop frequently but solely make decisions based on the size of markdowns; 'Need-Based Customers', consumers that specifically intend to buy a particular type of item, 'Impulse Customers', who come into a store on a whim, purchasing what seems good at the time; and 'Wandering Customers', the largest segment in traffic but smallest in profits (Hunter, 2016, p. 1). I argue that this type of segmentation system resonates with Instagram due to its function as a marketplace, whereby the users act as customers, - which will be revisited in Chapter 4. In this vein, just as the customers in Hunter's study are pivotal to retail businesses, and thus should be nurtured accordingly, everyday users on Instagram are fundamental to the existence of social media platforms, particularly considering their UGC forms the basis for profits by the companies operating the sites (Jin & Feenberg, 2015). Everyday users are critical because not only do they consume on the app, both symbolically through engaging with content and literally through

purchasing products - they also partake in their own production of UGC. This emphasises the importance of analysing each segment of this market rather than simply studying their motivations; because having a successful social media economy requires “understanding in knowing our customers and the behaviour patterns that drive their decision-making process” (Hunter, 2016, p. 2). These decision-making processes are critical for platforms as ordinary users do not receive anything material in exchange for their UGC and thus, they necessitate value in other forms to stay satisfied with the app. This raises questions as to whether everyday users are fundamentally exploited by the app or empowered by the affordances of social media, which will now be discussed in depth.

Everyday Users as Labourers

Political economy researchers suggest that the cultural work produced by media users revisits the Marxist theory of variable capital by residing in “capitalist circuits of accumulations” (Butosi, 2012, p. 3). As prefaced in Chapter 2.1, studies within this domain challenge the democratic effects of social media by suggesting that Web 2.0 exploits individuals who are “more passive users than active creators” (van Dijck, 2009, p. 43). According to Fuchs (2011), Andrejevic (2002), and Terranova (2004), this is because a user’s time on social media is essentially sold to conglomerates and, hence, contributes financially to that company. Additionally, Beller (2006) argues that rather than generating ‘attention property’, users of commercially owned SNSs are thus free labourers in what Scholz (2012) dubs “the Internet as factory”. Zwick et al (2008) support this by suggesting consumer co-creation as a form of ‘governance’, where sites relying on UGC “expropriate the cultural labour of masses and convert it into monetary value” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody, 2008, p. 180). Fuch (2011, p. 301) reinforces such contention, arguing that the more users engage in ‘prosumption’ sites such as Instagram, the greater the revenues generated for conglomerates. For this reason, Butosi

believes that producer/consumer hybrids problematically implicate labouring subjectivities in the economic relations of production and exploitation (2012, p. 38).

Conversely, modern cultural studies theorists such as Neff believe that users are enabled by their use of social media, arguing that media workers offer insight into the way "value is communicatively mediated as part of the marketplace's increasing reliance" on productions of "symbolic, informational, and aesthetic goods" (2012, p. 29). In this vein, Barbrook (1998) conceptualises the internet as a 'high-tech gift economy' - noting the internet as a form of anarcho-communism. He subsequently suggests that digital labour harbours its own cultural value in the absence of economic incentives. This understanding applies to users' production as their 'labour' typically begins from a passion for creating content and reaping the social benefits of SNSs. Additionally, Hesmondhalgh (2013, p. 12) submits that digital labour is the kind of cultural work that has always been unpaid due to the willingness and enthusiasm of individuals pursuing it. This perspective implies that, considering that most labour on social media is voluntary, SNS use can constitute a 'self-activity' that has value to users engaging with it (Kang et al., 2009). Here, consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are "pleasurably embraced and often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2000, p. 37). Furthermore, Whitmer suggests that by voluntarily online "broadcasting information" about the self, one "ostensibly gains control" over the production process and utilises it to their advantage (2015, p. 40). Hence, social media user labour highlights Andrejevic's (2004) concept of "productive surveillance", which suggests that people perceive online surveillance as a desirable way to express themselves and a route to achieve fame. According to Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2012), this occurs through participatory web platforms that reflect broader cultural changes, where public displays of 'self' become a form of productive labour and means for achieving success.

After examining both sides of this debate, social media labour perhaps aligns with Terranova's (2000) assertion that productive activities can be described as both voluntary and subject to exploitation in some contexts. In this vein, it notes visibility as "a double-edged sword" stating that it can be "empowering as well as disempowering" (2007, p. 335). For this reason, Mayer et al. (2009) propose moving beyond segregation between cultural studies and political economy, as contributions from both sides generally press in the same direction. Additionally, I argue that the argument is further complicated when other individuals, namely influencers, profit off their social media use. This is further explored in Chapter 2.3.

2.3 Social Media Marketing and Influencers

The new media's participatory environment complicates the role of traditional intermediaries. As discussed above, the unique nature of social media essentially empowers potential customers to share, comment and give feedback on advertisements, and industry marketers were quick to identify social networking sites as valuable tools to reach mass audiences with targeted messages (Korda & Itani 2013). As well as offering additional marketing channels through paid sponsored posts and more intimate platforms for brands to sell products, social media fundamentally crafts relationships through 'earned exposure', whereby customers relay positive experiences to one another online. Miller thus suggests that social media marketing aims to pull consumers "through a conversion process", from having an initial interest to "completing a sale of products or services" (2013, p. 92). Social influencers facilitate this process by promoting commercial products for social and economic capital gains whilst enhancing their own personal brands in the process.

In this thesis, these influencers are considered "highly visible tastemakers who professionally publish content on social media platforms" (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021, p. 2) due to their superior capacity to create effects, shape opinions and drive audience behaviours

through social media channels. This conceptualisation draws heavily upon Abidin's (2015, p 1) description of social media influencers:

> Every day, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles engage with their following in digital and physical spaces and monetise their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts.

Similarly, Enke and Borcher define social media influencers "as third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality" and influence organisational stakeholders through "content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web" (2019, p. 267). They also distinguish social media use from "strategic social media communication", a concept this project will adopt, defining the latter as the "purposeful use of communication" in which social media influencers perform activities with "strategic significance to organisational goals" (ibid). Existing literature has established four tiers of influence that are based on follower count, namely: "mega or super influencers (> 1 million followers); macro-influencers (100k-1m); or micro-influencers (5k-100k); and nano influencers (< 5k)" (Brewster & Lyu, 2020, p. 1)

While the term 'digital influencer' is somewhat recent in media literature studies (Uzunoglu, 2014; Abidin, 2014; Shandwick, 2013), 'influencing' online is long-established. For example, a survey conducted by Trammel and Keshelashvili in 2005, i.e., before the word 'influencer' was conceptualised, described bloggers as opinion leaders whose high self-awareness "converts to a significant degree of purported influence" (2005, p. 1). This finding aligns with Abidin's (2015) research on Singaporean lifestyle bloggers. She proposes five distinct qualities (accessibility, authenticity, believability, emulatability, and intimacy) that enable them to produce a sense of familiarity, termed 'perceived interconnectedness', with followers. Based on this research, influencers evidently project an affective intimacy

communicated through their presentation as a "unique, notable and authentic product", embodying a dual-level production "of the self and career" within the media ecosystem (Nathanson, 2020, p. 1). Here, the presentation of a 'good life' speaks to the audience's values and aspirations (Hill, 2011).

Moreover, regarding the measurement of influence, Mavroudis (2018) identified three factors that can be utilised: i) reach, ii) collaborative networks, and iii) brand endorsement status. Here, 'reach' suggests that the larger the following, the greater the audience they can leverage. 'Collaborative networks' define the professional and personal connections influencers have with fellow influencers on social media, whereby each subgroup such as fashion for example, has identifiable major players. This notion implies that affiliation with these individuals will boost Instagram users' following and status through "proximate fame" (Abidin, 2015). Finally, 'brand endorsement statuses' imply that the greater the reach, the higher the value is to advertisers regarding selling potential and, hence, the greater their brand endorsement status. Value is quantified by the quality brand endorsements an influencer receives. Here the fundamental act of being approached by a company or offered a free product in exchange for a post satisfies the criteria (ibid).

The value of reach was reinforced in a study of network diversity by Ellison Vitak who found that as users' "networks increased in size and diversity (i.e., the number of unique social groups identified within the network), so did their perceived bridging social capital" (2012, p. 12). According to Ellison and Vitak (2015), this is because the "size and composition" of networks are directly related to the resources one possesses, such as "social status, financial resources, cultural capital, and domain-specific knowledge" (ibid.). In turn, a "personal recommendation from a higher-status individual will carry more weight than that of a lower-status individual" (Ellison & Vitak, 2012, p. 17). An influencer's 'numbers' subsequently

indicate the size of their network connections and, hence, endow a marketable degree of credibility to shape perspectives.

The correlation between network connections and credibility was conceptualised by Fraser and Brown (2009) as 'the megaphone effect', referencing how the internet can make a 'mass audience' available to 'ordinary consumers'. This paper examined the correlation between accumulating cultural capital and public displays of taste and illustrated how 'tastes' produce both economic rewards and social capital. In these instances, a select few ordinary consumers gain an audience without the institutional mediation traditionally required (Fraser & Brown, 2009). This is chiefly displayed through the 'lifestyle genre' of influencers, who have gained popularity for their public display of the self as 'aesthetic'. Here, aesthetic is defined in relation to 'beautiful', the Aristotelian "unity in manifold" (Aristotle, 1995). According to Przyborski (2017), "we express ourselves aesthetically when we communicate in and through pictures—both regarding what we show as content and motifs (explicitly and ichnographically) and how we show content stylistically (implicitly and iconologically)" (Schreiber, 2017 p. 1). Through pictures, these influencers model themselves as guarantors of the value of their 'aesthetic' lifestyles through endorsing wellness ideologies, providing followers with advice, promoting goods and, most importantly, accruing lucrative brand endorsements in the process (Hadley, 2015, p. 1). Drawing from Chittenden's (2010) and Rocamora's (2011) research, the theory of affective labour is applicable here because influencers and other SNS users generally create content that depicts themselves as guarantors of specific propriety. This is particularly relevant to studies on influencers because they drive conspicuous consumption by selling an aesthetic yet seemingly attainable lifestyle to followers. In production studies literature, this capacity illuminates Hardt and Negri's concept of 'affective labour', namely the "production and manipulation of affects that require virtual or actual human contact and proximity" (1999, p. 93). Through this lens, consumption occurs through relating audiences to products via 'affects'

that symbolise connections between utilising a product and their success as a fashionable, fit and well-travelled individual. This association establishes an influencer's ability to construct affinities between 'goods' and 'tastes', as they can utilise their connections with followers as a space to mediate culture, a notion to be explored in the following section about how they present themselves online.

Self-Presentations on Social Media

Erving Goffman (1959) originally coined the term 'self-presentation' as the specific roles individuals perform in public. He posited that individuals express identity through 'verbal and nonverbal' messages to display the most 'credible image' to their audiences (Bortree, 2005). Here, everyday human behaviour is conceptualised as a 'dramaturgical performance', whereby participants in social interactions are "actors" who distinguish between their "front stage" and "backstage" (Goffman 1959, p. 49). In this context, Goffman (1959) suggests that self-presentation is a continual negotiation process between both positions, each containing unique presentation strategies that individuals manage through revolving processes of 'interpreting audiences, goals, and contexts' (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Early research on computer-mediated self-presentation predominantly focused on dating sites (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Toma & Hancock, 2010) and online community groups (Baym, 2000; Wellman et al., 2002; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Schwammelin & Wodzicki, 2012). Following the growth in digital platforms, however, Boyd and Ellison believe self-presentation capabilities constitute a vital "research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance" (2007, p. 210). For this reason, Goffman's work has been effectively applied to modern SNSs by academics such as Trammel and Keshelashvili (2005), who utilise his theory to understand how 'A-list bloggers' present themselves online. This literature suggests that influencers actively engage in impression management systems

through strategically and carefully crafting narratives about the self (Walker, 2005; Chin & Halls, 2008; Chittenden, 2010; Rocamora, 2011;). The concept of self-presentation is manifested on Instagram as cultural workers have historically negotiated tensions between the binary of authenticity and commerciality— whereby 'the authentic' or 'the real' is highly fetishised (Arrigada & Bishop, 2021). Ironically, however, curation is key for influencers operating on Instagram because the site affords users creative capacity to control self-presentation and display the aspects of their identity they perceive as most salient (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). In this vein, Belk (2013, p. 484) argues that popular social media practices, such as sharing selfies or uploading stories, enable the audience seemingly authentic 'backstage' access into a user's personal life and simultaneously present an idealised view of how we would like to remember ourselves.

This illuminates why 'vlogs' are the most popular content that lifestyle bloggers produce. Vlogs are video collections that serve as audio-visual life documentaries and vehicles for communication and interaction online. According to Lindgren, vlogging is a form of participatory culture generally based on oral narratives built upon previous entries by the same person. This content style originated on YouTube but has evolved into a highly creative form of expression and communication whereby 'colonies of enthusiasts' unite and enable people to do things with each other in new ways (Rheingold, 1994). A paper by Aran et al (2013) utilised a data-driven approach to discover the different styles vloggers use to present themselves online, finding that 'real' and 'authentic' narrative content was most popular. The importance of 'relatable' self-presentation was further emphasised in a study by Burgess and Green (2009), which stated that conversational vlogging constitutes the majority of the most engaged with user-created videos—and preliminary research indicates that these trends have increased ever since. According to Speller (2017), the curated 'authentic' self-presentation of these individuals ultimately enables responders to imagine living a life they desire. Influencers subsequently

exemplify Whitmer's (2015) assertion that brands cultivate 'relationships', 'narratives', and 'experiences' that their consumers can internalise into their everyday due to social media opportunities for sharing.

In this vein, influencers are essentially creative entrepreneurs in their desire to shape economic preferences, which is thus resonant to how they appropriate visibility online, a notion this research explores. Central to such visibility is the management and growth of their personal brands. Studies have shown how influencers carefully aim to build awareness and audience growth (Marlow, 2006). However, "central to their success are the deep and intimate relationships between their personal brands and their followers" (Abidin & Ots 2016, p. 154), hence making them successful cultural intermediaries, a notion discussed herein.

Cultural Intermediaries and the Branded Self

The relationship between audiences and influencers stems from a traditional model of media intercourse: the 'two-step flow of communication'. In contrast to one-step flow theories, where mass media directly influence individuals, this theory suggests ideas flow from media to opinion leaders and subsequently travel to the general population (Katz, 1957). In the context of SNS, such capacity aligns with Bourdieu's definition of 'cultural intermediaries', namely as "sellers of real and symbolic goods that transfer knowledge, skills and expertise between producers and consumers" (1984, p. 365). While Bourdieu (1984) initially conceptualised 'new cultural intermediaries' as 'members of the petite bourgeoisie' who manage the middle class's accessibility to 'legitimate' culture, more recent literature focuses on how the group mediates norms, values, and behaviours to serve commercial interests (Moor, 2012). The "term's flexibility has been exacerbated by the proliferation" of Web 2.0 activities, such as "blogging, podcasting, citizen journalism and related practices that extend the curatorial capabilities traditionally limited to cultural intermediaries to a much larger group of individuals" (Morris,

2015, p. 449). Greenhalgh and Wessely subsequently argue that our modern social media economy has led to professionals becoming challenged by "lay experts" (2004, p. 205), whose visual representation of beauty, rather than education, is authenticating knowledge to followers due to their cultural mediation capacities.

This tension between an increasing "number of workers engaged in what might be considered cultural intermediary roles" prompted Maguire and Matthews to ask, "are we all cultural intermediaries now?" (2012, p. 551). Importantly, however, their study revealed that if someone is "only transmitting or passing on a cultural object, and not adding new meaning to it", they are not technically considered an intermediary (ibid). In turn, they suggest that cultural intermediaries "construct value, by framing how end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries – engage with goods, affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 552). Intermediaries are therefore "contextually specific actors who are involved in framing the interactions between cultural goods and those who encounter them, and they do so by virtue of the cultural legitimacy they accrue" (ibid). Bourdieu's theory evidently presents a valuable lens to explore the association between influencers and their followers, as in such a relationship, 'tastes' are "constructed around a dominant social group that operates as matchmaker between people and things" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Thus, the cultural intermediation of norms, values and behaviours distinguishes digital influencers from regular social media users, as their voices "have greater reach and legitimacy based upon claims to expertise" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p. 552).

In the context of influencing, such claims are marked by the production of aesthetic content and validated by large social media audiences. This content is often executed through 'travel vlogs' (where influencers take followers away with them on their holidays), 'unboxing'

segments (where the creator unboxes a product and reviews it in real-time), or 'shopping haul' videos (where influencers review a bag of goods, they purchased shopping) (Hutchinson, 2018). According to Hutchinson, these 'hyper-commercial practices' generate maximum exposure for commercially oriented content producers (2021, p. 36). These practices reinforce Arvidsson's (2005) assertion that the function of branding has little involvement with the actual products being sold but rather the meanings that consumers create around them.

Moreover, while traditional definitions of branding thus refer to processes of linking cultural meanings to products and services, contemporary academics currently believe the concept now equally relates to individuals (Arvidsson, 2005; Lair, et al., 2005; Marwick, 2010; Banet- Wee & Brooks, 2010; Weiser, 2012) This was evident in Senft's research on 'camgirls', which investigated a tendency for internet stars to utilise images and cross-linking "strategies to present themselves as coherent branded packages" to audiences (2013, p. 346). Senft conceptualised such literature as 'brand me discourse' in response to self-commodification trends, whereby "everyday' individuals access tools of cultural production to become profit-making" micro-celebrities online (ibid). According to Marwick, a microcelebrity "is a state of being famous to a niche group of people" (2013, p. 114). In a digital context, the term embodies "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (Senft, 2013, p. 346).

Dissimilar to mainstream industry stars, microcelebrities are built entirely upon one's online self-promotion and are hence independent of the resources and dictates of legacy media (Khamis, 2016, p. 8). Singularly focusing on 'the self' as a brand from which to "extract material value" is becoming increasingly ubiquitous (Abidin, 2015, p. 3). This is due to the visual nature of SNSs such as Instagram and YouTube, which act as platforms to feature products and services on mediums whereby phatic communion is expressed (Malinowski, 1923; Miller, 2008). The way influencers visually sell their lifestyles to followers is thus a

process that can be understood by Giddens as the “possession of desired goods in pursuit of artificially framed styles of life” (1991, p. 187). For influencers, such pursuit occurs through self-conscious meta-narratives constructed by images drawn from visual codes “for the ultimate goal to achieve cultural value and material profit” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). Influencers rely equally on ‘aesthetic dispositions’ and ‘appropriate forms of self-presentation’ to maintain digital influence on Instagram (Maguire & Mathews, 2010, p. 22). According to Mavroudis (2018), branding in this sense is more about the ‘overall profile,’ namely the impression viewers receive when scrolling through a blogger's feed, more than individual images.

In turn, this is a significant consideration when deciding on what content to post and create. Mavroudis (2018) suggests that choosing not to post ill-fitting photos, for example, functions as an act of ‘brand preservation’. Importantly, however, ‘curating and managing’ a public persona requires significant work and mirrors ‘entrepreneurial labour’ (Neff, et al., 2005) as this work challenges one to construct a specific mode of self-presentation. This is because influencer marketing privileges discourses of authenticity, a notion previously touched on and will now be explored in more depth.

Authenticity Appeals

Discourses of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ have proliferated in recent years against a backdrop of emergent technologies that have “ostensibly upended top-down media hierarchies and enabled consumer audiences to be active participants in the cultural circuit” (Baym & Burnett, 2009, p. 443). According to Duffy and Hund, appeals to authenticity are deeply ingrained within the influencer landscape, with social networks invoking ideals of “sincere expression and realness” (2019, p. 5). In these settings, content creators are ultimately “expected to project themselves authentically while carefully adhering to the tenets of online self-branding” (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 6). Paradoxical phrases within literature such as ‘calculated authenticity’

(Pooley, 2010) ‘calibrated amateurism’ (Abidin, 2016), ‘aspirational ordinariness’ (MacRae, 2017) and ‘curated imperfection’ (Turner, 2018) embody the “oft-strategic deployment of these appeals” (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 6). In their work, they discuss how influences have become both “promoters of consumption, and marshals of ‘authentic’ sociality and community” (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021, p. 2). Arriagada and Bishop explored this paradox through a study involving “in-depth interviews with 35 social media influencers and participant observation” of the advertising agencies that hire them (2021, p. 2). It was found that authenticity is attained through emotional performance and that influencers constantly “negotiate imperatives in the form of commercial and editorial decisions when interacting in commercial networks or exchanges with advertising agencies” (ibid).

The term “influencer imaginary” was subsequently coined to describe the way in which cultural producers justify moving between commerciality and authenticity, which influencers do through a “strategic performance showing themselves” as both “professionals and amateurs” (Arriagada & Bishop 2021, p. 3). The study ultimately found that the influencer “imaginary” brings to light how “individuals experience and justify the commodification of the self and forms of knowledge as subject to valuation in markets when they communicate their brands” (Bishop & Arrigada, 2021, p. 5). The study concluded that the “ideal type” of authenticity is communication that requires an ironic amount of hidden work (Duffy, 2017). Influencer authenticity is, then, a “product of subjectivities and practices aimed at constructing” effective relations with audiences to fundamentally present brands in as natural a manner as possible” (Bishop & Arrigada, 2021, p. 27).

Influencers who fail to achieve this are subject to “authenticity policing”, in which users call out individuals who defy societal norms of what is deemed genuine self-presentation (Duffy & Hund 2017, p. 6). This creates pressure for content creators to “project themselves

authentically" while carefully adhering to the structures of "online branding" (ibid). Additionally, according to Duffy and Hund (2019), there is a gendered "authenticity bind" in our contemporary cultural moment. Their findings show that female influencers take "considerable measures to stay within the perceived boundaries" or their authenticity ideal (Duffy & Hund, 2017, p. 6). Perhaps more importantly, however, the research found that their creative and promotional activities are "shaped by two competing demands: a desire to present themselves as real enough without stepping into territory that could be perceived as 'too real'" (ibid). In turn, the literature suggests authenticity as a highly gendered concept, whereby authenticity labour tracks with definitions of "emotional labour," in which feelings are "evoked or suppressed" along the lines of commercial femininity (Hochschild, 2012, p. 111). This is because women suffer more risks associated with visibility on social media platforms and subsequently their behaviours are more likely to be policed (Duffy & Hund, 2017). Due to this surveillance, many influencers equip the help of public relations professionals and agencies to assist in the perceived legitimacy of their influencer collaborations, which will now be discussed.

2.4 Public Relations, Agencies, and the Pursuit of Visibility

Constructing media legitimacy has played a prominent role in PR throughout modern history (Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Yoon, 2005; Fredriksson et al., 2013). The practise of public relations is traditionally defined as "building relationships with journalists as well as editors and offering content that suits their needs, and that might result in media coverage" (Zefass et al, 2016, p. 5). Thus, conventional 'normative' theories of public relations often centre on 'relationship-building', 'dialogic approaches', as well as 'two-way communication' (Harrigan, 2016). Grunig and Hunt (1984) established the dominant communication model of PR, divided into "classifications of one-way and two-way symmetrical communications where consensus is achieved, and mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics, or stakeholders, is the goal" (1984, p. 1). For decades, this has typically manifested in the form of 'full-service agencies' maintaining six departments: "account services, account planning, creative, finance and accounting, media buying, and production" (Childers et al, 2019, p. 5). However, recently, this has also expanded to include social media management.

The movement to social media was primarily perceived as ground-breaking by academics who claim that social media 'reinvented' PR to allow for enhanced dialogue between organisations and consumers (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The impact of social media in public relations has thus gained attention from scholars who examine its role in social networking (McAllister, 2012), the interaction types between organisations and the public (Taylor & Kent, 2014), the quality of online relationships (Chen et al., 2020), the use of social media in professional settings (Jiang et al., 2016), and crisis communication on social networking sites (Romenti et al., 2014). Additionally, Grunig argued that "the new digital media have dialogical, interactive, relational, and global properties that

make them perfectly suited for a strategic management paradigm of public relations" (2009, p. 1).

Specific literature has also explored the way in which social media actors have been utilised to improve public issue awareness and mobilise followers to a particular course of action (Freberf et al., 2011). This is based on the understanding that, by working alongside social media influencers, public relations professionals "can capture the attention of brand consumers and promote relevant and relatable content to clients" more strongly (Glucksman, 2017, p. 77). However, doing so requires strategies that "embrace the digital age" (Freberf et al., 2011, p. 19). The increasing clout of social media influencers has hence led to organisations focussing on building relations with them to maximise positive online media coverage. This is based on the understanding that a strong relationship with influencers can assist organisations to maximise both positive media coverage and public presence (Pang et al., 2016). Notably, this is symbiotic for the influencers as they utilise their relationships with PR professionals as a form of networking and avenue for increased exposure.

PR Networking Activities

Public relations in the digital age necessitate understanding regarding how "key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points" (Key, 2005, p. 19). PR professionals achieve this by utilising influencers to develop relationships between their clients and audiences through PR activities that target every stage of the consumer process. These activities involve organising brand partnerships as well as physical activities that enhance publicity. According to Abidin, such activities can include:

> "face-to-face meetups with followers regularly, formal events including those sponsored and organised by clients in conjunction with the launch of a new product or service, or parties (i.e., birthdays, anniversaries, festive occasions, meet & greet

sessions, photo-taking sessions) organised by influencers that are sponsored in kind by clients (i.e., venue, party favours, photography, makeup, wardrobe)" (2016, p. 16).

This work can be linked to Gandini's (2018) work on the reputation economy, which suggests that reputation is an 'aggregate asset' of social recognition. According to this literature, 'credit' is received in a social network, acting as a complementary element between economic transactions and social exchanges (ibid). The existence of a reputation economy forms the basis for why many PR professionals encourage their clients to engage in unpaid publicity activities, to increase their reputation as a form of expected return in the marketplace (Lin, 2017). When such a transaction is accepted, this suggests individuals will perform certain actions with the expectation that the action will be reciprocated in the future, whether that be through real compensation or simply good public relations (ibid). Notably, such a culture has led to some PR professionals seeking control in relationships to "produce 'value outcomes' and meet objectives for the organisations they work for" (Archer & Harringan, 2016, p. 1).

Archer and Harringan thereby characterise the industry as the 'pink-collar' precariat class, "situated on a grey-shaded scale between hobbyist and professional" (2016, p. 75). They state that large PR firms have had to 'rethink' influencer payments to remain relevant, signifying a shift in attitudes that suggest influencers should be compensated for their labour by organisations. The paper concludes that the "mask of relationship-building in the social media age" needs to be removed and the importance of payment to bloggers must be acknowledged for theories of PR to effectively develop (Archer & Harringan, 2016, p. 1). This outlook has paved way for the emergence of influencer platforms, which are often run by former communications practitioners to assist creators in receiving compensation for their content (ibid). The growth and operations of these influencer platforms warrant further exploration.

Growth of Influencer Platforms

There is no denying the power of influencers to shape public opinion. This has led to many directly engaging in 'financial and contractual relationships' with brands and product advertisers, or indirectly through intermediary agencies (Abidin & Ots, 2016). These third-party networks have manifested into 'influencer platforms': talent-like agencies that solely represent influencers by sourcing monetary opportunities for them and assisting with contract negotiations on digital marketing platforms (Woods, 2016). These agencies ultimately monetize access to bloggers (Keller & Fay, 2016), whereby the platform takes an agency fee for their services. The availability of influencers at these agencies has drastically increased due to expansion in influencer marketing budgets and the lucrative nature of the job for creators (Woods, 2016). However, research on the functions and operations of these agencies is albeit scarce in extant literature.

Most of the literature currently available compares influencer platforms to that of traditional PR agencies, "as they essentially make up the infrastructures that enable increased visibility by leveraging the collective contribution across technological infrastructures" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 5). This is because the platforms are believed to function as intermediaries that generate dialogue with target audiences to increase purchase potential, and act as "unseen infrastructures that enable increased visibility by leveraging the collective contribution across technological infrastructures" (ibid). However, according to Hutchinson it is more relevant to compare them with creative agencies, as they are located between content producers and platforms and technologies, "along with the collective publishing power of multiple online content producers" (2021, p. 5.).

The way in which these agencies operate can be displayed through Abidin's (2016) fieldwork. Agencies "usually propose 'briefs' or 'story boards' advising influencers on key points" that must be clearly addressed in their advertorials, for example, "highlights of a new

product, how prospective customers can make purchases, suggested narratives based on the Influencer's lifestyle for crafting believable advertorial" (Abidin, 2016, p. 156). Abidin shares that in this process influencer platforms often exert pressure on the influencers to ensure successful collaboration, "defining their contractual relationships within each campaign and client brand" (ibid). It is therefore important to note that "while the social influencer is in the process of increasing their cultural capital through their creative work with their audience", which acts as the first tier of cultural capital translation, "the digital agencies are conducting the second tier of economic translation" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 6). In doing so, they aim to create "genuine user engagement between the online content producer and the audiences" (ibid.).

Contrary to earlier literature which attributed influencer success to their followers as they "encourage people to actively foster an audience" (Marwick, 2015, p. 140), influencer platforms realise that creating genuine user engagement of this nature does not necessarily mean recruiting the most popular influencers. In fact, one of the major differences between influencer platforms and PR professionals is that agencies have shifted towards smaller, more engaged audiences, moving focus on micro-platformisation (Hutchinson, 2019). According to Hutchinson, agencies achieve such focus by "connecting brands and services with users through specialised, niche online content producers" (2019, p. 6). This is beneficial for micro-influencers, as while there is evidently a greater expectation for influencers to be paid for their labour, smaller creators still experience little compensation when working with brands directly, hoping that 'exposure' will lead to future paid work (Duffy, 2017). The notion of exposure highlights the value of visibility in the public relation and agency world, which will be discussed to close this chapter.

According to current literature, the overarching aim of public relations and social media agencies is to achieve visibility for clients, reflecting its cruciality within the social media economy (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Hearmn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Khamis et al., 2015; Senft, 2008). Literature that touts visibility as a key affordance of social media platforms confirms such demand, casting visibility as a route to "social connectivity, career windfall and other positive returns" (Duffy, 2019, p. 3). According to Capriotti (2009) this is because visibility impacts public opinion and contributes to reputation formation. Achieving visibility has thus become a key concern for PR agencies and thus "visibility tactics are often embedded into the production process itself" (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 35). From a social media perspective, markers of visibility are displayed in the form of vanity metrics[10], such as likes, favourites, comments, and shares – which publicly "indicate how well one is doing online, and the vain act of showing it off" (Rogers, 2018, p. 1). According to Childers et al (2019), other valuable metrics include 'impressions'[11] and 'engagement'[12] and PR professionals aim to increase both for a brand through influencer marketing. This is based on the premise that, when an influencer "tags a brand in a post, users can easily follow that brand to build a residual following, which is an approach not available in traditional advertising. Increasing the number of followers for a brand will allow for more people to see and engage with the brand's content in the future" (Childers et al., 2019, p. 12). The display of visibility through metrics, therefore, forms the basis of how PR professionals measure the success of an influencer campaign or collaboration.

However, the processes of managing, understanding, and acting on such visibility can exact a cost for the users involved. This process is defined by Abidin as visibility labour,

[10] Vanity Metrics Vanity is a term that captures the measurement and display of how well one is doing in the "success theatre" of social media (Rogers, 2018, p. 1)
[11] Impressions is "the number of people who viewed an ad" (Childers et al, 2019, p. 12)
[12] Engagement is "the number of interactions with a post such as likes or shares" (ibid.)

namely “the work enacted to flexibly demonstrate gradients of self-consciousness in digital or physical spaces depending on intention or circumstance for favourably ends” (2016, p. 87). Visibility labour is encouraged by PR Agencies and Influencer platforms and encompasses the work individuals do to be noticed - which is framed as a requirement of the neoliberal attention economy. Identifying these modes of visibility labour is crucial for research, as it offers insights into the practices agencies and influencer platforms routinely use to enhance the visibility of influencers for their clients and in turn, navigate their own social media economies.

This concept of visibility labour is reminiscent of Archer and Harringan’s (2016) research, who utilised the example of being invited to brand events, which despite being ‘fun’, simultaneously come with the expectation of posting in return to positively enhance the brand's publicity. According to Mavroudis (2018), influencers report these PR aspects of Instagram work as being labour-intensive through post-event practices such as i) thinking of content to post, ii) creating content, and iii) satisfying audiences by constantly stringing to maintain online popularity. Laborious activities that fall under the nature of public relations also include networking and sometimes engaging in general networking relationships with other influencers to enhance their reputation. This type of relationship-building also touches on the emotional work that influencers engage with behind the scenes when attending to PR activities. Mavroudis’ concept of “fame labour” represents such “work that cannot be easily observed or quantified by analytic software” (2020, p. 1). In this context, fame labour is the unique form of invisible labour associated with building public relations within microcelebrity culture relating to “feeling the rules” (Hoschschild, 1979, p .1).

Importantly, however, following these rules does not result in the same outcome for everyone which then highlights the hazards of limited visibility into systems (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2014). According to Thompson, this is because the “field of vision is no longer constrained by the spatial and temporal properties” but is “shaped by the distinctive properties

of communication media, by a range of social and technical considerations…and by the new types of interaction that these media make possible" (2005, p. 35). In turn, the concept of visibility within the public relations space is highly politicised, a fact made evident in mediated contexts (Hund, 2019). Thus, while the digital economy's guiding logics of attention and visibility "rouse social media users to put themselves out there" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 1), individuals experience digital visibility in profoundly uneven ways –determined by the organisational interests of the platform. Notably, this is important as access to working capital is a must for those operating in the media economy (Albarran, 2016) and I argue that such capital is endowed through exposure on Instagram. This brings forth my argument that there is a critical difference between visibility and exposure when it comes to public relations pursuits: visibility is the process of being seen, whereby exposure is a currency that is traded. I, therefore, believe that media literacy should be focusing on the currency of exposure, rather than visibility due to the nature of the financial economy, a framework that is further explored throughout the thesis.

2.5 Literature Review Conclusion

Just as social media is ever-changing, so too is the literature underlying its existence. For this chapter, we commenced introductory work to understand current perceptions of the landscape in which social media operates. These perspectives were explored by discussing the scholarly work pertaining to the key stakeholders within the social media economy, namely platforms, users, influencers, and agencies.

Regarding platforms, a review of extant literature confirmed that Instagram is constantly shifting, both in and of itself, and as part of a broader visual social media landscape, and such changes need to be studied to situate Instagram in past, present and future contexts (Leaver et al., 2020). Furthermore, whilst the 'media ecology' metaphor is most frequently utilised as the crux of social media analysis, I suggest that scholars should re-consider a 'social

media economy' instead. This is because, regardless of the changing relations between platforms, all SNSs ultimately rely on the production and consumption of goods and services and resonate more with a supply chain than a synergistic ecosystem. An example of such a process is evident through research highlighting how social media algorithms impose "certain valuations, meanings, and relationships to objects and actors with which we interact" (Cotter, 2018, p. 4). Thus, my literature review suggests that social media sites like Instagram reinforce offline hierarchies of social privilege, with "winners" being those with greater access to social, cultural, political, and economic resources – thus mirroring a capitalist-style economy.

Next, literature on users emphasised that the affordances defining an SNS have become increasingly fluid and thus so too has the way we use them. In turn, scholars face the unique challenge of investigating this rapidly moving phenomenon. In doing so, much literature deliberations whether such affordances fit within the political economy or cultural studies frameworks - questioning whether everyday social media users are inherently exploited or empowered by platforms. This review concluded with Terranova's (2000) assertion that productive activities can be described as both voluntary and subject to exploitation in some contexts. However, I argue that the social media economy has complicated the debate due to the way in which SNS are functioning as market consumers. This brings forth a gap in current literature, as few studies are segmenting users into different category types. Instead, research tends to focus on uses and gratification theories to understand why ordinary users engage with social media, rather than how they consume it. My thesis thereby aims to fill this chasm in attempt to understand the way in which different users contribute to the social media economy, and how this then impacts influencer culture.

Following on from this, as social media has become more disruptive and employed by businesses as an advertising tool, it is difficult to ignore the constant stream of messages distributed by influencers encouraging responders to act a certain way. Thus, most existing

literature on influencers utilises the theory of cultural intermediation to describe their processes, suggesting a blogger's self-presentation is worthy of branding due to successes on the "organizational sites and practices in which they inhabit and exercise power" (Garnham, 1995, p. 67). As peer-to-peer experiences are a key source of information, academics such as Greenhalgh and Wessely have expressed concerns over professionals becoming challenged by "lay experts", whose visual representation of 'beauty', rather than education, authenticate their knowledge to followers (2004, p. 205). While this creates an urgency to evaluate the trustworthiness of online personal accounts, I argue that it is just as vital for media scholars to map convolutions and practices in the primary stages of connective media's growth (van Dijck, 2013, p. 21), because growth patterns hold the potential to educate us on current and future power distributions and the modern exposure economy, something this thesis seeks to investigate.

Finally, my literature review demonstrates that most influencers now use influencer agencies and platforms to negotiate campaigns (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Research highlights how changes in the industry have led to the emergence of digital and social media strategies like influencer marketing, which has irrevocably transformed the PR landscape (Hackley & Kover, 2007; Wagler, 2013). Here, it became clear that demand for online visibility has increased in recent years in response to the prolific growth of social media content creators whose success relies on networked visibility. In turn, the digital environment constructs visibility in an "unabashedly data-driven way by financially incentivizing indexes of attention and reputation" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 3), and is thus a crucial concern for PR professionals. While "academics are attempting to make sense of how to achieve visibility" (Archer & Harrigan, p. 67), often "offering practitioners normative guidelines, and falling back on theories such as two-way symmetry and dialogue" (ibid), there is currently little literature about

the dynamics of social media agencies and the specific value brands and influencers are attaining - a gap this thesis aims to fills.

In sum, this literature review demonstrates that the use of SNSs is associated with access to social capital resources. On the surface, it is believed that the "greater one's visibility, the better; careers are borne, new social connections forged, and opportunities for status and professional success abound" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 1). However, to achieve visibility, one must be rewarded exposure, which I argue is a scarce currency within the social media economy. Thus, my research contributes to the field by offering a new lens to explore social media and the effective capacity of its stakeholders through the use of mainstream media economics and critical political economy theory. Whilst the former is primarily concerned with profit-maximalization and market efficiency, the latter is interested in such issues as power, exploitation, and labour. Combining these economic strands subsequently requires acknowledgement of the inherent tension between these dichotomies in order to adequately critique both approaches and integrate insights from each field. This allows for a demonstration of the way in which social media endows audiences with a wider range of access to production but simultaneously creates new tiers of social elitism due to inflation caused by exposure, a paradox my data collection methods will explore further.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The presence of digital media has "redefined the ways in which we come to express our identities, representations, routine undertakings, and experiences" (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 1). Digital technologies have allowed the average individual to "capture, obtain, and share information" innovatively (ibid). After constructing the theoretical framework for this research project in the literature review, the following chapter describes the research design I adopted to investigate the ways individuals engage in our social media economy. This is important because "our choice of research design, the research methodology and the theoretical framework that inform our research are governed by our values and, reciprocally, help shape these values" (Guillrmin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). It is, therefore, essential to establish that this investigation is situated in the field of social science, particularly media studies. As a humanities scholar by nature, my academic background primarily relies on qualitative research for its ability to allow scholars to explore the distinct practices of a particular user group. In the context of social media, qualitative research is beneficial as extends beyond tracking numerical statistics, such as follower counts or hashtags, to include a variety of input sources regarding specific communities or user segments (Bruns, 2012). Additionally, qualitative data can significantly assist in triangulating and augmenting quantitative results (ibid.).

Within this research space, the rise of digital technologies has made specific new methodological directions available to researchers. This trend has culminated in techniques that fall under the title of 'digital ethnography' - a method that represents real-life cultures by combining the defining features of digital media alongside elements of storytelling (Underberg & Zorn, 2013). According to Hine (2000, p. 50), undertaking ethnography does not require the ethnographer to physically travel to a field site as it is centred around an 'Internet Event' focused on a specific media happening. Projects employing digital ethnography utilise the

expressive and procedural potential of computer-based storytelling to delve beyond observing facts about other cultures to entering the experience of internet events themselves. Through such interactivity, this thesis employs a research design that relies on my unique position as a social media user and micro-influencer on Instagram to embed cultural context and interpretation into the 'internet event' of influencing within the current landscape. However, my digital ethnography is distinguished from other types of ethnographic studies as I am an individual already operating within the field of digital influence rather than "entering a social setting and getting to know the people involved in it" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 1), a notion further unpacked throughout this chapter.

Considering that this research is interested in understanding how an exposure economy drives influencer practices, my research design combines digital ethnographic data with several other collaborative qualitative methodologies, namely: i) participant observation in the influencer industry through various capacities ii) surveys with ordinary social media users; iii) semi-structured interviews with influencers, PR professionals, and social media agencies, and finally; iv) textual analysis on influencers' public social media posts through semiotic examinations of content. The following study also examines digital and non-digital practices based on the understanding that mediated communication on Instagram' complements' rather than 'replaces' face-to-face interaction (Boden & Molotch, 1994). These methodologies ultimately unpack the immersive and interactive qualities of digital practices and new social media economies in response to change, which will be unpacked with further detail herein.

3.1 Research Positionality

It is essential to reinforce early in this chapter that the researcher of this study is a participant rather than merely an observer of the field in focus (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In other words, throughout my fieldwork, I interpret, rather than simply observe, the 'everyday existence' of the social media economy from the subjective standpoint of both an everyday

social media user and a profit-earning digital influencer. For this reason, acknowledging my unique researcher positionality is imperative to consider my access as an insider and recognise my subjectivity that inevitably shapes the data informing the research.

According to Liamputtong, "autoethnography is a narrative that critiques the situatedness of self" within different "social contexts" (2009, p. 334). In such a qualitative method, researchers write about personal experiences within their social world to understand culture on a larger scale. Due to my research aim to unpack the visibility culture of our social media economy, a significant component of this thesis involves gaining perspectives on what influencers "do and what they think about what they do" (Beattie, 2017, p. 2). Gaining access to digital influencers on Instagram presented two options: to follow the frequented academic path and study the material that influencers post or, take advantage of my unique position by utilising my insider access to this specific cohort for more accurate, empirical results. As a result, I decided on the latter to discern "patterns of cultural experience" for the purpose of such research (Ellis et al, 2011 p. 277). This positionality is based on my identification as a lifestyle blogger, having a follower count of approximately 11,000 followers on Instagram at the time of writing, and utilising the app for both creative and commercial purposes. While there are varying ideas about what constitutes the different tiers of 'influence', this thesis follows the classification by Alassani and Goretz (2019), in which case I am considered a 'micro-influencer' as I have between 10–100k followers. This category of influencers sits above nano influencers on the scale, who have under 5k followers, but well below 'macro influencers' (100k–1 million followers) and 'super influencers' (>1 million).

While Bernazzani (2017) states that 'micro-influencers' are 'online opinion leaders' with a smaller audience, Chen (2016) highlights the benefit of this influencer type. Such benefits include the ability to maintain a real relationship with audiences due to the tendency

to be viewed similarly to ordinary people. As a result, micro-influencers are often also perceived as more authentic and genuine compared to macro and super influencer counterparts.

My position as a micro-influencer subsequently grants insider access to a specific cohort of the social media economy, as I frequently partake in a variety of influencer practices, such as content creation, both gifting and paid collaborations, and attending events. Additionally, my audience with whom I maintain 'real relationships' is another privileged access. For further context, I have many influencer friends within the industry and work alongside several influencer platforms and PR professionals as I monetise my own Instagram and profit from my content creation. This, therefore, provides "particular kinds of knowledge" and a "privileged access, with other groups also able to acquire that knowledge" (Merton, 1972, p. 11). In turn, the data presented in this methodology is from original fieldwork observations on the social media economy and informed by my personal experiences also interacting with these groups of influencers, followers, and PR agencies (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). From a research perspective, I believe my 'insider' knowledge is valuable as it allows me to spot data trends and elements that an external researcher may not notice. I acknowledge that this will enable me to be more directed in my research as I have prior knowledge of what to look at due to a conscious 'embeddedness' within the micro-events of digital influencing and empirical perspectives of the experience at large (Horst et al., 2012).

As my own experiences form a central part of this research, I must be reflexive herein regarding how I view the industry and the data that emerges from the individuals I engage with - particularly data that directly informs research insights. According to Madden (2010), reflexivity is an ethical practice that manages the influence of 'me' and the representation of 'them' in research settings. Adopting reflexivity is extremely important because, as illustrated above, my interpretations are affected by personal experiences and subjective exposure to the research field at hand. However, reflexivity as a methodological approach delves beyond the

idea of bias. McGhee et al. (2007) state that reflexivity is a quest of self-awareness to limit a researcher's effects on data. This is important because an ethnographer's identity shifts according to the place and time of research and one's relevant demographic and cultural affiliations (Narayan, 1993). In turn, reflexivity is necessary to prevent prior knowledge from distorting the researcher's perceptions of the data. Hertz (1997) suggests that a reflexive researcher should not merely report the 'facts' of their research but also actively construct interpretations while simultaneously questioning how these interpretations arose, a method I adopt throughout my entire research design.

In sum, while I may encounter tensions in the form of self-disclosure through the reflexive process (Haynes, 2012), I albeit believe that my scholarly positionality, as both a researcher and an influencer, can be understood as a 'resource' rather than a 'threat' (Gough & Madill, 2012), as I can provide invaluable access to knowledge that other academics may not attain. Thus, if managed reflexively, this position significantly enhances my digital ethnography in its entirety: a belief to be further attested.

3.2 Digital Ethnography

According to Denzin and Lincoln, online qualitative research is a "transdisciplinary and sometimes interdisciplinary field that crosscuts the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences" (2000, p. 7). Like most methodological approaches, ethnographic studies are critically reflexive and encompass a collection of different methods within qualitative research. Atkinson and Hammersley hereby define ethnography as:

> Participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions ... collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (2007, p. 3)

However, in the context of this thesis, ethnography is not limited to ethnographic accounts of the web and social networks. Instead, it is a collection of methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviewing, surveying, and textual analysis and, thus, is more closely aligned with digital ethnography; a methodology that represents “real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story” (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10). Digital ethnography was chosen for its ability to include ethnographic accounts of both offline and online groups and provide empirical tools to approach social research mainly through participant observation. It was also preferred to enhance understanding of “meanings and how they come to be assigned to technology and the cultural experiences that are enabled by the digital medium” (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017 p. 2). This is relevant as I am writing from a perspective shaped by experiencing an extended period on the Instagram platform as a micro-influencer, which has inevitably informed my complex understanding of the research site. I have been operating as a micro-influencer for the past seven years; however, I began ethnographically participating in social media influence for research purposes for this PhD in August 2017.

In the context of my thesis, this participation occurs within my digital ethnographic framework through two distinct phases. As per Emmerson et al, firstly, “the ethnographer enters into a social setting and gets to know people involved in it” (1995, p. 1) and, secondly, “the ethnographer writes down what they observe to be coded” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 11). These two steps are executed to understand and interpret everyday life and “analyse the broader contexts through which cultural texts and scripts are produced and reproduced” on social media (Horst et al., 2012, p. 87). The digital ethnographer then adopts “the role of processing the collection of texts and graphics made available on digital mediums and engages in making sense of the meanings portrayed through texts or graphics” (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 2). This is achieved by “reading the texts and by engaging in the texts through writing” (ibid.).

Grounded theory is hereby applied through a process of open-coding and refining conceptual categories to accurately analyse autoethnographic findings (Charmaz, 2006). This involves discerning cultural patterns by noting repeated feelings, experiences, and occurrences in field notes and conceptualising them into themes (Jorgenson, 2002), detailed later in this chapter. I created field notes by 'actively participating' (Strauss, 1987) within the technology and audience of Instagram, whereby a participant observation approach enabled the observation and collection of rich data. According to Strauss (1987), the initial collection of data resembles "memo writing, reminder notes, scattered 'bright ideas' … or just thinking aloud on paper for purposes of stimulation in order to see where that thinking will lead" (Strauss, 1987, p. 109). In this study, these memo notes are considered a "sophisticated method for observing the social interactions of the setting and recording" subsequent descriptive data (ibid). In the construction of my field notes, I adhere to four key criteria based on Emerson et al.'s (1995) study:

1. Data is intertwined with observation.
2. Attention is given to the native meanings of people under study.
3. Fieldnotes begin to form a broader account of people's lives.
4. Field notes detail the social and interactive processes of subjects.

Emerson et al. also state that, "after observing the social setting", the ethnographer should "frame those observations separately from their personal experience to offer subtle and complex understandings of others' lives, routines, and meanings" (1995, p. 13). It is now essential to emphasise that the process of collecting field notes through ethnographic participant observation is by no means objective (Fine, 2003). By constructing and describing experiences, I am personally observing; hence, my activity inevitably represents another culture that "develops a particular line of analysis or constructs a persuasive argument or engaging tale" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 213).

Nonetheless, digital ethnography is a practical tool to “provide deep insights" into different social groups (Creswell, 2012, p. 1). This is because it is believed that one must be engulfed in the landscape to analyse it accurately. The following few sections illustrate how this was specifically performed to explore the five fundamental stakeholders of the social media economy: platforms, users, influencers, and agencies.

A Walk-Through Method of the Instagram Platform

Media technologies are socio-technical systems that mediate cultural expression, interaction, and the production and circulation of information, goods, and services (Boczkowski, 2006). In turn, the ‘social, psychological, and cultural’ impacts of media messages have been long researched in communication studies (ibid.). Despite the prevalence of such research, few updated studies are wholly dedicated to describing the different features and functions of Instagram. In this vein, as the software application (app) of Instagram forms the primary case study of this PhD, it is essential to contextualise the mechanics and uses of the app at the time of writing by conducting a walk-through method.

Instagram is a popular iOS and Android mobile application currently used by over a billion people globally. The app allows users to upload photographs and videos, edit them through filters and modification tools provided by Instagram, share content with other Instagram users, and ‘like’, ‘comment’, ‘share’ or ‘save’ the content of others. Users can also ‘follow’ and ‘private message’ the individuals running these accounts, which can be private or publicly accessible, depending on the user’s security preference. While Instagram has a website whereby photos can be viewed, users cannot upload photographs or videos on a desktop (at the time of writing), and in turn, most activity occurs through the mobile application (Marwick, 2018). Instagram’s success has made it a rich research site for scholars interested in online “interaction, information dissemination, activism, and a plethora of other subjects” (Marwick, 2014, p. 1). The sheer volume of users, content and hashtags has made the site a favourite for

quantitative data analysis and “big data” number-crunching, but also qualitative research on how users can monetise the app, as well as the socio-cultural implications of such monetisation (ibid.). One such example is the work by Crystal Abidin (2013), who conducted a research project on the Influencer industry in Singapore, comprising a subset of interviews with three Influencers, 12 followers, and ethnographic fieldwork on Instagram collected between January 2015 and April 2016. A grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978) was adopted “in the thematic coding of all content” (Abidin, 2016, p. 1). Screengrabs featured were from the Instagram profiles of Influencers and “the feeds of their dedicated accounts and associated hashtags” (ibid). While Abidin’s work explores influencer commerce, the app operating in contemporary times is vastly different to when her study was conducted. This is based on various factors, one being the actual software updates that have occurred within the application, thus heightening the need for a walkthrough method of the app as it currently stands.

The walkthrough is a foundation for user-centred research that identifies how users engage with and appropriate app technology. It is a research technique “grounded in a combination of science and technology studies” situated within cultural studies, in which researchers critically analyse a given application platform (Light et al., 2016, p. 1). The method involves establishing an app’s expected use “environment by identifying and describing its vision, operating model, and modes of governance” (ibid). Typical walkthrough techniques subsequently step through the various stages of app registration and entry systematically and forensically regarding everyday ‘follower’ and ‘influencer’ use (ibid.). The walkthrough method is a highly valuable form of research for this study because it establishes a foundational corpus of data that can be built upon to establish a more detailed analysis of Instagram’s “intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings, implied ideal users, and uses” in different contexts (Light et al., 2016, p. 1.). In this vein, participant observation is also a crucial component of exploring the technological platform of Instagram as a whole. Participant

observation-sourced data is recorded in field diaries. I systematically record any observations that occur within my use of the app and analyse such recordings to provide an account of what was happening at that moment. These observations are crucial to the success of the walk-through method, as they enable me as a researcher to observe and record happenings, while the field notes assist in developing the research questions.

In sum, the ethnographic walk-through method is a significant research tool for collecting data on the ever-changing social media economy. It allows for fluid interpretation and can update current literature regarding how the app stands currently. However, it is essential to know that the walk-through method can only examine the platform from a personal standpoint. This is important as, according to Dourish & Gomez Cruz, the meaning of "cultural things are not fixed but ongoingly produced by people in the ways in which they talk about, appeal to, explain, contest, celebrate, and debate the significance and values of those things" (2018, p. 5). Thus, this research design sets to "unpack; those practices by which meanings are produced at particular times and in particular places" (ibid.). To do so, it is imperative to examine the other everyday users engaging with the app. Such data was thus obtained through surveys.

Exploring Everyday Users through Surveys

Survey research employs scientific method applications by critically analysing source materials through scraping and interpreting data and arriving at 'predictions' (Salaria, 2012). The fundamental purposes of such research include "describing a population, identifying characteristics of a group, describing attributes and characteristics of research interest, explaining a phenomenon, or explaining how variables are related" (Buchanan & Hvizdak, 2009, p.37). In turn, the method is helpful for my study on social media users as it can harness the rich potential of qualitative data and provide much to offer as a media researcher, especially given the now widely available online delivery options, such as Google forms, which were

utilised for this project (Braun, 2020). Online surveys, also known as web or internet surveys, have emerged as highly convenient research tools that enable “researchers to create and deliver surveys to subjects/participants in a convenient, expeditious manner, and produce results in synchronous time, so respondents and researchers can watch data results being compiled instantaneously” (Buchanan & Hvizdak, 2009, p. 37). Many disciplines and professions have embraced these technologies as a sound option for conducting formal survey research, and informal questionnaires. This option is fundamentally a by-product of Web 2.0 services, namely the provision of tools to interact, edit, contribute, and socialise, and promote a user-centred “model of creation and flow of information” (ibid.). While not initially planned, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis made the possibility of a volume of in-person interviews nearly impossible. Thus, online surveys became a crucial component of my digital ethnography and were chosen to gain a broad insight into ordinary online users (See Appendix).

The overall aim of my surveys was to discover what roles users play in trading exposure within the social media economy. As this is quite a complex examination, creating my survey required question diversity. According to Evans and Mathur, online surveys should include “dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions, scales, multimedia questions, single-response and multiple-response questions, and open-ended questions” (2005, p. 199). My questionnaire featured 42 questions, including multiple-choice, short answer, and long answer questions. Survey items “collected data on a range of related topics” (ibid), such as how much time users spend on Instagram, what type of content they upload, what they think of influencers and influencer marketing, and how social media makes them feel in general. The data was pivotal as it allowed me to code the findings thematically, drawing common themes and allowing a grouping of similar responses into different categories of users, drawing inspiration from marketing studies on customer segmentation. The estimated survey completion time was 15–20 minutes based on pilot testing by the research team.

A significant strength of this methodology was the online survey's ability for "speed and timely" responses. According to Mathur (2005), online surveys can be administered time-efficiently, minimising the period between survey creation and data collection, which was necessary at the stage of my research, as surveys were only conducted in June 2021. Moreover, 'convenience' was a further incentive, as this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic when travel and face-to-face interaction options were scarce and limited. According to Ali et al., studies like these emphasise the utility of social media platforms as a "tool to recruit large and diverse samples of survey respondents efficiently and effectively, especially during rapidly evolving global or regional crises when other methods of recruitment are no longer safe, practical, economically feasible, or even legal" (2020, p. 6). The survey approach thereby helpful as respondents could answer at a convenient time for themselves while adhering to government restrictions (ibid.). This highlights the benefits of online surveys in general because, as Hogg (2003) notes, a respondent can take an online survey whenever convenient instead of being hassled at an untimely moment.

Regarding survey distribution, I sought to follow the advice of Simsek and Veiga (2001) that, in order to enhance response rates and data quality, researchers should establish trust with respondents by, in the survey introduction, explaining the study purpose, respondent selection processes, how data will be utilised and who can access such data. To recruit audiences, on June 28, 2021, I henceforth uploaded a post on my personal Instagram story with a short introductory message (Swoboda et al., 1997) asking if anyone was interested in participating in a survey for my PhD research on Instagram. The copy featured over a screenshot of my personal Instagram feed at the time and read:

> Hi, all. So, I am in my final stages of my PhD and have a few gaps in my research findings that I cannot currently fill via interviews due to the Sydney Lockdowns. I am therefore distributing online surveys instead and need your help. In a nutshell, my thesis

> is on the monetisation of digital influencers and the economics of social media in its entirety. If you identify as a social media user who does not make money from your usage of Instagram, I would appreciate it if you could fill out a simple survey which is estimated to take 15-20 minutes of your time. I cannot promise you much in return besides the fact that your responses will assist in a project that will contribute much-needed, recent literature about the ever-changing social media landscape – which will hopefully then assist in the creation of legislation that will make Instagram a more positive space for all of us. These surveys are also anonymous, so you can be as honest as you like. Your data will not be stored or utilised for other reasons besides this research project.

Through delivering this message, I wanted to emphasise that anyone who was interested in completing the survey would remain completely anonymous and that there was no incentive to fill out the survey other than they would be contributing to a research project that may potentially assist in knowledge regarding the social media landscape. I included a 'swipe up link' that diverted users directly to my Google form if they were interested in participating. These Instagram stories garnered a response of 142 participants (Figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1 - Survey Age Breakdown

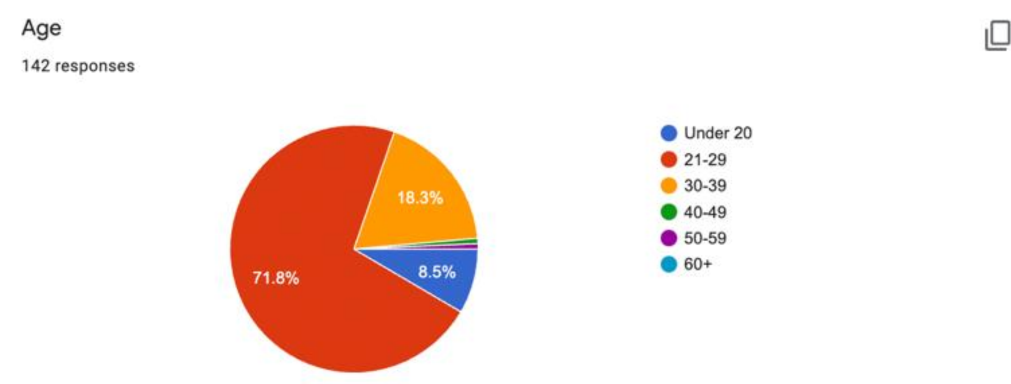
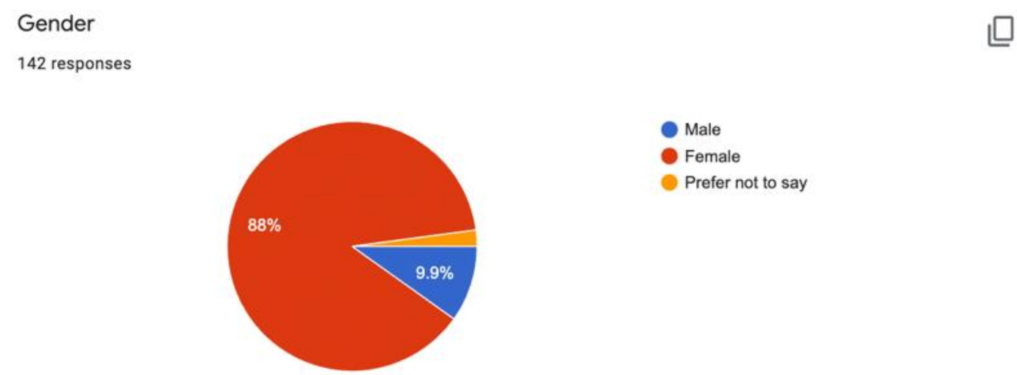


Figure 2 - Survey Gender Breakdown



The number of individuals who saw the survey or its URL on my Instagram stories but declined to participate is also known due to the Instagram Insights feature. Here, 'Insights' show that out of the 543 accounts this Instagram story reached, 26% completed it. It must, at this moment, be acknowledged that since most of my respondents were Sydney-based and at the time, in a harsh lockdown, users may have had more free time and thus were more willing to participate. Nonetheless, in the scheme of research methodologies, 142 participants is not a significantly large number. However, Sandelowski views a sample size as adequate so long as the study is "small enough to manage and the material/ data collected" is "large enough to provide a new and richly textured understanding of experience or the phenomenon under enquiry" (1995, p. 183).

Moreover, it is essential to note that "by its nature, the internet poses a unique set of problems in guaranteeing a random sample of respondents" (Kaye & Johnson, 1999, p. 325), which was apparent in this research study. While the method by which I distributed my survey is unconventional in research projects, I believe the Instagram story method I utilised sits closest to the traditional form of "controlled sampling" and is thus in line with Evans and Mathur's (2005) conceptualisation as sampling that distributes to databases to 'develop opt-in

mailing lists' of their customers. Here, it can be argued that utilising my database of Instagram followers, allowing them to "opt-in", enabled me to receive feedback but also "enhance their relationships" by showing that I was interested in "customer", or in this case follower, "opinions" (Evans and Marthur, 2005, p. 6). While this allowed me to reach a segment of active social media users, perhaps assisting my response rate, a key disadvantage of this type of internet survey distribution was "skewed attributes of internet population" (Evans & Marthur, 2005, p. 7). As evidenced in Figures 1 and 2 above, the demographics of my respondents are significantly skewed, with 71.8% sitting in the 21–29-year-old categories and 88% of respondents being female by gender. Moreover, 95% of the audience participating in this survey were from Australia, with 85% from Sydney. While these figures highlight an uneven representation of the Australian population, it is albeit arguably reflective of the social media users who are most active in this Instagram economy in Sydney, NSW. Hence, the results are still valuable to my research.

Other limitations regarding this method align with Scriven and Smith-Ferrier's concerns regarding the "privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity concerns of respondents, including the perception of survey invitations as spam or containing viruses and the level of data security, as all having a possible impact on data quality and response rates" (2003, p. 95). Here, it is suggested that researchers should "clearly understand the possibilities for subject identification in online survey work and be cautious when collecting sensitive data on such sites" (ibid). This became a potential problem, as my Instagram Business account was activated, which, while necessary to utilise the 'swipe up' function, also made me privy to which of my followers saw my story. However, I navigated this by consciously avoiding checking this beyond a quantitative level. I also did not personally ask anyone I knew to fill in the survey, nor did I send the link to anyone beyond the Instagram story uploaded to my public audience. I also followed Sveninggson's (2003) "recommendations for researchers concerning

the continuum of public-private sites and sensitive-non-sensitive data" to assist researchers in "understanding the level of risk to subjects and participants" (Buchanan & Hvizdak , 2009, p. 39). Here, social media sits into the category of "entertainment or hobby-based data on a public newsgroup", which according to their study, typically "falls into the public, non-sensitive quadrant" and thus, does not pose a significant concern (Sveninggson, 2003, p. 39).

Furthermore, while I acknowledge my privileged position to have a space where I could advertise to a public audience of >10k Instagram users, I again argue that the beneficial results obtained outweigh any conflicts of interest. This is mainly due to the methodological restrictions I faced due to Covid-19. The fact is that audiences filled out the survey on their own accord and at their discretion, and the results subsequently received were rich in quantitative and qualitative data. Importantly, however, I did not receive responses from influencers or PR professionals due to my survey call-out. Instead, I decided to contact these stakeholders individually and have in-depth, more personalised conversations, which is further explored in the next section.

Investigating Influencers and Agencies through Semi-structured Interviews

Despite having my own 'micro influencer' experience, I acknowledge that my perception of the landscape is biased in that my feelings and practices differ from others, particularly those with differing follower counts. For this reason, it was imperative to gain the opinions of external players within the social media economy, particularly through speaking to influencers and agency professionals.

Interviews define conversations with purpose and function as "one of the most effective techniques for conducting a systematic social enquiry" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 14). My digital ethnography is thus inclusive of a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews as a methodological tool to gain further knowledge of the practices digital influences and influencer platforms engage with and, understand how they identify within broader socio-cultural contexts

from both an influencer and industry level (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This form of face-to-face insight is crucial for my research because offline empirical perspectives are important to combine with the online data gathered through the other components of my digital ethnography. Additionally, examining personal experiences or merely Instagram profiles without discussing underlying motives or contexts would provide a limited understanding of practices and, simultaneously, problematised identification of public/private disparities within our social media economy (Kozinets, 2015 p. 1999). In contrast, semi-structured interviews enable open discussions that can be guided towards appropriate areas (ibid).

Thus, instead of adhering to a script of prepared questions, I identified themes or issues I sought to cover in the interview sessions beforehand and created loose questions to guide the interviews (see Appendix). This is because a researcher's role within a semi-structured interview is "not to inhibit the discovery of new areas but to focus on the discussion topic, as per the research questions and the emerging themes from the ethnography" (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 183). Due to such potential for fluidity, it is argued that semi-structured interviews were more appropriate than other qualitative methods such as focus groups due to the competitive nature of the industry in focus. More specifically, it was believed that respondents may not have divulged unique Instagram practices in front of competing bloggers or agencies, and I did not want individuals to alter perspectives following the opinions of other participants.

To attract quality research participants, I emailed specific influencers who both fit my criteria and had their email addresses displayed in the 'bio' [biographical note] of their public Instagram profiles. I chose not to interview any influencers I knew or followed personally to avoid bias, conflicts of interest, and potentially tainted responses. My email contact technique did not breach privacy or spam legislation as I only directly reached out to participants who were classified as professional influencers (either nano, micro, or macro —so long as they participated in sponsored posts) and as mentioned, had their emails publicly available on their

profile to be contacted by strangers. Similarly, I avoided and minimised real/perceived coercion to participate by not interviewing any influencer friends or individuals I follow from my personal account. In terms of my sample demographic, the age range was not exclusive, but most respondents in my study were between 21 and 30 years old. This is reflective of the influencer landscape in Australia, as according to a survey by Statistica in 2019: 31% of influencers creating sponsored posts in Australia sat between the ages of 18 and 24; 54% were between the ages of 25 to 34, and 11% were aged between 35 and 49. Additionally, 85% of Australian influencers were women (Gjorgievska, 2022).

Additionally, I ensured all participants were over 18 years old and followed the criterion that stated that all subjects must obtain over 3,000 followers to fit my classification as an 'influencer'. As most of this research is ethnographic, I limited my sample size to 15 influencers who identify as 'lifestyle bloggers' rather than exploring an array of different niches. This is because lifestyle bloggers are a significant case study for research on digital influence as such individuals are popularly consumed as 'endorsements of distinction' by both brands and audiences alike (Abidin, 2013). Furthermore, these bloggers post about a broad range of products and services that fall under fashion, fitness, beauty, and travel and thus, their content is well versed. In this vein, I am particularly interested in them as a case study because of their ability to sell their 'lifestyles' to followers through a series of self-conscious meta-narratives constructed by images drawn from visual codes "for the ultimate goal to achieve cultural value and material profit" (Hearn, 2008, p. 198), as this makes them a rich source of analysis.

Interviews with these lifestyle bloggers were conducted over Zoom (due to the impact that Covid-19 had on domestic and international travel during the research period of this project) within the period of November 2019 and July 2020. It was vital for me to gather a variety of influencers from different locations within Australia to interview for this project to

receive a well-rounded pool of opinions and results; however, like my survey results, the majority reside in Sydney, Gold Coast or Melbourne. This is most likely due to fact that most industry events and opportunities for social media influencers currently occur on the East Coast of Australia.

Similarly, the agency professionals chosen for this study were contacted via email, most of which were obtained via a snowball method—a nonprobability sampling technique where present study subjects recruit future respondents through their own networks and acquaintances (Goodman, 1961). Here, influencers connected me to them through their networks, or I contacted professionals based on my own network. Despite businesses experiencing hardship due to the pandemic, I recruited four respondents who represented differing components of the industry: a Sydney-based hair salon owner (Small Business Owner Respondent), who performs PR in-house, a national food manufacturing business CEO (CEO Respondent), who utilises an agency to deal with his influencer marketing, and two PR professionals—one PR Agency Owner (PR Agent Respondent) and a Content Manager from the social media agency VAMP (Influencer Platform Respondent). While these industry representatives had nuanced ways in which they intersected with the social media economy, I ensured all utilised Instagram and influencer advertising as a crucial component of their business. These representatives were based between Sydney, Gold Coast, Melbourne, and Adelaide, thus providing diversity in location. They were chosen to participate in interviews due to their ability to offer industry perspectives and professional views beyond my own. Additionally, I specifically chose to have one interviewee who performs their own PR in-house to have a point of comparison to contrast with the client who works with an agency. This was to provide a nuanced perspective of working with agencies for influencer collaborations. These interviews were also conducted over Zoom and, like the influencer interviews, were transcribed and underwent a process of grounded theory coding analysis.

Significantly, the success of the semi-structured interview method ultimately depends on a distinguished set of themes to discuss. Each interview allowed for discoveries that built upon my established understanding of the research project. Thus, by the conclusion of the interview process, I was able to obtain sufficient data to understand the practices in which influencers and agencies engage within their pursuits for visibility. Upon analysing the transcripts, however, it became evident that I required a more profound understanding of how these practices manifest online through text, thus calling for further analysis.

Textual Analysis of Social Media Content

Contemporary social science is influenced by the idea that the world is socially constructed (Fairclough, 2003). Many social constructivism theories thereby emphasise texts' role in constructing the social world (ibid). According to Bainbridge (2008), when performing analysis on a text, researchers essentially make an educated guess at the most likely interpretations made of that text. Textual analysis is thus a methodology that searches "for the evidence people produce in their everyday lives" regarding "how they make sense of the world" (McKee, 2014, p. 1). It is a valuable tool for social research, provided it is used in conjunction with other analysis methods (Fairclough, 2003).

This thesis utilises textual analysis to analyse the role of influencers in the social media economy and locate their practices through the content they produce and how they make sense of the world. This data was collected in three periods. All posts included were taken from public Instagram accounts and analysed with written permission, coded through an 'inductive approach' for analysing 'qualitative evaluation data', and informed by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Selected Instagram posts underwent substantive coding during this process, extracting data from my sample. Data was then subjected to open coding to identify key emerging themes and core categories. Lastly, all coding was analysed via axial coding until the core and related concepts emerged upon saturation. To facilitate such

a complex coding process, posts were textually summarised, coded with keywords for content, quantitatively examined in terms of 'comments' and 'likes', and saved with a description of the post and which themes were visible. The aim here is to identify central themes in the data and demonstrate the influencer practices that organically occur through visual imagery and discourse. A subset was then selected for analysis and individually coded utilising textual analysis.

Methods of textual analysis have been performed successfully on various social media platforms, such as Papacharissi (2012) in her study of performative self-presentation on Twitter trending topics. In this study, the research team worked with a sample of 1,798 tweets and manually coded for descriptive features such as replies and hashtags and specific performative strategies that were operationalised based on concepts drawn from performance theory. Papacharissi undertook discourse analysis on the same sample, identifying patterns and repetitions in the text. Through the study alone, it was "concluded that 'play' is a primary performative strategy on Twitter' (Marwick, 2013 p. 6), suggesting that individuals confronted with a restricted stage for "self-presentation seek to overcome expressive restrictions through imaginative strategies that include play" (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 10). In studies such as these, qualitative textual analysis is utilised to "unearth subtleties of interaction" on social media, "which may have been missed using more quantitative methods" (ibid) - hence, why I am employing it for this research project.

However, it is worth noting that textual analysis is inevitably selective as in any analysis, "we choose to ask certain questions about social events and texts, and no other possible questions" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 14). Additionally, our ability to know what 'there' is, is "inevitability limited and partial, and the questions we ask arise from motivations that go beyond what is 'there'" (ibid.). However, I believe that the benefits of textual analysis are reflected through its positioning within the tradition of 'critical social science'—social science

motivated by the aim of providing a scientific basis for critical questioning of social life in both moral and political terms (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Morrow 1994). In turn, if textual analysis is employed with grounded theory, it is helpful for empirically showcasing influencer practices and the types of content commonly created in the social media economy.

Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded Theory forms the final component of my digital ethnography. This method combines established and emerging concepts to construct theoretical frameworks that stem from the research data (Lawrence, & Tar, 2013). By adopting grounded theory, researchers “direct, manage, and streamline data collection and construct an original analysis of your data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Here, data is subjected to comprehensive comparative analysis that shifts studying concrete realities to generating conceptual understandings (ibid). By constructing an initial analysis of the collected data, the researcher limits the potential to impose existing theoretical or personal prejudices onto the research and allows the framework to be grounded within the data (ibid).

The aforementioned techniques and research tools outline how I collect raw field data that facilitates an understanding to address my core research questions at hand. In any ethnographic study, however, time is spent daily learning emerging issues, developing ideas and interpretations to pursue a further qualitative “investigation, and exploring the different types of material gathered” (Tacchi et al., 2003, p. 1). Thus, to assist in analysing relevant themes and issues from the collected data, grounded theory is applied to the methodology in its entirety through the practical grounded theory method defined by Charmaz (2006) as an inductive, comparative, iterative, and interactive method. This decision was based on the intuitive nature of Charmaz’s guide, which allows for the emergence of frameworks yet remains dynamic to incorporate new data concepts. This is summarised in the following steps i) decide on the research problem 2) decide on initial coding and data collection 3) create

tentative categories through initial memos, 4) collect data with focussed coding, 5) refine conceptual categories through advanced memos, 6) seek new data through theoretical sampling 7) write the first draft (Charmaz, 2006). Utilising the research problem as a starting point, the researcher combines the "sensitising concepts of the research problem with the sensitising concepts to view the research project from a disciplinary perspective, i.e., media and culture" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). These concepts "guide the data collection in the first instance and are then converted into the initial coding using active incidents" (ibid). Active incidents "represent an observation as action and allow the researcher to think analytically about them" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). The researcher "then writes memos to raise these initial codes into tentative categories by grouping and comparing the emerging concepts" (ibid). This leads to another data collection period to enable the categories to form into focused codes or conceptual categories organically. Here "coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data" as the crucial phase leads directly "to developing theoretical categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). These categories are "tested against the research problem to gather further research data to write the first draft of the findings" (ibid).

Grounded theory, therefore, ultimately fuses all mixed methods and enables the extraction of key concepts at each stage of the research process to utilise them as the basis for the following research method, thus forming a holistic qualitative research study. Most importantly, however, as Charmaz (2006) suggests, applying grounded theory enables a logical, consistent data collection that fundamentally helps produce an idea. This has manifested through The Exposure Economy Model (EEM), which is further explored throughout my findings and discussion chapters.

3.3 Methodology Limitations

Instagram is a vibrant site for analysis, with a diverse array of stakeholders that operate cohesively. As quantitative studies utilise statistics and numbers to identify connections and networks to interpret them 'objectively', qualitative research was chosen for its ability to place technology, in this case, social media, into specific social contexts (Street, 1994). One component of ethnographic practice that renders it particularly useful for studying the ever-changing social media economy is its "attentiveness to the processes by which inert objects are enlivened" (Dourish & Gomez Cruz, 2018, p. 5). Importantly, however, a core challenge for a digital ethnographer within contemporary social media landscapes is understanding the ever-changing relationship between humans and technology. This was raised throughout my methodology, as Instagram continuously changed its functions and features throughout my research. For this reason, it was challenging to set down everything I witnessed as a researcher (Paterson, 2008). Another limitation of digital ethnography I experienced can be illustrated through Puijk's assertion that "communication is withheld from the observer" in some online contexts "as communication is withdrawn to the silence of the computer screen instead of being displayed in face-to-face interaction" (2008, p. 5). This limitation was heightened due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which made my research an online-only domain, and, thus, I was forced to rely on my ability to "define essential properties, assumptions, relationships and processes" while providing sufficient actual data to demonstrate how my analysis was grounded in "lived" experience (Charmaz, 2020, p. 218).

Despite these concerns, specific measures were implemented to avoid limitations affecting the research. It is believed that the most crucial component of digital ethnography is its methodological triangulation that secures differing perspectives of the object under investigation (Stevenson, 2010). Therefore, I combined digital ethnography with surveys,

semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis to provide holistic, reflexive findings on the stakeholders of my research study, namely platforms, users, influencers, and agencies. These qualitative methods provided a rich source of data that enabled me to delve beyond description alone. Instead, I was able to explore user presumptions about individual technologies and distinguish social media activities from strategic practice, revealing much about its social norms and the economic and cultural impacts of the exposure economy.

Chapter 3 Conclusion

In sum, ethnographic approaches like the digital ethnography established in this chapter provide tools for unearthing ways that data and narratives are intrinsically bound. As Instagram is a complex network with countless users, collecting singular forms of data would not have been adequate for studying the platform's use beyond simple queries. Therefore, the methodology described here is useful because the field is a combination of digital and 'real-life' activity, despite its online conduction, and is hence appropriate for understanding digital influencer practices and the exposure economy in its entirety. Moreover, I argue that my unique position as both an 'influencer' and 'researcher' was valuable because it enabled an insider perspective of the industry and functioned as a positive and creative route to produce academic knowledge. The findings in this thesis are thereby crucial for not only providing insights that would otherwise take a prolonged period of fieldwork to comprehend (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 157) but contributing individual experience to an existing body of literature lacking a personal standpoint. Additionally, this digital ethnography can serve as a foundation for further user-centred research that may seek to identify how social media economy stakeholders and appropriate app technology for personal or commercial purposes in different contexts. Thus, my own context will be displayed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Digital Ethnography Data

The previous chapter covers my research methodology design, which explores the social media practices that individuals engage with in their pursuit, or, in some cases, avoidance of visibility. Chapter 4 presents the findings from this digital ethnography by showcasing the data collected from the respective walk-through method, electronic surveys, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis, all of which were analysed through grounded theory. Here, research was conducted on four key stakeholders within the exposure economy: i) platforms, ii) users, iii) influencers, and iv) agencies. This research included a qualitative investigation of the currency traded between all actors and an exploration of why differing agents experience digital visibility in uneven manners. The following chapter is sectioned into the findings on these four stakeholders and evaluates the mobility of digital practices that occur within and through multiple online-offline places.

My first set of findings ethnographically describes how users empirically navigate the Instagram platform on an everyday level through a walk-through method to contextualise the app and highlight the structures in which it currently operates. Next, the way users experience the app, and its associated cultures, are considered by utilising the data extracted from 142 online survey responses regarding user experiences. Finally, influencer and agency practices are explored through the findings gathered from semi-structured interviews to understand the strategic practices they engage with to maintain and increase exposure. Throughout this presentation of findings, participant observation and autoethnography reflections sporadically feature when appropriate, in conjunction with textual analysis to delve beyond observing facts about other cultures, to actually entering the internet events myself (Abidin, 2020). The results from this research design thus implicitly and explicitly rely on my position as a micro digital influencer to embed personal and cultural context into digital influencing on Instagram.

4.1 Platforms

Platforms are “automated architectures, models, and activities” that introduce new mechanisms in social life through a “complex interplay between technical architectures, business models, and mass user activity” (van Dijck & Poell, 2018, p.1). In the social media world, platforms manifest through software applications (apps), which in technical terms, are computer programs specifically designed to run on mobile devices. This technology has played a pivotal role in shaping the social media economy, undergoing significant socio-cultural and economic transformation across different domains. As discussed in Chapter 2, this is because each new software introduced to the economy has its specific mix of “styles, grammars, and logics, which contribute to what is possible, through the affordances provided, adapted and appropriated" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257).

In the context of Instagram, for instance, the application paved the way for a new era of digital influencer culture and inadvertently reconfigured the economics of how we monetise social media in its entirety. This is because the platform was reappropriated from a creative space for posting ‘instant’ photos to a carefully curated commercial marketplace with the potential to be monetised. Despite the developers' intended creative uses when building Instagram, emergent practices that employ its technical and commutative possibilities have proliferated since its arrival. According to Gibbs et al. (2015), these practices have ultimately shaped both its end users' mediated practices and communicative habits. This chapter explores these practices by systematically and forensically deploying the walk-through technique to step through the distinct stages of the app’s everyday use. Exploring the affordances of the Instagram app in this manner is crucial to contextualising how the platform is utilised and the role it plays in the social media economy.

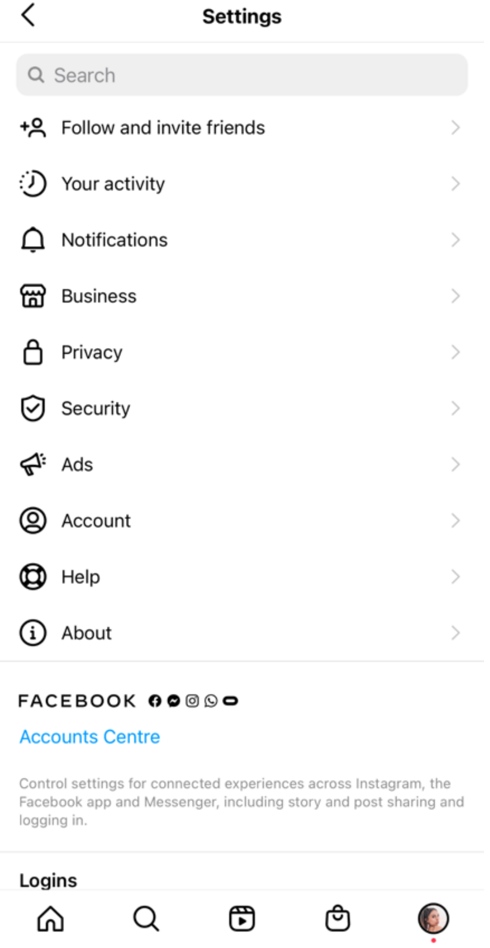
Walk Through the Instagram App

Abidin and Leaver broadly define Instagram as a series of programs and algorithms: "a gigantic database of images, videos, captions comments, geolocation tags, location tags, likes and emojis" (2020, p.g.14). However, this is a relatively modest definition that does not encapsulate the ever-changing affordances and features of Instagram as it currently stands. In turn, I contextualise the platform's appearance and functionality through a walk-through method by establishing the "app's environment of expected use, identifying, and describing its vision, operating model, and modes of governance" (Light et al., 2018, p. 1). This method is grounded in a "combination of science and technology studies with cultural studies, through which researchers can perform a critical analysis" (ibid). In the context of this thesis, the version of Instagram analysed was 261.0 which is released worldwide and accessed within Sydney, Australia. Additionally, the images displayed in the walk-through method have been taken from my personal Instagram to provide empirical context without breaching privacy concerns. They are not analysed in this chapter.

Sign up and Settings

The settings interface draws upon Abidin and Leaver's (2020) assertion that Instagram is fundamentally a collection of personal data. This interface "enacts rules to allow different apps, platforms, and partners to access, add, or remove data from the Instagram database" (Abidin et al, 2020, p. 14). Before a user can begin operating the app, Instagram will ask them to create a free account. Users are provided with the option to sign up using an existing Facebook account or email address. Individuals then select a unique username and password and are prompted to follow friends on Instagram who are within their current Facebook network, signifying cross-platform convergence between the applications (Jenkins, 2008). Users can do this immediately or skip through the process and return later. The settings interface is accessible to users when viewing their profile and is located at the top right-hand side of the screen.

Figure 3 - Screenshot of the Settings Interface



As displayed in Figure 3, users can alter their profile settings; check their 'archived' posts and stories (namely content that they have purposely hidden from their public profile); view their content insights if they are a business account (the engagement metrics they received from each published form of content); check their past activity (for example, what they have searched or engaged with previously); browse their 'saved' photos (photos they have saved through the in-built feature on the app); toggle their 'close friends' list (a list of people users can select to show private stories[13] to); and 'discover people' (a tool to find new people via the

[13] Instagram Stories are a feature that allows Instagram users to share instant photos and videos to their 'Story' rather than to their main profile.

Explore Page, which is an algorithmic selection of creators and content that deem relevant or interesting to the user). There is also a QR code feature available to individuals that individuals can scan to follow a user in person. These capabilities empower a sense of agency over their activity and privacy on Instagram—that is, within the app's parameters.

There is also a 'help' and 'about' section featured, which details the fine print of all of Instagram's rules and regulations. One particular interest is their data policy, which describes Instagram's information process to support the platform. Here, Instagram states that they collect data about the user, their device, and information from partners. Regarding the former, the platform collects: "the content, communications and other information you provide when you use our Products, including when you sign up for an account, create or share content and message or communicate with others" (Instagram, 2022). According to their policy, this can include information in or about the content that users provide (e.g., metadata), for example, the location of a photo or the date a file was created. It can also include: "what you see through features that we provide, such as our camera, so we can do things such as suggest masks and filters that you might like or give you tips on using camera formats" (Instagram, 2022).

It seems that their systems automatically process content and communications that users "provide to analyse context" for: 'networks and connections' (e.g. helping users find people you may know); 'usage' (e.g. information about how individuals use their products, such as the types of content viewed or engaged with; the features used; the actions taken (the people or accounts interacted with and the time, frequency and duration of activities); 'information about transactions made' (e.g. if a user utilises Instagram for purchases or other financial transactions the platform collects information about the purchase or transaction); 'things others do and information they provide about you' (e.g. information about users, such as when others share or comment on a photo of you, send a message to you or upload, sync or import your contact information) (Instagram, 2022).

In terms of device information, Instagram admits to collecting data from users about computers, phones, connected TVs and other web-connected devices. According to their policy, they utilise this information to:

> Better personalise the content (including ads) or features that you see when you use our Products on another device, such as your laptop or tablet, or to measure whether you took action in response to an ad that we showed you on your phone on a different device. (Instagram, 2022)

Finally, the information they retrieve from partners provides information about activities beyond Instagram products, “including information about a user’s device”, websites visited, purchases made, the ads seen and how their services are used—whether a user has an account or are logged in to Instagram products (Instagram, 2022). An example they use is that a business could utilise Instagram API to tell the platform about a user's purchase in its shop. They also receive information about users' “online and offline actions and purchases from third-party data providers” who have the right to provide Instagram with user information. Here, partners receive Instagram data when they “visit or use their services or through third parties that they work with” (Instagram, 2022). In turn, the information Instagram collects about users constructs a profile of information that Instagram then utilises to show personalised ads to users, thus increasing their profits. My field notes confirm that, from a personal perspective, while this information was publicly available to me, I was not aware of the extent to which my data was being collected and utilised by the platform.

Newsfeed

The Newsfeed interface is the cornerstone or landing page of the app. On a technical level, it is a service that provides a stream of news on a regular basis for distribution or broadcasting (Abidin et al, 2020). It is the first screen that appears upon signing in and opening the Instagram app from a user perspective. Instagram account holders can scroll downwards and view a

stream of content posted by the accounts they follow. Interspersed between such content are sponsored ads that organically appear in the newsfeed and are signalled by an inbuilt feature at the top of the content that states, ‘Sponsored’, and an optional banner at the bottom of the post links users to the product via ‘Shop Now’ text.

Ethnographically browsing the newsfeed highlighted that an average of every second post was sponsored or was a paid ad, making the newsfeed feel like “a catalogue”, according to my fieldnotes. Users of the app can interact with photos and videos on this feed through engagement tools such as likes, which show public appreciation for the post; comments, where users can write messages through text and emojis; saves, which will save the photo to the user’s inbuilt ‘saved’ folder on Instagram; and send, where individuals can direct the post to a friend via private message. Users can also pull the page downwards from the top to refresh the feed for timely refreshments of content.

It is important to note that the diction ‘news’ within ‘newsfeed’, is a somewhat outdated way to describe this page. This is because, at the time of writing, the newsfeed does not present imagery in a chronological fashion. Instead, such order is determined by an algorithm based on what Instagram believes users want to see. According to Bucher, Instagram transforms content's “information flow and presentation” to “deliver relevance” (2020 p. 5). This is highlighted in Instagram’s statement that the organisation of this newsfeed is: “based on the likelihood you’ll be interested in the content, your relationship with the person posting and the timeliness of the post” (Instagram, 2022).

Thus, while the newsfeed previously presented a reverse chronological of posts, it is now a curated series of user content that is based on what is depicted as most “meaningful” to each end-user. This is determined by usage history and the popularity of each post, indicated by engagement metrics, such as the amount other users have liked, commented, saved, and sent the post in relation to how many followers they have. Instagram explained that this decision to

base the newsfeed on such an algorithm was to improve the user experience by populating the news feed only with "the moments we believe you will care about the most" ("See the Moments You Care About First," 2016). According to Omeara, however, preference-driven algorithms of this kind are designed to "create seductive environments that keep people on the platform, liking, commenting and producing data" (2019, p. 1). From personal experience, this often means that I do not see my friend's content because my newsfeed prioritises influencers or accounts with high follower metrics. This highlights Bucher's (2018) claims that changes to platform infrastructure inform participatory norms, which I will revisit in Chapter 5.

Moreover, the lowermost display of the newsfeed features five fixed icons. The first is a home button, which navigates users back to the newsfeed; the second is a magnifying glass, which allows users to search different 'accounts', 'tags' (hashtags, such as #dogs, for example, which subsequently link users to the content of dogs under this tag), and 'places' (which shows photos users have created in differing locations using the geotag function). A header also says 'Top' herein, allowing users to see their most recent searches. There is also a title that reads 'Near Current Location', which displays a list of locations at which other Instagram users have recently 'checked in' through their photos and stories. This feature is significant in its potential to create visibility for nearby businesses and landmarks, as clicking a particular location presents a feed of tagged photos from users who have uploaded pictures from that location.

Explore Page

Instagram users can access the Explore page by clicking the magnifying glass icon at the bottom of the app screen. This page features a unique collection of public photos, videos, reels and stories that are individually tailored to help Instagram users discover posts, accounts, hashtags, or products that may interest them. Every time this page is refreshed, a newsfeed of content appears. The algorithm behind the explore page utilises machine learning to adapt and improve content recommendations. As a result, users are provided the ability to tell Instagram

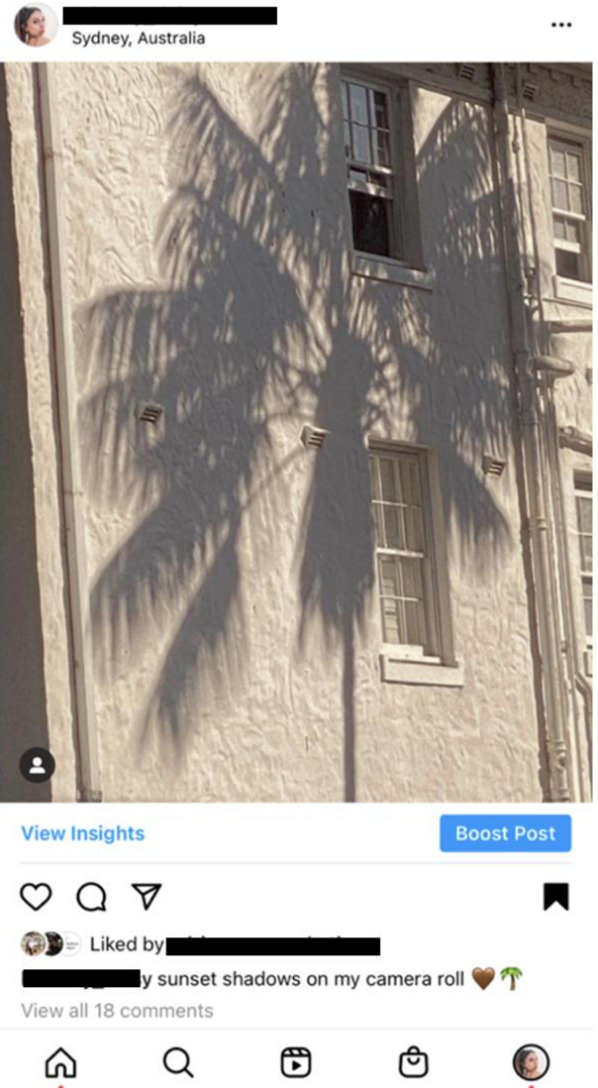
which content shows up that they are not interested in, thus improving how the newsfeed is tailored. Fieldnote observations of my own explore page confirm that it is highly tailored to my personal interests, showing images and videos related to my specific fashion sense, beauty how-to videos and even some PhD memes. This, therefore, allures me to continue scrolling and is often where I find new accounts to follow.

According to Zote (2021), this is purposeful as the explore page can increase followers for those who appear on it, as over 200 million accounts visit the page daily, comprising 50% of the platform's user base. In turn, the explore page provides significant exposure for the profiles that feature on it, as it can introduce content to users not already following the creator. My field research suggests that the main way for a creator to feature on another user's explore page is to receive maximum engagement within a niche category. I have personally noticed an increase in both engagement and followers when I have had a photo appear on the explore page of others. Akin to the Explore page is a 'plus' icon, which individuals can click as a shortcut to create a i) post, ii) story, ii) story highlight, iii) IGTV vide, iv) Reel or v) guide.

Instagram Posts

Instagram is fundamentally a platform for creating and uploading visuals (both imagery and video) with accompanying text (See Figure 4). 'Posts' form the crux of Instagram's purpose and make up the primary content created and shared on the application by users. While, initially, most users would take and upload photos directly from the app, followed by editing them with the limited Instagram filters and editing tools provided within, it is now more common practice to capture photos or videos on a smartphone device camera and edit them in external software, such as third-party apps. This practice highlights shifts from 'arbitrary' to 'strategic' Instagram posts (Abidin, 2016, p. 2).

Figure 4 - Screenshot of an Instagram Post



My field notes demonstrate that I resonate with this user trajectory. When I first began utilising Instagram, I would upload content without placing much thought into it; however, now, I plan what I publish and ensure that it follows a particular stylised aesthetic. However, it is noteworthy that the type of posts uploaded on Instagram differ significantly between ordinary users and influencers. Everyday users, who do not profit from their use of the app, and who are further explored later in this chapter, tend to periodically post images taken in their everyday lives and do not follow a particular theme or pattern with this content. However, professional accounts run by influencers and businesses, are usually carefully curated, and involve a specific colour scheme. This binary functions as a critical distinguisher as to whether

a user is utilising their Instagram for personal or profitable purposes and are discussed in-depth in Chapter 5.

Instagram Stories

Instagram Stories are a feature that allows Instagram users to share instant photos and videos to their "story" rather than profile. Inspired by the social media platform, Snapchat Instagram stories are ephemeral as they disappear after 24 hours. Unlike Instagram photos, which are uploaded to a user's feed and considered a permanent fixture of an individual's profile, stories are a more candid snapshot of a user's everyday life (Figure 5).

Figure 5 - Screenshot of a Story Creation Interface in procrss

The 'stories' feed is situated at the top of the newsfeed. Users can scroll horizontally through a list of 'stories' posted by the accounts they follow, which are generally real-time updates on a user's day. A new 'story' is signalled through a coloured ring around an individual's profile photo. Only accounts with new stories will be featured here, and the algorithm works much like the regular newsfeed in that the accounts individuals engage with

most will feature at the top. The introduction of stories allowed users to literally ‘follow’ the day of other users, even the parts not necessarily aesthetic—so signifying a change in Instagram use habits. From a personal perspective, I upload many images and videos on my ‘story’ that I would never publish to my Instagram feed because I feel like they would not suit the aesthetic I aim to achieve on my profile. I, therefore, am grateful for the affordance of Instagram stories, as I can upload more candid content than I would publish on my profile grid.

Individuals can also go ‘live’ on their Instagram story, which lets them interact with followers in real-time through the ability to ask questions that will appear on the screen instantly after pressing ‘send’. These live stories are available for 24 hours after and accessible via the user’s story on their profile.

Another notable feature available in stories is the filters feature. Initially, users were limited to a series of colour and brightness altering filters to edit their stories with, for example, ‘Paris’ as seen in Figure 6. However, recently Instagram introduced the ability for users to create and publish their own filters for any user to apply to their story images or videos, which has led to a large array of different filter designs. Among these are augmented reality filters, some of which can be utilised to change a user’s hair colour or facial features. I personally enjoy using these filters, particularly on days where I am not wearing make-up but feel like I need to show up on my Instagram Stories. However, the everyday use of such filters has led to some dialogue regarding the dangers of appearance augmenting filters, which is further discussed later in this chapter.

Instagram Reels and IGTV

The film icon directs a user to Instagram reels: this button will take a user to the profile holder's Reels feed. Reels are a new feature on Instagram at the time of writing, introduced as a direct competitor of the social media video platform TikTok. According to Instagram’s announcement when releasing this feature, Reels function as:

> A new way to create and discover short, entertaining videos on Instagram. Reels invites you to create fun videos to share with your friends or anyone on Instagram. Record and edit 15-second multi-clip videos with audio, effects, and new creative tools. (Instagram, 2021)

Individuals can engage in reels the same way they engage with image content, through likes, comments, saves and share functions. According to my interviews with influencers, which are explored in-depth in Chapter 5, reels have become an effective way to achieve visibility because they have a higher reach than Instagram Posts.

Moreover, 'IGTVs' are more extended versions of reels and were introduced as the first video capability on Instagram to rival YouTube. What further differentiates IGTV from reels is that they can be utilised alone or in conjunction with Instagram and are designed for the mobile-optimised viewing of long-form videos. Any user can create their own channel and share video content up to an hour-long in terms of duration. This allows users to upload videos of a more extended nature, such as wedding videos and video blog (vlog) style content. I, however, do not find myself gravitating towards IGTV videos as they are too long to view on the small screen of my phone device. This is perhaps why Reels more popular on the app.

Instagram Guides

Instagram Guides function as a way for users to share and consume content on Instagram. They allow users to upload a curated flow of posts with commentary, and are purposeful for step-by-step instructions, tips, and recommendations (Figure 6). When an individual interacts with the guide feature, they are presented with three options of 'guide types' to create, 'Places' (to recommend places in a user's city and beyond), Products (to recommend a user's favourite products), and Posts (to recommended posts that a user created themselves or others they want to share).

Figure 6 - Screenshot Example of an Instagram guide

When users click on one of the above options, they can type in the specific recommendation and sort through already-created content available on Instagram. The user then simply clicks on the photos they wish to include in their guide and can then write copy about them. Users also have the option to write what their guide is about.

My fieldnotes suggest that this feature is a viable way to achieve exposure. This is because an inclusion in a guide is perceived as earned media, which refers to brand-related posts that are not directly generated by the company but by a user or influencer on social media (Mattke et al., 2019). This was personally evidenced when one of my Instagram posts was featured in a guide made by a macro-influencer for the best cafes in Sydney, and I subsequently received several followers from it. Therefore, this feature is valuable for businesses or other creators aspiring for visibility.

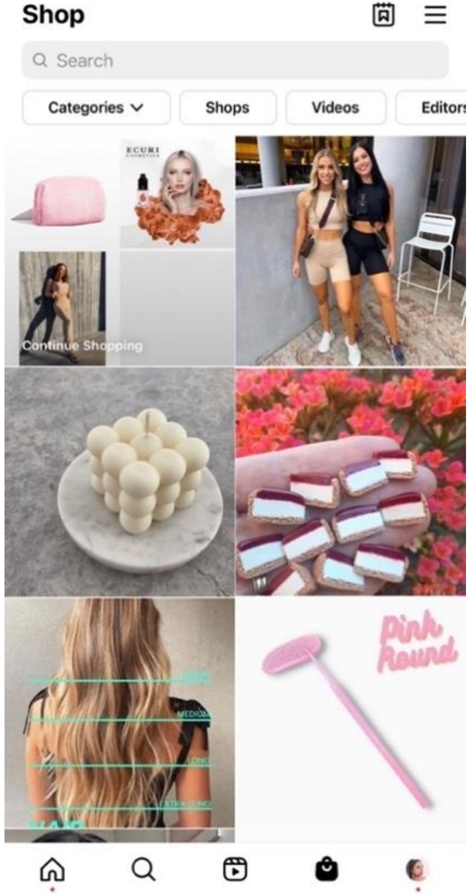
Instagram Shop

The next icon is a 'shop' page (Figure 8). Here individuals can 'browse shops', 'see editors' picks', 'shop collections', 'explore guides' and 'watch and shop'. According to the Instagram business website, Instagram Shopping is a set of features across Instagram that lets people shop photos and videos no matter where they are within the app:

> "We've built a world of shopping features that tap into people's existing behaviours to turn your business's Instagram account into a shoppable storefront" (Instagram, 2021).

This decision was grounded by the fact that 70% of shoppers turn to Instagram for product discovery and 87% of people say that influencers have inspired them to make a purchase (ibid.). I personally do not use this feature as I feel I am more inspired to purchase through organic imagery on my newsfeed. However, I often notice that products I have been thinking about buying and researching online frequently appear on my shop feed.

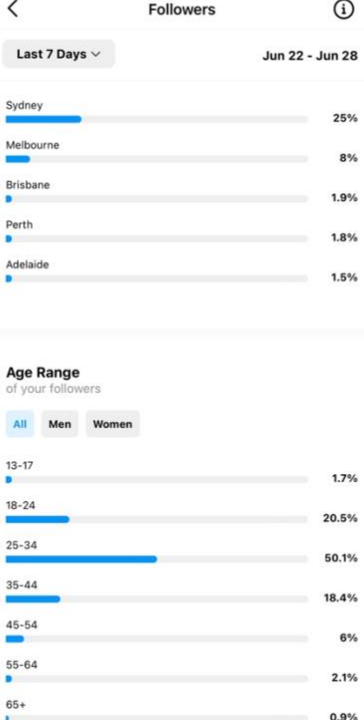
Figure 7 - Screenshot of the 'Shop' Interface



Profiles (Business and Personal)

Instagram profiles (accessible by clicking on a user's username or display photo) are the personalised feeds that users make to represent themselves or their business and have complete creative control over (within the parameters of the Instagram interface). Users can choose two types of Instagram profiles: i) 'personal', which is a generic Instagram profile, and ii) 'business', a professional account tailored to businesses, such as brands or services, or celebrities and creators. Business profiles can retrieve real-time metrics on how stories and posts perform, gain insights into followers, such as where they are located, what gender they identify with and how old they are, and understand how they interact with the profile's posts and stories. Within these subheadings, there is further information. For example, business profiles have access to graphs that provide insight into how many followers their account has received over a set period, where most of their followers reside location-wise (segmented by city and country), and the age range of audiences as well as the gender (Figure 8).

Figure 8 - Screenshot of Follower Insights



Accountholders can also see the most active times their audiences are online. The idea behind this feature is to post content at a time when most audiences engage with one's content to increase visibility. Learning these demographics is essential for any user monetising Instagram, as knowing a user base can determine which content to post to maximise profit. Additionally, a business may ask to see the audience demographic of an influencer before starting to work with them. Users with business accounts can also add public information about their company, such as business hours, location, and phone numbers.

Whether an individual chooses a personal or business account, a walk-through method of either profile presents similar findings. The main features on both business and personal accounts are the individual's chosen display picture, a quantification of how many posts a user has uploaded, the number of followers they have, and how many individuals they are following themselves. According to my field notes, I strategically attempt to have a higher 'follower' count than 'following' because this suggests that individuals follow me because they value my page, rather than just following back because I have followed them. The next component of the Instagram profile is the Bio. Here, users can write a short description about themselves and include a URL link, which usually features their websites or business information. Under the bio, users are privy to three buttons: 'following', 'message' and 'email'. Under these, feature story 'highlights', which allow users the ability to save particular 'stories' onto their profile.

There are also three icons under the story highlights: a grid icon, a film icon, and a portrait. The grid showcases a user's Instagram feed, which is essentially a chronological portfolio of all uploaded photos. Individuals can engage with the post by liking it (by clicking the love heart symbol), commenting on it, sending it to another Instagram user via private message, or saving the photo. When individuals click on an image, the picture enlarges. These three actions are all forms of engagement and assist in boosting the individual's post. This is

because metrics thus determine how well-received a post was by its audience by determining how much ‘engagement’ it attracted.

This brings forth another benefit of a business profile, the ability to view how much engagement each piece of content received.

Figure 9 - Screenshot of Post Insights

Here, users can view the engagement on their individual content (Figure 9) and discern the engagement that their profile in its entirety achieved over the last seven, 14, 30 and 90 days through the back end of the business account. Users can also scroll through a calendar feature to determine the exact engagement metrics on differing posts since their account creation. Users can also find insights regarding the number of accounts they have reached and engaged with and their follower counts. This is important because engagement validates an influencer’s

social status and social capital[14] (Marwick, 2015). Engagement also enables visibility, thus highlighting how the platform is designed to encourage creators to make posts that will receive the best engagement from their audiences in order to be seen. This algorithmic concept will be further explored throughout this thesis.

Platform Summary

In sum, this walk-through method has established a foundational corpus of data that allows for a more detailed analysis of Instagram's "intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings, and implied ideal uses" (Light et al., 2016, p. 1). Through examining Instagram's privacy settings, it was found that the platform collects data on all its users for commercial benefit. Additionally, through analysing its affordances, it became clear that the app aims to encourage users to utilise its features, particularly those that generate engagement because this keeps users on the platform. Further, we established that Instagram's workings manifest an increasingly algorithmic media landscape that commodifies visibility. It can thus be concluded that various features of the Instagram app exist purely to assist with the trade of exposure.

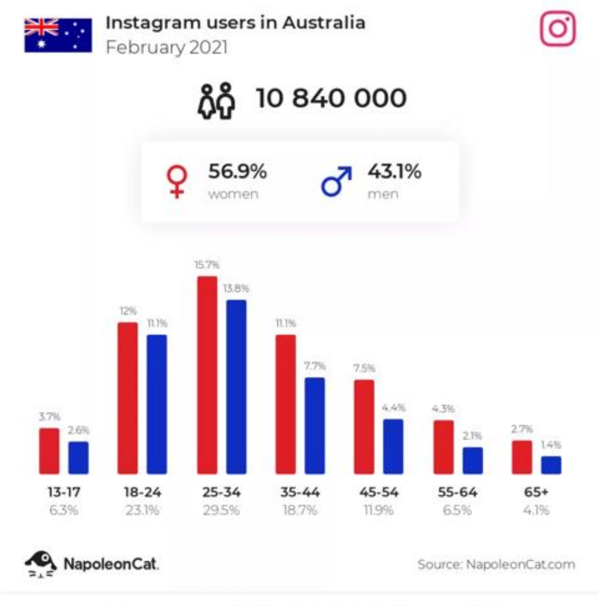
In turn, the walk-through method is a starting point for further user-centred research that aims to recognise how the platform functions as a powerful stakeholder in the social media exposure economy in 2022. These findings illuminate the broader implications of infrastructural changes in affordances on platform culture, configure how visibility is understood and traded within our social media economy, and act as a preface to the following findings on how ordinary, everyday users are both rewarded and exploited by the app.

[14] Bourdieu (1977) theorised social capital as "not a natural formation" but a resource that individuals derive from participation in collective activities, arguing that such "resource exists in social networks and embodies the commitment and trust among individuals "(Chia et al., 2021, p. 40).

4.2 Everyday Users

In the context of this thesis, everyday users are ordinary internet participants who engage with social media in a lay manner. They are not ‘influencers’, nor are they media professionals. Instead, they are ‘ordinary’ individuals who do not financially profit from social media use or monetise their online identity and, hence, are on Instagram for personal reasons, such as keeping up to date with friends, researching, or as a creative outlet (Whiting & Williams, 2013). My thesis attempts to understand the role this group of stakeholders plays in the circulation of exposure within the social media economy. As mentioned in Chapter 3, data on these users were gathered through a survey completed by 142 respondents, distributed online, and conducted electronically. Of these respondents, a large majority were female and within the 21–29 age group; however, this demographic is expected as it reflects the key operators within the Instagram space (see Figure 10).

Figure 10 - Instagram Users in Australia



Instagram users statistics in Australia in February 2021

Note. Copyright Statista.

According to recent market research by Statista (2021) , 57.1% of Australian Instagram users are female, and at least 3.1 million Australian users are aged between 25–34. Approximately two-thirds of Instagram users are 18–29, with 18–34-year-olds being the most active age group

(Statista, 2021). Thus, while my demographic research audience is skewed, the respondents who chose to participate can be more broadly perceived as a microcosm of the social media economy on Instagram.

It is also essential to recognise a 'sampling on the dependent variable' here. By posting this survey on my personal Instagram stories for recruitment, it was likely that I would capture the opinions of the active Instagram users within the demographic my profile attracts. For transparency purposes, this warrants a discussion on the validity and whether the following results would differ if respondents were gathered differently. Here, Tufekci suggests that "most big data analyses remain within the confines of the dataset, with little means to probe validity" (2014 p. 9), and in turn, social media-extensive data studies should be paired with interviews, ethnographies, and other methods so that biases and "shortcomings of each approach can be used to balance each other to arrive at richer answers" (Tufekci, 2014, p. 10) which is what this study did.

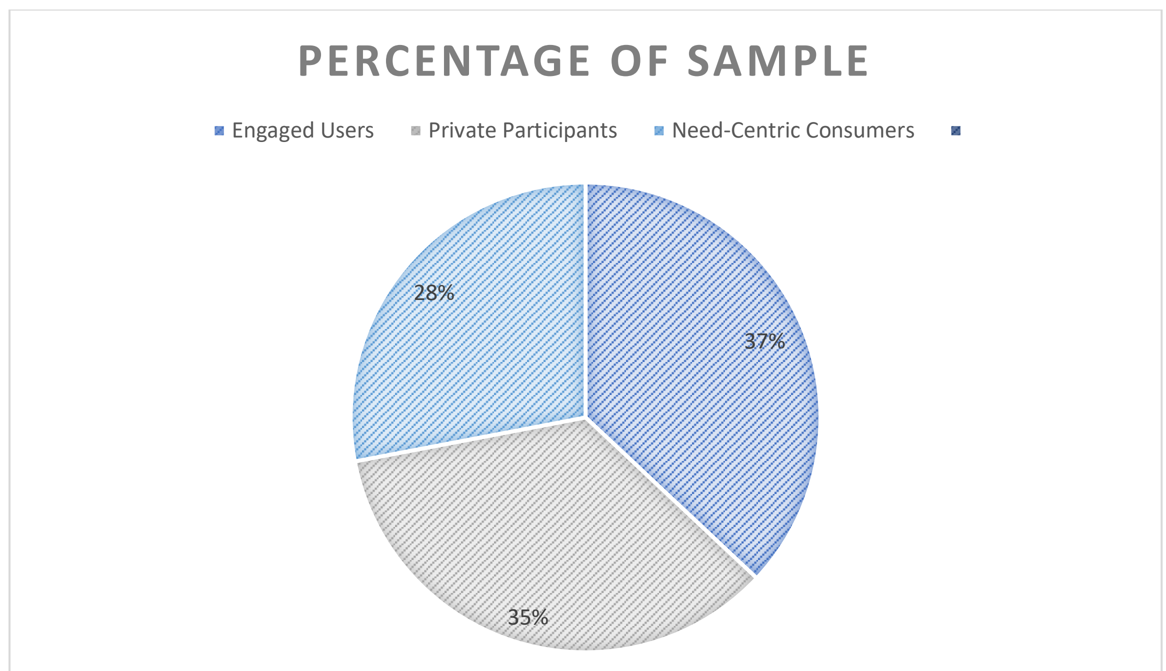
Among the users I did pool, I first and foremost sought to distinguish their individual social media usage habits to determine the way in which they consume Instagram. This was inspired by Kotler's (1997) literature, which describes marketing behavioural segmentation according to usage volume, such as heavy, medium, and light users. As a pretext for such investigation, users were subsequently asked how many hours they spend on Instagram per day. Respondents then had four descriptions to choose from before starting the survey. In conjunction with data regarding how much time they admitted to spending on Instagram, they assisted in classifying which category of user they would subsequently fit into. The options were as follows:

1.	**I spend a large quantity of time on Instagram and engage with all its features**
2.	**I frequently scroll Instagram but rarely upload content or engage with other people's photos**
3.	**I only go on Instagram when I have a specific need in mind, for instance, if I want to look up a brand**
4.	**I only have Instagram to keep up with friends or because I need it for work.**

These categories were designed specifically for this research project. Whilst numerous conceptualisations already exist in media studies surrounding user groups on Instagram, most studies tend to emphasise a division between either 'active' vs 'passive' (Xu et al (2014); Thorisdottir et al, 2019; Trifiro, & Gerson, 2019) or 'professional' vs 'amateur' (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Lange 2008, 2011). However, this thesis argues that such dichotomies lack nuance and only define users based on their posting activity, rather than diverse online behaviours. As my study compares the social media landscape to a financial economy, the user classification conceptualisation was inspired by marketing studies, specifically Hunter's (2016) study of consumer segmentation mentioned in Chapter 2. Hunter divides customers in his research into five types: "loyal customers, discount customers, need-based customers, impulse customers, and wandering customers", to segment different types of customers in a retail setting (2016, p. 1). My study found that only loyal, need-based and wandering customers aligned with the social media user types that participated in my survey.

Survey results underwent a thematic coding practice to determine which respondent answers would be analysed according to which user category (Figure 11).

Figure 11 - Social Media User Segmentation Graph



Here, the users who admitted they spent over two hours on Instagram in Question 1 and resonated with description one were ‘engaged users’, aligning with Hunter’s definition of ‘loyal customers’, who made up 37% of users in the survey. Those who stated that they spent at least one hour on Instagram per day and identified with description two were ‘private participants’, aligning with Hunter’s ‘wandering consumer’ segment, making up 35% of the sample. Additionally, descriptions four and five were ‘need-centric consumers’ and generally reported low daily app usage. This category is based on Hunter’s ‘need-based consumers’ and comprises 28% of the database. However, it is noteworthy that these were self-reported estimates—which means the actual times those users spend online might differ (Tufekci, 2014). Nonetheless, this methodological approach can be applied to any social media platform to distinguish user types

by their application consumption based on time spent daily and the primary motivation for participating.

These user categories are significant for my typology because they describe the behavioural disparities of differing types of users and highlight how not all users contribute to the exposure economy in even manners. Additionally, by analysing the characteristics of segmented customer groups, platform developers and influencers can develop refined strategies for each segment (Kim et al., 2005). The corresponding attributes of these different users, as determined by analysing survey data, are further explored herein.

User Type One: Engaged Users

Engaged users are the most active group on social media, making them extremely valuable to both the platform and the circulation of exposure in its entirety because of the central importance of profits. This group spends a large portion of time on social media and engages with all its features, namely content creation (creating content and posting it both on their Instagram feed and stories) and content engagement (liking, sharing, and commenting on images on other user profiles). They are also the most likely group to purchase products on Instagram through sponsored ads or influencer marketing. Hence, they yield the most significant investment return for platforms, evidenced by the 90% response rate that stated they had bought something from the Instagram app in the past 12 months. This group parallels Hunter's (2016) conceptualisation of loyal customers, who generate most of a company's profit due to being highly engaged with a brand. Of my survey respondents, 37% identified themselves as engaged users, which were identified by clicking the questionnaire response: "I spend a large quantity of time on Instagram and engage in all its features" and admitting to spending over two hours a day on Instagram.

These users are highly valuable to the business of Instagram as they are loyal to the platform and are likely to share content with friends, family and extended social networks on

the app. Moreover, 90% of these respondents stated that they choose to have their profile on 'public'. After analysing the most common types of reasonings for this decision, the main sentiment was "not caring" if people saw their content, as most respondents believed that they only upload images that do not compromise privacy e.g. "shots from my daily life, primarily of my pet" (Engaged User, Male, 22), "photos with friends" (Engaged User, Female, 28), "lots of travel snaps" (Engaged User, Female, 25), which were among the most popular answers thematically. Moreover, the 10% of users in this category who chose to have their profiles on private mode were either educators and schoolteachers or required privacy for their profession.

Whether these users feel the need to upload content every time they partake in something 'Insta-worthy', 43% stated yes, 47% said no, and 12% expressed they sometimes do. A recurring sentiment throughout responses was that users previously felt the need to upload content when they thought they were doing something worthy of an Instagram upload; however, they now do not feel such pressure as strongly, signifying changes in use patterns. When asked about motivations to upload content in general, responses were, quite contradictorily and predominantly about projecting a particular image to their followers online.

For example, one user said she uploads "so people think I'm busy/productive" (Engaged User, Female 27), and similar responses included: "I'm not sure. I guess to show others what I'm doing with my life" (Engaged User, Female, 22); "If I look good or am doing something fun, I want other people to see" (Engaged User, Female, 25); and "I like people seeing me living a fab fun life" (Engaged User, Female, 20). These responses highlight this group's desire to post on social media to curate a positive sense of self for their audience.

Additionally, there was a trend of users admitting to posting specifically for validation, with one user stating that she posts for a "bit of approval from friends" (Engaged User, Female, 26), and another expressing, "If I'm going to post, may as well share and document to "Instagram worthy" things I do and achieve. It's like a representation of myself" (Engaged User,

Female, 25). These findings suggest that engaged users feel inextricably linked to their online identity and care about how others perceive their online persona. This was reflected in responses to questions regarding whether these users edit their photos, with 55% stating yes, 23% saying sometimes, and only 19% saying no. These findings imply that a level of labour and care goes into the photographs this group posts online, despite not receiving financial compensation for such labour as influencers do.

Interestingly, when asked if these users put any thought into what their profile feeds look like, responses were split, with 50% stating that they do, 44% saying they do not, and 6% suggesting they do ‘sometimes’. Out of the users who care about their feed, the main concerns derived from wanting it to ‘look nice’, with an interesting emphasis on being ‘bright’. For example, one user stated: “I like bright photos with lots of nice scenery, it’s a conscious decision what photos I post” (Engaged User, Female, 27), followed by another two similar responses which read: “I like it to be bright and make me happy looking at the fun things I’ve done” (Engaged User, Female, 18), and “I want it to be light and bright, aesthetically pleasing to myself” (Engaged User, Female, 29). This focus on a ‘bright’ aesthetic reinforces that the users in this category prefer to upload positive imagery to create a feed that denotes self-happiness and contentment. Moreover, various responses insinuated that users in this category were previously more conscious about their feed but have recently shifted in concerns. For example, one user stated: “I have in the past, but I don’t care anymore. Now that I am a little older, I don’t feel the need to compare my feed to those of others” (Engaged User, Female, 29). A similar response goes, “I used to, but these days I don’t care. The photos I choose to upload are from happy memories” (Engaged User, Female, 37). This shift highlights a movement away from perfectly curated feeds and the decision to post candid, care-free images.

Interestingly, the question, “Do you appreciate when other content creators have 'aesthetic' feeds? Why/why not?” yielded similar results, with 40% saying yes, 36% stating no,

and 13% revealing arbitrary feelings. Out of the responders who said yes, this was primarily due to an appreciation of the mechanics behind creating an aesthetic feed. For example, one respondent stated, “Yes! It’s a craft to make images look good. I love the flow on their page” (Engaged User, Female, 40), and another explained: “Yes. I like looking at pretty things. It’s not hard to edit a photo (I.e., I mean adjusting light, colour etc.) to create an aesthetically pleasing image” (Engaged User, Female, 32). This suggests that these users enjoy the art of content creation and appreciate the labour it entails.

However, the engaged users who stated that they do not appreciate a curated Instagram feed expressed this notion through terms regarding a lack of authenticity. For example, one user said: “not if it feels forced” (Engaged User, Female, 31), while another wrote: “I am really over the refined look, it makes me think the poster lacks creativity. Coordinated posts without them are better” (Survey Respondent, Female, 28), emphasising a push back on consuming overly curated feeds.

Other interesting findings within this user group highlighted the fact that they are generally quite conscious as to how many likes and followers they have and are likely to upload photos at specific times to garner more likes, which again indicates that there is a level of consciousness as to how their audience perceives their content. This group is also quite generous with their likes, with 80% stating that if they see a photo on the newsfeed that captures their attention, they will always engage with it by ‘liking’ it. Furthermore, when asked what makes them share a particular image or video, responses included: “If I'm doing something fun or think something is pretty/looks cool/is funny” (Engaged User, male, 28); “If it’s something that I think my friend would like, or if I want their opinion on whether I should buy an item of clothing or something” (Engaged User, Female, 25); “If it makes me feel something or is funny/ relatable” (Engaged User, Male 32). These responses highlight that this user group help make the content they see value in more visible by engaging with it, which will be revisited later.

Moreover, a significant finding among this user group was the interplay between social media usage and esteem. This was exemplified in the question: “How much does Instagram affect how satisfied you feel with your own life?” This question was executed on a Likert scale. Five categories of responses ranged from 5: “it does not affect me at all”, to 1: “it can make me feel highly dissatisfied”, with a 3 being a neutral type of response (Jamieson, 2004). Here a significant 70% of respondents selected a two or below. This highlights that the more users are immersed in Instagram, the more they can be affected negatively and presents somewhat concerning data on the harmful impacts Instagram can have on its users’ psyche. Furthermore, when asked if they felt pressured to show only the good things in their life on Instagram, 80% of engaged respondents stated yes, highlighting a common practice of only showcasing positive life moments, perhaps because they do not feel the public accountability that influencers do to showcase low life moments. This notion is further explored later in this chapter.

Additionally, my surveys suggested that Instagram has led to users wanting to change something about themselves. Responses here ranged from physical features to financial circumstances and demonstrated that users are privy to feeling less satisfied with their life when exposed to other people’s achievements:

> Instagram makes me compare myself to others in all aspects, from my body to my ownership of luxury goods, so I appreciate it when I see influencers and brands trying to show ‘realistic’ lifestyles and untouched photos. Especially when it comes to body image. Even if it is performative, I like to see my kind of body represented online. (Engaged User, Female, 29)

This highlights a consumer movement toward wanting to see less refined and more realistic content. There were also many specific references to the personal impact of using story filters. One of my respondents stated: “It seems harmless at first, but now I genuinely want a nose job after using these filters. I never even had a problem with my nose” (Engaged User, Female,

23). This finding suggests that the current filter culture can contribute to unattainable beauty standards, which is problematic as they become a more permanent fixture of social media practice.

However, respondents also emphasised that they are conscious of their social media consumption and unfollow people if their beliefs explicitly do not align: "If they are aggressive and force their views/ beliefs on others without being educated on the topic if I find them boring and their page no longer satisfies my interests" (Engaged User, Male, 28).

Another user stated:

> I regularly go through and "clean out" my follow list to ensure I'm still following people I want to. I also unfollow people who post things I disagree with politically, socially, economically, and environmentally. I think it's irresponsible to continue following someone you disagree with; you're still showing them support otherwise. (Engaged User, Female, 35).

These responses suggest that they are aware of the adverse effects Instagram can have on them and act accordingly. Another typical response was that many users unfollowed influencers preaching vaccine hesitancy during Covid-19, which occurred seven times in survey results among this category. Other significant answers stated that they would unfollow influencers who they no longer relate to or appear uneducated. However, no users in the engaged category admitted to having a 'social media detox', thus highlighting their heavy investment in the app.

In turn, engaged users are like 'brand loyals' in that they are significantly engaged in the application of Instagram. They interact with most of the platform's affordances, including engaging with others' content and allowing the medium to influence their purchasing decisions. An interesting by-product of this type of user behaviour is that their high participation with the app has made them somewhat conscious of how they portray themselves online, resulting in content creation that focuses on curating a positive image of themselves. This has led them to

be conscious consumers in that they are acutely aware of the impacts their app usage can have on them in terms of esteem and life contentment, despite being loyal to it. This group are thus pivotal to the circulation of exposure within the social media economy because they actively consume and engage with the posts of others while also uploading their own, hence strengthening the currency as it creates a tier between those who utilise social media for-profit and those that do so for leisure—a notion to be revisited later in this chapter. Furthermore, due to the investment this group has in the app, they should be the ones influencing platform decisions, as keeping them satisfied is pivotal (Hunter, 2016)

User Type Two: Private Participants

In media studies, lurkers are commonly studied as a sub-group of social media users. According to Schlosser (2005), lurkers are contrary to 'posters' and are historically categorised by avoiding posting their opinions online. However, my study found that this category of users are actually quite active and thus, the term 'lurk' does not holistically describe their online behaviours. The classification of *private participants* is that they still participate, albeit behind the scenes. My survey showed that this group significantly frequented Instagram (more than two hours per day) yet rarely publicly engaged with its affordances. They do not post published content and are not particularly loyal to the app—instead, they are lurking in many apps and participating in a private manner. The group parallels marketing classifications of wandering consumers (Hunter, 2016), who browse frequently but do not have a particular brand or product in mind as they prefer to just 'window shop' without actively purchasing. Similarly, private participants habitually browse online but do not particularly want to post.

In my survey, 35% of users were private participants, and 90% of these users stated that they use Instagram every day. This suggests that the group represents considerable value to the social exchange because they impact server traffic; without them, there would be fewer content consumers (Chinn et al., 2012). Due to their unproductive nature, I was initially

surprised that such a large percentage filled out my survey on social media; however, the fact that the survey was anonymous most likely helped.

My findings show that 72% of these users have their accounts set to private. When prompted to explain this decision, many responses highlighted the fact that their social media activity was more about consuming rather than producing content: “I don’t upload much; I mostly use Instagram for consuming content. I’m not looking to build my following” (Private Participant, Male, 22). Moreover, many users had fears regarding privacy and being watched by external individuals: “I don’t want random people gossiping/having a stalk to be able to just look through my photos” (Private Participant, Female, 30). Others desire the control possible with visibility: “I need control over who sees the (very little) content I post” (Private Participant, Male, 29). Another significant insight as to why private participants choose to have their accounts private is captured in the following response:

> I am private because currently, to gain followers, you are led to believe you need to be "pretty". I have low self-esteem and get upset when I lose one follower (do they think I'm ugly/ fat/ boring/ annoying) so I am picky with whom I choose and who follows me. (Private Participant, Female, 25)

This quote suggests that some users choose to be private participants due to fear of judgement, challenging Schlosser’s (2005) suggestion that lurkers (those not posting their opinion) are less affected by another’s negative opinions.

When asked about posting behaviours, similar responses were received. One user stated that they “rarely upload. Do not feel the need to share my life all the time. I value actual real-life human connection over squares” (Private Participant, Male, 30), and another suggested “not a lot, I don’t take many photos in general so have nothing to post!” (Private Participant, Female, 27), aligning with “I don’t take many pictures and don’t care if others don’t see my

pictures" (Private Participant, Male, 34). These responses appear quite defensive, perhaps indicating a degree of resentment towards Instagram.

Interestingly, 50% of the users in this category admitted to appreciating when influencers had an 'aesthetic feed', stating sentiments such as: "Yes, makes it easier to look at" (Private Participant, Female, 20); "Yes, but I only ever look at someone's overall feed once when I first come across their account which will determine whether I follow them or not" (Private Participant, Female, 27); and "Yes because it looks good and is aesthetically pleasing" (Private Participant, Female, 29). This indicates that as these users are passive consumers, they expect a higher quality of content to observe, perhaps not understanding the labour that goes into such quality.

Additionally, these users are judicious with their likes, with 70% saying that they 'rarely' like a photo on their newsfeed if it captures their attention. Interestingly, however, this group was highly active in sharing content behind the scenes. Several users stated that they regularly share content with their friends, especially content they find humorous, relevant, or interesting, for example: "If it's funny or relates to something I was talking to someone about" (Private Participant, Female, 22), and "I'll send to my friends. Also outfits I like or think one of my friends as I send" (Private Participant, Female, 26).

Several respondents within this subgroup also admitted to "hate following", namely purposely following a disliked account for personal enjoyment or amusement, as emphasised in the following quotes: "I will most often share content with friends If I don't agree with something someone's posted, e.g., people's stories and their Q and A's" (Private Participant, Female, 29); "I love to discuss fails" (Private Participant, Female, 25); and "if I follow an influencer now it's generally a hate follow" (Private Participant, Male, 22). This finding is noteworthy because hateful shares inevitably lead to the visibility of content and assist in circulating exposure for the influencer.

Finally, 50% of this group stated that they were selective with whom they follow on Instagram: "I'm selective, I find a lot of influencers annoying, so I unfollow anyone whom I do not find relatable" (Private Participant, Female, 25), and "Yes, I mainly follow friends or brands that interest me", thus highlighting that they have a curated follow list for consuming content and creators that are relevant to them.

Moreover, these user groups express distaste for others exclusively showing the positive parts of their life: "I don't showcase everything I do on social media, so I feel I don't need to show the bad parts of my life, but influencers commodify their life in its entirety and therefore if they are only showing the good moments, I am less likely to see them as authentic" (Private Participant, Female, 29). This highlights a chasm between those who utilise their Instagram for professional and private reasons, emphasising that the former does not need to delve deeper into the realities of their life because they are not monetising their content and thus, have less potential to influence their followers.

In sum, private participants regularly log in to online communities but seldom post publicly (Sun et al., 2014). Like wandering customers (Hunter, 2016), they comprise a large segment in terms of traffic while making up the smallest percentage of profit. These users are fascinating because they spend the same amount of time on the Instagram app as engaged users yet do not produce content themselves or publicly engage in it. Additionally, they are albeit vital because they are 'likely' to communicate their experience with others (Hunter, 2016). Therefore, they are not adding value to the economy in terms of content; however, they undeniably assist in the circulation of exposure by consuming it and sharing it with others, increasing the "value of the user community and its social connections" (Williams et al, 2012 p. 3).

User Type Three: Need-Centric Consumers

Respondents within the need-centric consumer category parallel with Hunters' (2016) definition of need-based customers who are driven by a specific demand. They are utility-centric and will go online for reasons such as business, seeking information, or searching for a particular product or service within the app's parameters. This group made up 28% of my respondents. A key finding was that they are not particularly passionate about Instagram as ‘engaged’ users are, but rather see it as a ‘necessity’ for everyday societal functioning. However, they post more than private participants, thus placing them somewhere in between. They upload content and engage with most of Instagram’s functions but do not invest much time, emotion, or effort into the platform. When I asked these users to reflect on why they go on Instagram, responses ranged from ‘I go on Instagram to keep up with friends” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 22) to “I can spend lots of time on Instagram but then go weeks without touching it” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 37), and “I only go on Instagram when I have a specific need in mind, for example, if I want to look up a hotel” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 30). Other responses varied thusly: “For inspiration or education”, “so I can look up companies and brands”, and “so I can look up meals at restaurants before I go”. Additionally, a few respondents in this category stated that they only utilise Instagram for business purposes: “I only have Instagram because I use it for work” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 40), or “I use it for my business” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 32).

These users present interesting social media habits as they post regular content but are not inherently passionate about their user experience. When questioned about how long they spend on Instagram, their responses were mostly ‘Less than 2 [hours]’, yet they admitted to engaging with most of Instagram's features. Additionally, 80% of their profiles were on ‘public’ due to either their business or because they did not give much thought to other people viewing their content. For example, one user stated she is on public “to see my stats on business profile” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 22). Another user said, “I enter many competitions in which

your profile has to be visible so that the company can see that you are following them" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 35). Here, the user's use is 'need-centric' rather than primarily for leisure or entertainment, or for general enjoyment, as with engaged users.

When asked if they were selective with whom they followed, the majority stated that they were not or simply did not put much thought into it. This impartial response differed significantly from the engaged users and the private participants, which can be attributed to a less engaged use of social media due to the temporal patterns of their Instagram, utilising it sporadically rather than regularly. This was emphasised in the response of one need-centric user who suggested that, while she does not upload to her Instagram grid, she does often upload to Instagram stories: "I use Insta stories sometimes. When I do, I story what I eat, my dog, my home decorating, and my wedding planning. I rarely post selfies, mainly pictures of my fiancé and me" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 30), thus suggesting a preference to only upload fleeting content. The use of the diction 'story' is hereby interesting, as the process of taking a "story" has now become a verb, hence naturalising affordances, and highlighting it as commonplace feature in social media behaviour.

Akin to being selective with what they post, findings showed that this group is less discerning about whom they follow on Instagram and do not express much interest or information about editing photos unless specifically for work. According to research findings, they do, however, heavily engage with other features such as 'liking' photos and 'sharing' images with their friends: "I mainly share stuff with my friends that I want to buy or show them restaurants I want to go to" (Need-Centric Consumer, Male, 29). The group also indicated that they regularly 'save' images and videos for similar reasons: "saving it so I can remember it later" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 28). The users that did declare posting stated that they upload that their primary purpose is to "keep up to date with friends and family" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 32), implying that most of the content they decide to post is from

significant life events, such as holidays, weddings, and birthdays. One user stated she chose not to upload many photos; however, because "an expectation for perfection is high even in normies'" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 28). This statement raises an interesting differentiation between these users, considered 'normal', and their perception of influencers who are thus 'not normal'.

Moreover, this group stated that they were not judicious with their likes, with 80% saying that if they see a photo on their newsfeed that captures their attention, they would always like it. Regarding whether they are selective with whom they follow on Instagram, 60% stated they were not but occasionally decluttered their following lists. Responses ranged from "I follow accounts that I like to see in my feed, so it is content based. I will occasionally clear out my following list" (Need-Centric Consumer, Male, 27) to "Not really. Generally, follow my favourite reality tv stars from current shows, then unfollow them when they become boring. Otherwise, just other influencers who look interesting. Don't mind a mummy blogger sometimes." (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 22)

Additionally, 40% of this group believed they were unaware of how many likes and followers they had. Yet, many suggested that they see the value in having a larger audience for business purposes. Similarly, they expressed only uploading photos at specific times to garner more likes for business or work purposes. This group, therefore, appear to be less strategic with their social media consumption. They are hence not as conscious of their social media usage and patterns as private participants; however, do not upload and participate to the extent as engaged users, thus highlighting nuances in how they trade exposure with others.

In sum, need-centric consumers are ultimately driven by specific problems they can satisfy on Instagram. They tend to spend less time on the app because they usually receive what they need and then leave the application. They are also less engaged in Instagram culture more broadly, meaning they can be quickly drawn to other platforms. Nonetheless, the group

facilitates circulating exposure by participating in such need-based usage behaviours and sharing antics. Knowing the needs for which they are utilising Instagram is also significant as the platform, influencers and businesses trying to target everyday users should ensure that this group receive positive interactions in fulfilling such needs for long-term growth.

Personal User's Opinions on Influencers

While the user profile categories above presented nuances in social media behaviour and usage, an overwhelming resemblance between respondents was their opinion on influencers. This became apparent when respondents were asked to express what words came to mind when they heard the term 'Influencer'? Here, 59.8% of respondents included negative descriptors, 20% positive, and 9% had impartial words, as displayed in the word cloud below.

Figure 12 - Influencer Associations as a Word Cloud

Here, the most common words to arise were “Fake”, “Money”, “Instagram”, “Sell”, and “Products”. Interestingly, these dictions have connotations of superficiality and commercialisation, signifying that an influencer is synonymous with frivolity and capitalism to ordinary users. This was supported by additional words that frequented these responses, namely “sponsored”, “pretty”, “followers”, “influence”, “entitled”, “rich”, “aesthetic”, and “marketing”, which are all based on exterior qualities and status. Based on these findings, users across all three categories feel significantly negatively towards influencers. This was furthered in the question, “What do you think of 'Influencing' as a job?” which was answered on a Likert scale with one as ‘they have it easy’ and five as ‘it is a difficult job’. Here, 64 % of respondents answered this question with a score of 2 or lower, 36% gave a score of 3, and only 18% gave a score of 4 or more. These results demonstrate that everyday users generally hold unfavourable opinions of influencers and do not respect their job as a challenging career. This, therefore, impacts the levels of confidence that users feel towards influencers, as they predominantly perceive their messages as marketing. For example, one user stated:

> Do I trust them to advertise good products? Maybe but not really because they’re getting paid, so they don’t get much choice but to say it’s bad. I think I don’t trust the companies sponsoring them more than anything. In terms of trusting their opinion, often I don’t follow them if I don’t somewhat, but I like to think I have the critical thinking skills to determine which opinions are weird or seem wrong. (Private Participant, Male, 22)

A need-centric user expressed a similar response: “Absolutely can’t trust them at all. When you’re being paid to promote a product, it’s just a payday for them; they have no integrity, they don’t care about people. They’re just worried about their payday” (Private Participant, Female, 22). Here, a correlation between ‘getting paid’ and ‘deceit’ is evident in statements.

It was also found that users correlate trust significantly with 'qualifications', as the word 'qualified' appeared several times among respondents. Some examples include: "Don't trust them fully; if they were qualified in the field, it would make them more trustworthy" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 27). This idea of harbouring qualifications in the field of their product recommendations is also significant:

> I don't feel like I can trust people who give unsolicited advice outside their scope. I am more likely to trust an influencer who gives a genuine opinion on a makeup product than someone trying to push a diet onto their following. (Engaged User, Female, 29)

This data suggests that users follow different creators for specific reasons and lose trust in those influencing over too many different niches. The concept of trusting based on qualification was further evidenced in the health arena: "if an influencer were recommending a product for gut health, I would trust it more if this influencer were in the health/nutrition industry" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 22).

This draws considerable shifts in research from previous literature regarding the ability of lay influencers to socially mobilise due to word-of-mouth recommendations. It also suggests that cultural intermediation no longer relies on legitimacy based upon claims to expertise (Maguire & Mathews, 2012), but rather, users now want actual evidence of such knowledge - notion further explored in Chapter 5.

Paradoxically, it was found that such distrust does not deter users from being influenced on Instagram from a consumer perspective. Findings reveal that 81% of users had purchased an item promoted by an influencer in the past 12 months, with 60% of these respondents being from the engaged user category. When prompted for a purchase justification, responses were nuanced. For example, some users suggested that they purchased products they already needed but admitted that influencers increased their awareness of such needs, e.g. "I needed a similar product, and they increased my awareness of the brand" (Engaged User,

Female, 30); “I was looking for a similar product, and they had a discount code!” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 24); and “Usually it’s something I’ve already been looking to purchase, often a discount code is provided, so I see it as a good opportunity” (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 32). Other respondents stated that seeing a product advertised multiple times made them more likely to purchase it: “Hearing LOTS of influencers talking about the brand and personal friends/colleagues recommending them…. I like to research myself before purchasing something an influencer promotes & ensure they are a loyal user of the product themselves” (Engaged User, Female, 28). This highlights the value of exposure and how visibility can lead to mobilisation.

Moreover, when asked if respondents had ever been influenced to change a value, lifestyle choice, or belief after seeing someone speak about it online, 40% of users from all categories stated they had been inspired to execute a positive lifestyle change. For example, one respondent from the engaged variety asserted: “Yes, adopt a more positive lifestyle and incorporate more balance into my life” (Engaged User, Female, 32); similarly, a responder from the private participant category stated:

> I often feel inspired by content I consume on Instagram and often take these things on board. For example, if I see someone talk about how beneficial running is for their mental health, I feel inspired to do it, just like a little “push”. (Private Participant, Female, 22)

Other positive impacts from influencer content found in survey results ranged from gaining awareness of Australian politics to learning more about race and gender inequality, including inclusivity in gender pronouns. This is evidenced through a comment that stated:

> I’ve learnt SOOOO MUCH about pronouns and gender inequality, and I just realised sometimes I eat less meat because of things I see from influencers on social media. I make sure I buy ethically sourced clothing now; I don’t support companies that

> plagiarise…. I'm more comfortable asking LGBTQUI friends questions because I now have a better, broader understanding. I've learnt so much about race and institutionalised racism. 1000% more open-minded, informed and interested about minorities and they struggle. (Engaged User, Female, 22)

This idea of becoming more open-minded highlights the value of Web 2.0 in that users can utilise Instagram to become exposed to once marginalised voices, cultivating a more diverse online environment, which can sometimes be prompted by influencer culture. In turn, while users are more careful about which influencers they choose to trust, they are mobilised by the exposure of their messages. This mobilisation is further explored later in this chapter while examining the dynamics of influencing and its specific practices.

User Summary

In sum, engaged users, private participants and need-centric consumers are three distinct consumer groups that display unique characteristics, yet all contribute to the circulation of exposure. Engaged users are the most profitable group in the social media economy because they are active participants on Instagram and are heavily involved in all its features by creating, engaging with, and sharing content, as well as consuming actual products on the app. Comparably, private participants engage with many of the same features behind closed doors. They are private Instagram users who do not partake in public content creation and are judicious with their engagement. However, they assist in circulating exposure through sharing and viewing content, thus impacting user traffic. Finally, need-centric consumers utilise the affordances of Instagram to their advantage on a needs-basis. The purposes for which they utilise Instagram is important for other stakeholders within the supply chain to understand because if they satisfy such a purpose, they can be rewarded with valuable engagement by this group.

Moreover, findings suggest that all three user categories have an overall negative perception of influencers, despite some being positively impacted by elements of influencer culture. Users are highly critical of influencers who do not have the professional expertise necessary to promote the products, demonstrating shifts from previous research (Turner, 2014), which states that influencers generate legitimacy through follower counts. Finally, users are becoming more conscious of the commercialism of social media and execute autonomy in their practices of whom they follow and how long they spend on Instagram. This shift in behaviour is of crucial significance to influencers, who ultimately aim to satisfy their followers through content production and will be further investigated.

4.3 Influencers

Following the data presentation on everyday social media users, it is now appropriate to investigate how the perceptions of this group align with influencers and their own Instagram practices. As discussed in Chapter 2, influencers are “multi-platform, high-profile internet microcelebrities” who accumulate a social media following due to presenting online “textual and visual narrations of their personal lives” (Abidin, 2015, p 1). Industry standards currently categorise these microcelebrities into tiers based on audience size, namely “nano-influencers”, who have under 10k followers, “micro-influencers” with under 50k followers, and “macro-influencers” with over 50k followers (Harrigan., 2021). Aside from follower quantity, the key differentiation between influencers and their ‘ordinary’ internet user counterparts is that influencers can monetise their social media use by intentionally connecting a target audience with certain brands whilst maintaining effective communication with their following (Childers et al., 2018). Thus, this research supports Craig & Cunningham’s (2019) argument that creators should be recognized as stakeholders in current debates, both academic and policy, on platform governance.

While media academics have expressed growing interest in influencers as brand communication tools, much remains unclear regarding the empirical practices these individuals employ to maintain and grow their audiences. Therefore, the following findings display these practices through data collected from semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with 15 self-identified Instagram influencers over Zoom and took approximately one hour each. Conversations centred around subjects' pursuit of influencing, their everyday use of the Instagram platform, content creation processes, strategies employed to improve visibility, and general feelings on their professions. In my sample, all interviewees were women, which meaningfully reflects research that "influencer marketing is particularly prominent in feminised sites of cultural production" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 5).

Additionally, participants ranged between 18 and 31 years of age, and all resided in Australia, specifically Sydney (9), Melbourne (4) and the Gold Coast (2). Interviewees held diverse audience numbers on their Instagram accounts, ranging from approximately 3,000 followers to roughly 250,000. For five of the 15 interview participants, influencing is their full-time profession; the others work "aspirationally" to supplement their income, (Duffy, 2016), some in the hopes of one day going full-time, others content with keeping it as a side project. Interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analysed utilising a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Table 1 provides an overview of these interview respondents. Note that all participants have been provided with a pseudonym and are referred as that alias throughout the thesis to maintain anonymity.

Table 1 – Interview Participant Demographics

Influencer pseudonym	*Status*	*Type of Creator*	*Follower Count*	*Age*	*Location*
Amelia	Macro	Celebrity	20K	47	Gold Coast
Aria	Micro	Content	90K	30	Sydney
Cherry	Micro	Content	17K	22	Sydney
Daisy	Micro	Content	11K	28	Sydney
Elle	Micro	Content	15K	31	Sydney
Hanna	Macro	Content	200K	21	Sydney
Jesse	Micro	Content	16K	30	Sydney
Katy	Nano	Content	3K	27	Melbourne
Lily	Macro	Content	150K	21	Sydney
Lisa	Micro	Content	25K	19	Sydney
Melanie	Micro	Content	27K	29	Melbourne
Minnie	Macro	Celebrity	58.6K	29	Gold Coast
Ruby	Nano	Content	5K	20	Sydney
Sophie	Macro	Celebrity	250K	35	Melbourne
Tiffany	Macro	Content	150k	22	Melbourne

As evidenced in the table above, nano, micro and macro-influencers have been categorised into dual types of 'creators' based on research findings. In the context of this thesis, content creators encompass nano, micro and macro-influencers who have gained prominence online for their creative content and the persona they have curated within a digital context. Comparably, celebrity creators are influencers who transfer a degree of offline social capital or public fame to an online context on Instagram, for example, reality television contestants. The decision to distinguish these different types of online influence is based on my findings that the actual practices of such creators vary due to differing expectations and intentions deriving their influence origins. Chapter 4 explores both types of influencers by presenting data about their i) rise to influence, ii) influencer practices and iii) self-reflections on influencing. These ideas are examined with the assistance of ethnographic field notes and textual analysis of influencer content from both the researcher's own Instagram and influences who provided permission for my study to utilise their content for research purposes.

The Rise to Influence

The progression from an everyday social media user to a digital influencer has been of academic interest since the growth of influencer culture in 2012. As discussed in Chapter 2, the ability for 'ordinary' individuals to create an Instagram account and produce public content supports participatory culture claims that Web 2.0 has enabled "anyone to be a media producer" (Bruns, 2007). However, my findings show that while anyone on Instagram can create and circulate media content, not every user can transcend such creation from an 'amateur' to a 'professional' level. This is because an individual's content is only able to blur such spheres once an online persona has been curated, marketed, and then exposed to a greater audience, as these stages result in a level of digital influence that can then be monetised and subsequently converted into a financially viable job. This was evidenced in my data generated by questions prompting influencers to describe their rise to influence and the steps they believed assisted them in accumulating followers. When influencers in this study were asked if they could pinpoint a moment that they felt like they "became an influencer", responses varied; however, most answers centred around collaboration offers. For example, Melanie, a micro fashion/lifestyle blogger with 27.4k followers, stated:

> I think when brands started reaching out to me… I didn't realise that styling up an outfit doesn't come easily to everyone, so people started following me because they started liking what I was buying and sharing it with their friends...and then people started asking me to put certain items together, so it's kind of all fell naturally. (Melanie, Micro-Influencer)

This influencer reveals that she did not purposely begin her Instagram account to become an influencer. Instead, her style functioned as a critical source of value for audiences inspired by it, thus increasing her following and the subsequent brand deals. However, the crucial component of such a quotation is the concept that her content was 'sharable' and therefore presented the variable of exposure as a significant contributing factor to her influence.

Moreover, other responses, such as the excerpt below from a micro-influencer with 15k followers, suggest that being paid for posting was a key indicator of influence: "Getting paid for something I was doing for free made me realise I could do this as a successful job" (Aria, Micro-Influencer). This quote highlights a direct relationship between feelings of success and the reception of financial rewards. However, 'timing' was also considered a notable factor for gaining followers, with 90% of influencers in my data pool suggesting it was "easier" or "quicker" to grow an audience in the early days of Instagram "before the algorithm", as per the following response by a macro-influencer with 150k followers: "It was easier in the early days before the new algorithm. I used to grow every time I uploaded" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer).

Responses of this nature specifically suggest a perceived correlation between the traditional, chronological newsfeed and an ability to grow a following in a shorter, as reinforced in this quote from a micro-influencer: "I used to grow so fast, and now I have been stuck on 10k for about three years. I feel like no one sees my stuff anymore" (Cherry, Micro-Influencer). This highlights a direct link between visibility, or lack thereof, and the platform's algorithm, a notion further discussed later in this chapter.

On the contrary, another influencer in my sample with 155k followers stated that she had grown more followers in the post-algorithm era, attributing this growth to her participation in a reality dating television show:

> After I left the show, my Instagram was inundated with followers. Not everyone on my season left with the same success, however. The exposure from the show obviously helped, but some girls from my season only gained a couple of thousands afterwards, maybe because they did not get as much airtime as I did or work consistently on their social media upon leaving. (Minnie, Macro-Influencer)

The influencer explained that before gaining "exposure" on reality television, her Instagram had only a few hundred followers, most of whom she knew personally, as she would simply

post photos of her day-to-day life in an ordinary-like manner. Minnie revealed that gaining followers on Instagram was a key incentive to going on the program in the first place: “I had seen girls in previous years amass thousands of followers and become full-time influencers, and I can’t deny that was a motivator to go on” (Minnie, Macro-Influencer).

Similarly, another macro-influencer in my sample group believed her offline career as a model contributed to her online status:

> My name was always floating around in magazines, and I noticed most of my initial growth was in line with becoming more well-known in the modelling world. Once I gained, I think like 50,000 followers, people would come across my page and just see I had followers and follow me, meaning more brands wanted to work with me so yeah, I grew from 50-150k fast. (Amelia, Macro-Influencer)

Here, the influencer suggests that her career as a model gave her the exposure, she needed to grow her following, and once such following grew, it gave her the credibility to attract more at a quicker rate.

Based on these findings, there are two distinct routes to becoming an influencer, the content creator path, whereby one receives recognition for the content they produce online, such as Melanie’s story, or the celebrity creator route, in which one can transfer their offline social currency or ‘fame’ to an online context on Instagram, as with Minnie and Amelia. Nonetheless, an essential component of gaining influence in these routes is constructing a marketable persona that a particular audience desires to start or continue following.

Influencer Practices

Research findings demonstrate that a significant number of influencers in my sample group utilise a series of purposeful creative customs that constitute their job as online content creators. These are dubbed ‘influencer practices’ and are both implicitly and explicitly strategic and coherent to achieving visibility. While influencer practices differ upon content and celebrity

creators; findings reveal that these influencer types distinguish their social media use from strategic social media communication, namely the purposeful use of communication influencers strategically perform activities in accordance with organisational growth goals (Enke, & Borchers, 2019). These activities were discovered through a content analysis of interview transcripts with 15 influencers, in conjunction with my participant observation findings as a micro-influencer. Themes include narrative construction, content creation, scheme curating, collaborations, exposure tactics, monitoring metrics and working alongside algorithms—all of which are hereunder discussed.

Narrative Construction

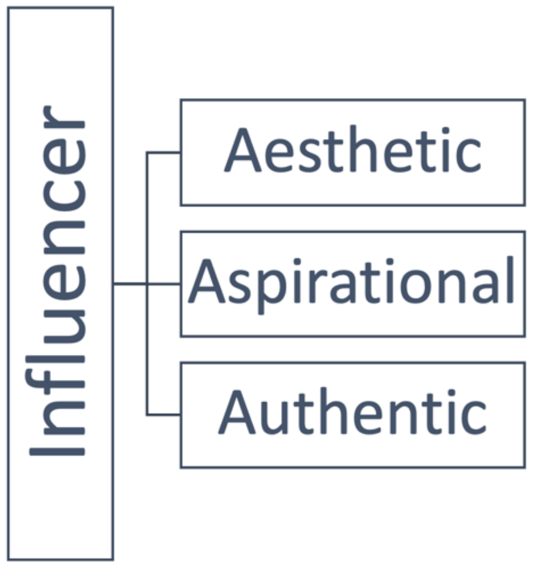
In the context of this thesis, narrative construction defines how influencers rely on visual and textual stimuli to craft an online persona they can monetise on social media. As referenced in Chapter 2, Trammel and Keshelashvili (2005) explain this practice by suggesting that bloggers actively engage in impression management systems through strategically and carefully crafting narratives about the self. My research suggests that this careful creation begins with investing in a niche category to create content as a tool to envision their audience (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). While all influencers in my sample broadly stated that they operated within the 'lifestyle blogging' space, when asked about what type of content they primarily posted, the most popular categories were fashion (60%), beauty (15%), health and fitness (15%), and travel (10%). When questioned as to why they post within such structures, responses indicated it as a branding exercise; for example, Jess stated:

> Posting within a particular niche gets you more engagement and helps you grow faster. People know what they are getting into when they decide to follow you, which enhances your personal brand. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

This statement suggests that selecting a niche category is crucial in constructing the personal narratives they wish to sell to their audiences. Moreover, when questioned on why they

believed such audiences follow them, answers varied. However, three recurring themes were identified following a textual analysis of interview transcripts: i) aesthetics, ii) aspiration, and iii) authenticity (See Figure 13)—ideals that I believe mirror the appeal of influencer culture more broadly and are thus further unpacked.

Figure 13 - Influencer Narrative Construction Themes



Firstly, I define 'aesthetic' as an underlying set of principles that appear attractive and appealing online. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this is based on Przyborski's (2017) conceptualisation that individuals express themselves aesthetically by communicating in and through pictures regarding what they show as content motifs and how they show content stylistically. The positive reception influencers receive from stylistically displaying content is apparent through interview responses: "I started growing a following because of my content style and feed aesthetic; people would always ask me how I edit my photos and what camera I use" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Here, Elle implies that her value to audiences is her visually appealing profile, confirming Abidin's (2016, p. 14) assertion that lifestyle bloggers are "unabashedly admired for their aesthetic ideals". This parallels interviewee Cherry's claim that

she started growing a following due to her unique imagery: "I began posting arty, dark images, and my following started growing faster” (Cherry, Micro-Influencer). This statement affirms that influencer content is often appreciated as symbolic goods and cultural signifiers (Hanquinet et al., 2014). However, my research found that aesthetics also extends to the physicality of influencers, not just the creative content they produce, as this group generally obtains an appearance celebrated by societal standards. This manifested through inferences from influencers that their followers admired their physical appearance: “My engagement spikes when I upload selfies or show photos of my body in bikinis” (Amelia, Macro-influencer).

The correlation between showcasing the body and receiving positive engagement resonates with the idea that the body functions as a form of physical capital that associates a value to its socially celebrated size and appearance. Here, Shilling (2017) suggests that bodily forms are linked to varying levels of implicit physical capital, leading to additional opportunities to convert such physical capital into other social, cultural, or economic resource formats.

In this vein, it becomes clear that the aesthetic nature of influencers provides a form of cultural capital that makes them appear aspirational—a term characterised by their ability to inspire followers to achieve their level of social prestige and material success, as evidenced in the following quotes: “I post lots of high-end designer goods and have a nice car, and to be honest, most of my followers use me as a bit of a muse” (Hanna, Macro-Influencer), and:

> My content is predominately travel-based, and I feel like people use my Instagram as a mood board for their trips. When I went to the Maldives, my engagement levels surged because people kept awing over my content. Everyone was invested in that trip because the Maldives is such a luxurious place to visit. (Minnie, Macro-Influencer)

In these statements, dictions ‘muse’ and ‘mood board’ demonstrate that influencers explicitly showcase aspirational content to be admired, as this endows them with a degree of social and

cultural legitimacy. Themes of aspiration were also evidenced through influencers who admitted that they believed audiences followed them for didactic purposes:

> I am like a big sister to most of my followers, and my following started growing the more I showed others how I live my life, what food I eat, what workouts I do, what brands I wear, that kind of stuff. (Aria, Micro-Influencer)

Here, Aria's perception of herself as a 'big sister' to her followers suggests that her content is created with a conscious attempt to inspire pursuits of self-betterment. This is further highlighted in the following quote:

> I feel like most people follow me as an inspiration guide. Therefore, I give advice on everything I do in my life, from my exercise regime to my favourite places to eat. People trust my recommendations and are happy to invest in what I recommend. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

This statement suggests a process of taste-making whereby influencers operate as a matchmaker between people and things (Bourdieu, 1986). The finding thus further illuminates Hardt and Negri's (1999 p. 93) concept of 'affective labour', discussed in Chapter 2, whereby consumption occurs through relating audiences to products via 'affects' that symbolise connections between utilising a product and an influencer's success as a fashionable, fit, and well-travelled individual.

Paradoxically, my findings show that influencers constantly attempt to balance aspiration with authenticity. This thesis defines authenticity as showcasing a 'true' or genuine persona beyond social media's 'highlight reel culture'[15] (Abidin, 2016; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2017). My interview findings reveal that authenticity is imperative to follower growth, as highlighted through such responses as "being authentic made my following

[15] Highlight reel culture is a metaphorical term used to describe an inclination only to showcase the positive components of one's life.

skyrocket" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). In fact, a macro-influencer in my study attributed much of her social media following to when one of her "candid day-in-the-life videos went viral" (Aria, Micro-Influencer).

This supports Aran et al.'s (2011) assertion that 'real' and 'authentic' narrative content is most popular on social media. The way in which influencers showcase authenticity varies for influencers in my sample, from "putting my face to my account" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer) to "providing glimpses into my real life, like the ordinary stuff—not just the good stuff" (Sophie, Macro-Influencer). These quotes highlight how influencers draw on 'realness' or 'ordinariness' themes to establish their relatability (Duffy, 2016). This supports Cunningham & Craig's assertion that influencers build a media brand based upon their personalities and through the "intensely normative discourse" of authenticity (2019, p. 13). Also noteworthy is that the dictions 'effortless' and 'carefree' arose several times throughout my data findings, as evidenced by Lily: "The brand image I portray on Instagram is stylish yet effortless – girl next door vibes" (Lily, Macro-Influencer). Here, the word 'effortless' can exemplify how influencers aim to appear like their aesthetic and aspirational qualities are not contrived. This, however, contradicts the unprompted use of the phrase 'brand image', which conveys the respondent's conscious effort to construct a marketable online narrative. The use of authenticity as a marketing tactic can be seen in the following assertion:

> I feel like bloggers are gaining more popularity because their rawness is trusted. For this reason, I often leave bloopers in my videos or upload behind-the-scenes photos as my followers like it because they can relate to me more when I am showing my life more candidly. (Amelia, Macro-Influencer)

Here, justification for narrative construction is displayed through the positive response individuals receive when uploading 'backstage' content, which according to Willment (2020), occurs because curated 'authentic' self-presentation ultimately enables responders to imagine

living a life they desire. Moreover, the fact that 'rawness' is metaphoric for authenticity connotes the ideal of being undisguised. This is an ironic sentiment considering influencer content is always, to a certain degree, staged and public—which is evinced in the following section, which delves into their content creation processes.

Content Creation Processes

According to my interview research, various practices are involved in creating content, as each user has specific tastes and nuanced skill sets. A significant majority (80%) of interviewees in this sample stated that they capture most of their content themselves utilising tripods or self-timer applications on their phones, in most cases iPhones.

> I used to bring out my camera on shoot days, but to be honest, my audience prefers my iPhone photos – I think because they look more candid. (Melanie, Micro-Influencer)

Utilising a mobile device rather than a professional camera reinforces an innate desire to appear like no extraordinary effort is required to make quality content. Paradoxically, however, influencers in my sample, particularly those classified as content creators, commonly revealed rather complex methods in their work, indicating several steps that occur behind the scenes in a photo or video. Processes included, but were not limited to interpreting briefs, concept creation, styling (including clothing, hair, and make-up), followed by selecting the 'winning' shot and then editing the photo or video with an array of editing apps, some to retouch and others to alter image components such as colour, and then to schedule the picture to ensure it suits the feed. These processes require a significant degree of strategic planning, as evident through interview Jess' statement:

> Throughout the week, I brainstorm content ideas and look at what I must shoot and what my feed currently looks like. Style outfits and pick locations. On my day off, pack a few outfits in the car and shoot several looks at once. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

This quote highlights a degree of labour involved in content creation processes, which is then prolonged after the photo is uploaded, as data showed that 65% of the influencers in my sample admitted to spending further time and effort 'engaging' with followers immediately after they post in the aim to boost performance. The consensus here was that a well-performing photo is determined by how much organic engagement a post conjures in the first hour of going live:

> I always make sure I respond to any comment I get straight after posting. If I don't receive a certain amount of likes or comments in the first half an hour, I will delete the post and re-upload it later because I know the algorithm will assume no one wants to see the photo, and it will perform badly. (Daisy, Micro-Influencer)

This practice emphasises the influencer concern of their content underperforming. Interestingly, however, celebrity creators in my sample did not appear as phased by achieving such engagement as they "receive a decent amount likes regardless of what I upload and when I upload" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). I argue that this is most likely because their followers are more so 'fans' and will praise their content regardless. The type of content both user groups upload is further examined.

Content Creation Types

This research defines 'content creation' as the contribution of photographs, videos, and text to Instagram. My findings confirm that Instagram content has a particular visual lexicon (Alper 2013) as displayed through the four main types that lifestyle influencers create in photograph form for their Instagram feeds, namely i) outfit of the day (OOTD) images, ii) flat lays and iii) selfies. These are here defined and discussed.

- OOTD Images

An OOTD, also known as WIWT (What I Wore Today) depicts any image that showcases oneself modelling an entire outfit. These images are commonplace among influencers in static

image and reel form, particularly those posting within lifestyle, fashion, or travel niche categories. According to Abidin (2016), the focus of these images is the way in which users ensemble an outfit from various types of apparel and accessories. Additionally, conventions for OOTD images are to inform audiences of the brands relating to each item through embedded tags, namely electronic tags that directly link to another profile within a photo or user tags, the practice of text tagging within a caption. Although, on occasions, influencers purposely do not tag each clothing piece in a photo to encourage audiences to ask where they purchased a particular item in the comment section to create intrigue and invite further engagement. This tactic is exemplified in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14 - Example of an OOTD Image on Instagram

Figure 14 exemplifies a conventional ‘outfit-of-the-day’ (OOTD) image. In frame is an entire outfit worn by a micro-influencer, who is standing against a sunlit wall. Here, the influencer has pulled together an outfit from various differing brands. However, she has only

tagged the blazer, indicating that it is a collaboration with this brand. Textual analysis of the imagery suggests that the bright lighting, which is shining on the outfit, symbolises that it is the spotlight and, thus, the main feature of the photo. Moreover, the blogger's blissed facial expression and body language are narrative tools that aim to convey a 'spontaneous moment' that was captured. The caption "afternoon light" confirms this as it appears to be a deliberate attempt to make the photo appear 'candid' rather than promotional. The effectiveness of such practice is highlighted through comments mentioning the influencer as a source of inspiration, such as: "I want your hair", "this is a whole mood", "I NEED this whole outfit", and "where are these shoes from?". This commentary highlights the influencer's affective ability to 'sell' her lifestyle and the products she wears through aesthetics. It is also important to note that these kinds of content images are both 'saveable' for users who want to utilise the outfits as a muse and 'sharable' for those who like to show their friends items that they think they would also appreciate. This is the power of OOTD images.

- Flat Lay Images

A flat lay is one of the more traditional styles of influencer content. Flat lays are a type of photo captured of objects organised on a flat surface. The image is traditionally taken from a higher perspective, whether that be a bird's-eye or front-facing or a high angle. The focus is always on the products as nothing else is visible beside the surface. This has recently been readapted into the "shelfie", which is the same concept; however, the photo is taken from a front angle instead of above, and the products are situated on a shelf rather than a surface. Flat lays and shelfies are built on similar foundations and have akin purposes. According to influencers in my sample group, these types of images are the simplest to shoot:

> When I cannot be bothered to do my hair or makeup, I shoot a flat lay because I can just style up a shot and not have to worry about if I am having a photogenic day. (Sophie, Macro-Influencer)

However, it is essential to note that flat lays were more common practice for content creators than celebrity creators in my sample group, perhaps because they are considered a more stylised, editorial type of photography.

Figure 15 - Example of a Flat Lay Image on Instagram

Figure 15 presents a standard flat lay image. It features a collation of products placed aesthetically and in proximity on a surface, in this case, a timber table. The products include a coffee, which is the salient component of the image, alongside magazines, a netted basket, and some home wear accessories such as a vase and large gold paper clip, creating a narrative of productiveness and creativity at home. The artistic and stylised way this image is presented dilutes the product placement of the coffee brand that the user is advertising in the caption: "Busy afternoon – thank goodness for my @delonghi_au coffee machine". Here, the creator has constructed a narrative around her photo and, in the process, implied that her coffee machine is the reason for her productivity. Thus, flat lays of this nature are effective because

they can be hidden beneath a veil of an editorial-style photograph that explicitly showcases the product and requires less labour than an image featuring the self.

- Selfies

Selfies are photos taken of oneself, most commonly with a self-timer or through the front-facing camera, meaning the user can see themselves as they are taking it. Senft and Baym (2015) have previously compared selfies to a "cultural artifact" to highlight their prominence. A typical example of a selfie can be seen below:

Figure 16 - Example of a Selfie on Instagram

Figure 16 shows an influencer with a face of make-up on, staring directly into the camera lens. The lighting is low, and the colours are neutral, thus connoting a sense of naturalness. This is reinforced through the influencer challenging social media norms by choosing not to edit the blemishes on her face, increasing her relatability to audiences. Textual

analysis of this selfie suggests that the influencer has attempted to create a personal connection with the audience through engaging in direct eye contact. This was reinforced by an influencer in my study, who stated: “If I feel a little disconnected from my followers or haven’t posted in a while, I will usually upload a selfie because it's more personal” (Jess, Micro-Influencer). Thus, selfies function as a “medium through which phatic communion is a ritual strategy for fostering interpersonal relationships between influencers and their followers” (Abidin, 2016, p. 6).

Another form of selfie popular among influencers is known as a ‘mirror selfie’, an image that combines characteristics of both OOTD’s and selfies. These photos involve a user taking an image within a, usually aesthetic, mirror (see Figure 17). These selfies also create intimacy with followers, particularly if the mirror is situated within their private bedroom or home.

Figure 17 - Example of a Mirror Selfie on Instagram

According to my study, 90% of influencers believe mirror selfies are one of the easiest and most effective styles of content that take less labour but produce favourable results with their audiences. This was evidenced in an influencer from my sample who stated:

> "You don't have to worry about what your face looks like or finding a cool location to shoot in. You just put on a nice outfit and take a quick photo. They are usually quite easy to fit on the feed because I always make sure there is a clean background behind my image, so they always suit my scheme" - Aria, Micro-Influencer.

Here, the influencer reflects on the nominal labour involved in taking this content. Additionally, the consciousness of these types of photos 'fitting the feed' links to another distinct practice employed by content creators, scheme curating – which will be now explored.

Scheme Curating

Curating a purposeful scheme involves devising consistent content within a particular colour pallet, style, and photo-editing regime to create a visually attractive, coherent profile. This is a crucial branding practice, as evidenced by one of the micro-influencers in my study:

> "Creating a scheme is super important because it defines who you are as a creator and acts as a portfolio for your brand, which helps bring followers and collaborations" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer).

The desire to present a coherent feed on Instagram was homogeneous among the influencers I studied, with 80% of respondents admitting they feel compelled to follow an aesthetic by creating a specific mood through colours, objects, and angles:

> "I have a feed theme that is easy to stick to as it is close to my personal preferences on style, which comes across through my colour tones, framing and photography" (Katy, Nano-Influencer).

This statement highlights Smith and Sanderson's assertion that Instagram affords users the creative capacity to "express aspects of their identity they perceive" as the most 'salient' (2015 p.2). While most influencers spoke positively about scheme curation, other responses highlighted the restrictive nature of this practice:

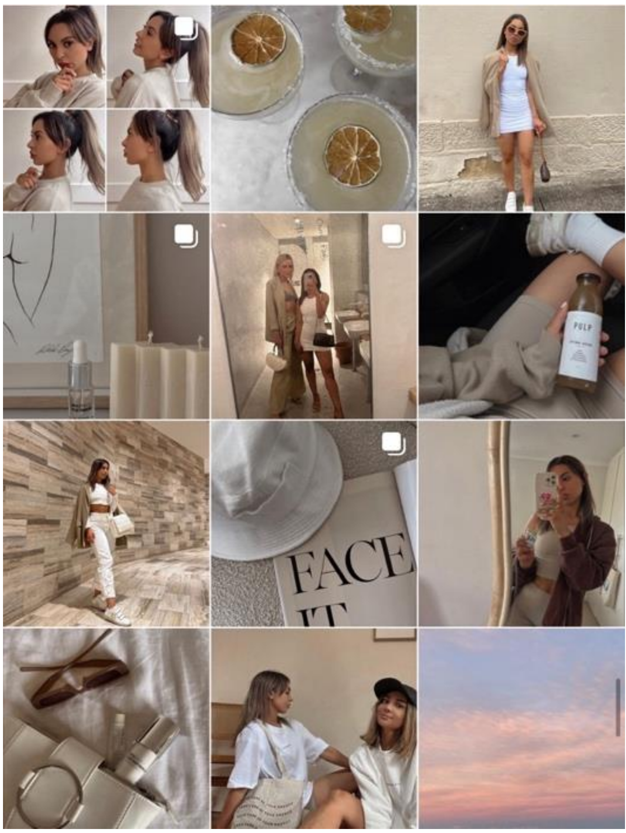
"Sometimes I cannot upload a photo because it does not suit the current scheme, which can be annoying, especially when a photo is due for a client" (Elle, Micro-Influencer).

This data suggests that creating a scheme can sometimes lead to content rigidity. However, other influencers believe such restrictions are helpful in their curation:

"I feel like the colours must work well together on the grid; otherwise, it's not pleasant to the eyes. I do feel restricted by this, but sometimes it is good because it helps me decide what to post next!" (Jess, Micro-Influencer).

This suggests that the mechanisms of an influencer's scheme can guide proceeding content, illustrating the influencer industry as a symbiotic system that actively locates methods in which presentation can be favourably displayed to online audiences. This represents forms of creator labour that operate "within the structural and material interests of social media" (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 84

Figure 18 - Example of a Curated Instagram Scheme



As a micro-influencer, I resonate with this sentiment as I strategically attempt to upload images that suit my neutral colour scheme, which functions as the starting point for my content creation. I often change the colours based on what aesthetic I am opting for at the time, which is typically a seasonal decision. The above example (Figure 18) demonstrates a current focus on browns, beiges, and light pinks, which are sometimes difficult to adhere to depending on the location or product I am shooting.

One way I maintain a homogenous colour scheme is through utilising 'presets', namely filters, which provide a consistent colour pallet over each photo, so the grid appears consistent. Presets are primarily available on amateur photoshopping apps such as Lightroom and Tezza. However, creators can also make their own by toggling differing colour settings and saving them as templates. This has led to influencers monetising the practice by selling their own presets for users to purchase and use for their own personal photos. The use of presets was a common practice among 80% of influencers in my sample group, as evidenced by the following response:

> "Presets are great because it takes much of the labour out of editing and ensures that all imagery looks consistent on my feed" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer).

As a result, presets reduce labour yet simultaneously create a more curated, consistent appearance.

Another way influencers maintain consistency is through the inclusion of 'filler images', a practice commonplace in my survey findings, particularly for content creator influencers:

> "Once I've got my content, I manoeuvre my feed around colours and what works consistently. I will always try to shoot filler pics where I can, to break up the photos and create a nice grid" (Lily, Macro-Influencer).

’Filler Images’ define the photographs influencers place in between photos to “break up” their feed (ibid.), acting as a tool to tie imagery together in an aesthetic manner. Typical filler photos include nature photos such as imagery of the beach or palm trees or arty images of objects such as lattes, candles, or interior pieces. Filler images are usually not promotional and are primarily utilised as a placeholder. An example of a filler photo is evident in Figure 19 below, taken from the researcher's personal Instagram profile.

Figure 19 - Example of a 'Filler Photo' on Instagram

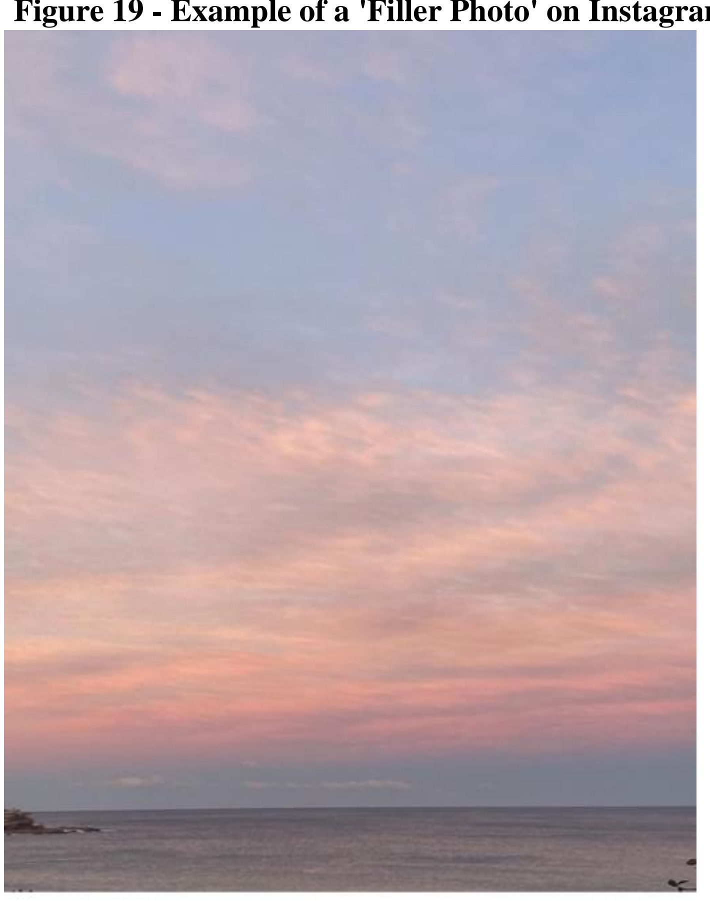


Figure 19 is a filler image of a coastal sunset. The photo is calming in nature, complements my neutral aesthetic and is objectively pleasant to look at. The caption: “A sunset to break up your feed of Black Friday Sale posts” emphasises to audiences that it is not an ad. This is important as, according to one of the content creators in my sample:

> If every photo is an ad or a product shot, my feed would just look like an ad. I feel like my filler photos create a feed that is inspiring to others as it is easy to just pop-up images

> as they are taken, but it is a skill to be able to plan those photos on a feed, so it is colour coordinated and looks aesthetic (Daisy, Micro-Influencer)

This extract illuminates Abidin's assertion that much influencer work occurs "under-visibility", despite being systematic and effortful (2016, p. 10). The amount of work put into the scheme, however, differed for my celebrity creator influencers, as evidenced in the following quote:

> I don't like my feed looking messy because it represents me, but I also don't put much time or effort into planning it. Basically, I just make sure I don't have like two photos next to each other that look too similar, but other than that, I just edit my photos nicely and hope for the best. (Lily, Macro Influencer)

The above assessment confirms that celebrity creators place less consideration into the creative component of their Instagram, perhaps because their fame is attributed to other areas, such as their persona. For example, the interviewee from the reality television show stated: "I never plan my feed; most of the photos are of myself anyway, so I just post whenever I need to and don't overthink how it looks on the grid" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer). This finding was consistent with the other celebrity creators in my sample group, who admitted to not placing a significant amount of thought into their overall Instagram feed and, instead, placed more concern into being active and uploading regularly, thus emphasising the importance of creating intimacy with, and being visible to, followers.

Conversely, 100% of the creators in this research admitted that they utilise scheduling apps. These third-party platforms allow creators to plan and schedule photos for either aesthetic or pragmatic purposes, as evidenced in the quote:

> I use a scheduling app to plan my feed and ensure I am making deadlines, so I can see what my content looks like together. If I have a photo due, but it does not suit my feed, I will not post it until it does. (Elle, Micro-Influencer)

Scheduling apps thus assist influencers in organising their sponsored posts around scheme curation for content creators. In contrast, the celebrity creators in my sample stated that they "only schedule paid brand deals" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer), and this practice was more of a way to "keep track" of what they had due and when (ibid.).

This nuance in scheme curation practices highlights how content creators and celebrity creators are appreciated for differing reasons and are subsequently held to different standards for their content and feed aesthetics. This is also the case for collaborations, a practice that will be discussed.

Collaborations

Collaborating with brands allows influencers to monetise their use of social media. The crux of collaborations, also often known as 'sponsored posts', involves a company offering influencers financial or material rewards in exchange for promotional content 'deliverables' in the form of an Instagram photo, video, set of stories, or a combination of each. The practice of collaborating supports Craig & Cunningham's argument that influencers must secure some form of remuneration on the major social media platforms" to be considered "cultural entrepreneurs" (2019, P. 1).

My findings show that remuneration occurs through numerous avenues, varying from a brand directly contacting an influencer (brand-led), an influencer reaching out to a brand (influencer-led), to an agency acting as an intermediary between influencers and brands to organise them (agency-led). This research confirms that there are various types of collaboration styles and expected deliverables, namely 'gifted collaborations', whereby brands exchange a product or service for content in a contra style agreement, 'sponsored collaborations', in which the brand pays an influencer to post a certain number of deliverables adverting a product or service, and 'ambassador collaborations', in which an influencer is paid, or gifted, on a retainer level, meaning they receive regular benefits over a specified period.

Moreover, my findings show practices influencers engage with to showcase that they are open to collaboration. For instance, it is essential for influencers to place a contact email address in their public bio to be contacted on a professional level: “Once I added my email address to my bio, I started gaining more collabs through brands reaching out to me” (Melanie, Micro-Influencer). This is because including an email address on a public profile denotes that the creator is open to professionally working with brands. From here, my fieldnotes show that a typical collaboration process usually involves:

1) Receiving or offering a collaboration
2) Negotiating the offer with the client
3) Agreeing on a set of deliverables and pricing rates with the client
4) Interpreting a brief or mood board provided by the brand or agency
5) Shooting the content based on said brief
6) Writing the caption and adhering to regulatory codes[16]
7) Sending the content to the client for approval
8) Scheduling the content based on the agreed-upon timeline
9) Posting the content
10) Sending insights to the client after the campaign to measure the return of investment (ROI)[17]

When influencers in my sample were asked about their process of accepting which brands to work with, responses varied. Most (60%) of influencers stated that they tried the products

[16] The Australian Influencer Marketing Code of Practice (AIMCO) currently advises influencers to remain transparent in their collaborations by including the hashtags #ad #gifted or #sponsored on captions or stories or instead utilising the inbuilt ‘paid partnership’ feature on Instagram.

[17] There are numerous ways in which the above collaborations can track performance. For example, the brand will often give an influencer a discount code in which they can provide their audience, and, in some cases, they will receive a commission every time such code is utilised. After the campaign, other companies and agencies ask influencers for their content ‘insights’ to track how well the content performed.

before agreeing to collaborate: "I trial products for weeks - months before speaking about them! If I like them and would buy myself, I'm always happy to collaborate" (Jess, Micro-Influencer).

However, other influencer in my sample, particularly nano- and micro-influencers stated that they sometimes sell products they do not believe in. This was evidenced through an influencer's reflection on her collaboration with an at-home IPL (laser hair remover) machine:

> It does not really work. I probably wouldn't buy it myself, and I feel really product placement-y when I post about it. Sometimes my friends tell me they want to buy it, but I feel bad and tell them it's not worth it. (Sophie, Macro-Influencer)

This quote directly contradicts the promotional content created for the product and thus, illuminates current dialogue regarding the ethics of influencers' 'selling' for commercial rather than personal interests (Ots & Abidin, 2015). An example of commercial interests is evident in interviewee Ruby's statement: "I often say yes to gifting even if I don't like the product if it's being offered by a brand or PR company, I want to build relations with, or that could repost me" (Ruby, Nano-Influencer). This confirms Duffy's (2017) finding that smaller creators often experience little compensation for branded collaborations in hope that 'exposure' may lead to future paid work (Duffy, 2017). Smaller creators must thereby consider the labour involved in a collaboration before agreeing, highlighted in the following statement:

> Depends on how demanding the brand is and if I would spend my own money on the brand. I work full time and have a hectic job, so I no longer have that much free time. I won't work with brands that demand posts to be paid within a few days of receiving the item. (Katy, Nano-Influencer)

Notably, of the 20 influencers I interviewed, only seven described influencing as their 'full-time job'. It is reasonable to conclude that those who make a full-time living out of influencing have higher payment expectations and are more reputation-conscious of the collaborations they accept. This was evidenced in the following quotation from a full-time celebrity creator

influencer: “I must be careful with the collaborations I accept because my followers are on to me. Sometimes I say not to a huge paycheque just because I know it won't be worth tainting my reputation for” (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). This was further emphasised in a statement from a micro-influencer who also creates content on a full-time basis:

> I have said no to lots of collaborations offered by influencer agencies like E-Cigarettes, waist trainers, detox teas and teeth whitening pens because I would not buy them. When you accept products like that, it's transparent, and you look like a sell-out. (Sophie, Macro-Influencer)

This consciousness of appearing like a ‘sell out’ highlights how content creators are ultimately “expected to project themselves authentically while carefully adhering to the tenets of online self-branding” (Duffy & Hund, 2019 p. 8). In turn, they hide their collaboration under a veil of advertorial style content, a practice evident through examining their collaboration aesthetics.

Collaboration Aesthetics

My findings confirm that influencer collaborations ultimately aim to integrate branding by incorporating clients “in a manner so subtle that their advertorial does not come off as a hard sell” (Abidin, 2016, p. 8). For lifestyle bloggers, this is primarily achieved through creating sponsored content that seamlessly blends with their organic posts, integrating collaborations in such content as OOTD images, flatlays and selfies.

According to Abidin, sponsored OOTD posts are effective as their tropes include “wearing, photographing, promoting and conversing about products, and the subsequent maintenance, production and curation of Influencers' and fashion brands' digital estates on Instagram” (2016, p. 94). The power of an OOTD is that consumers can see what different products look like on an individual in real life, providing an alternative lens to E-commerce websites shot by professional photographers. This heightens the consumptive nature of OOTD-style images because consumers receive them with a similar impact as a word-of-mouth

recommendation. This is exemplified in a photo taken from the researcher's personal Instagram (Figure 20).

Figure 20 - Example of a Sponsored OOTD Image on Instagram

Figure 20 is a sponsored post for a fast-fashion company hidden under the veil of an OOTD image. The photo is captured in front of a white backdrop to emphasise the outfit as the salient component. In my caption, I make a comedic reference to the Sydney Lockdown to add a layer of personality and a glimpse into the context of the image to resonate with audiences. This highlights Abidin's assertion that "influencers chiefly engage in displays and impressions of intimacy towards their followers to convey the closeness and relatability upon which the success of their advertorials lies" (2015, p.11). This resonates with my strategy above to "not dive straight into the advertisement" (Fieldnotes, 2021) as, through my observations, such explicitness deters followers. Therefore, I did not directly reference the brand I was advertising

in the caption and instead, implicitly displayed it through embedded tagging. Another popular collaboration content style is flat lay style images, as seen in Figure 21:

Figure 21- Example of a Sponsored Flat Lay Image on Instagram.

Figure 21 is a typical ‘flat-lay’ image featuring an array of different products aesthetically placed together on a surface. The image is carefully curated and edited yet signifies a sense of ‘organised mess’. The actual products utilised in this image connote self-betterment and organisation. The photo is a paid advertisement for a subscription vitamin company and is narrated as an addition to a creator’s morning routine in a purposeful attempt to diffuse product placement. This photo style suits the context of promoting the vitamins as it appears more organic, due to a limited capacity to show the particular product in use. Interestingly, however, some influencers in my sample stated that their flat lays and shelfies do not perform as well as the photos that they personally feature in:

> Flat lays never perform as well for me as photos that I am actually in. Many brands are saying "no flat lays" in briefs now; for this reason, they almost always prefer selfies (Daisy, Micro Influencer).

This quote reflects on the fact that brands typically prefer 'selfie advertorials', a practice where influencers "publish overt advertising content, prominently displaying the featured product in a selfie" (Abidin, 2016, p. 8). This type of collaboration content was popular among my sample group, with most mentioning that product selfies were the most common requests by brands, particularly beauty brands. This is paradoxical given the above data that stresses the importance of diffusing product placement. However, I argue that brands show preference for this content because holding a product close to one's face draws direct correlations between influencer beauty and the advertised product, reinforcing Hardt and Negri's concept of 'affective labour', namely the "production and manipulation of affects that require virtual or actual human contact and proximity" (1999 p. 93). Here, consumption occurs by relating audiences to products via 'affects' symbolising connections between utilising a product and their success as an individual. This notion is evidenced in Figure 22 below:

Figure 22 - Example of Product Shot Selfie on Instagram

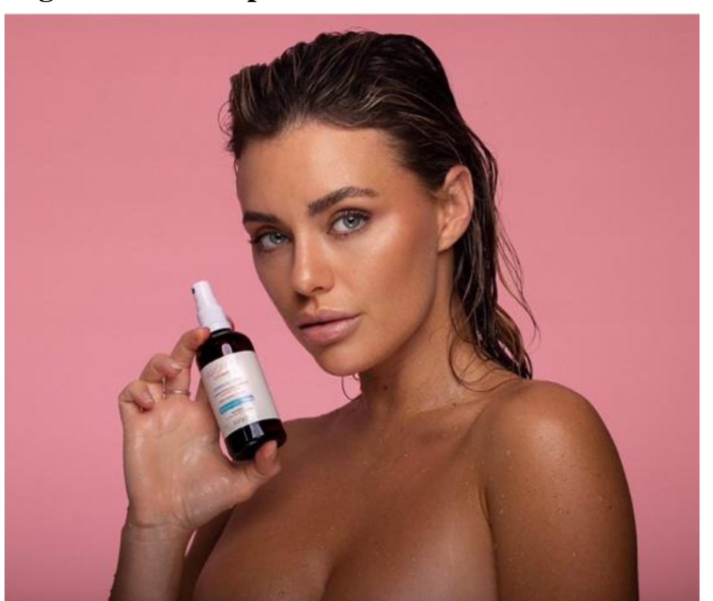


Figure 22 is a close-up of an influencer holding a hair product. The proximity between the product and her fresh hair suggests product use. The influencer at this moment utilises herself as a tangible example of the good's effectiveness, delivering a message that if followers purchase the item, they too can achieve fresh, clean hair. The caption’s reference to “good hair days” strengthens positive associations by suggesting that buying the item will foster consumer happiness and in turn, ‘good hair’. This influencer thereby appropriates the narrative generated in explicit sponsored imagery by “reorienting followers to a sense of positive self-improvement” (Abidin, 2016, p. 17). However, it is interesting that this image received approximately 50% fewer ‘likes’ than her other Instagram photos, which average 800 likes per image, indicating that followers perhaps responded adversely to the explicit ‘ad’ style image. This sentiment was furthered by an influencer in my study that stated that she no longer films ‘unboxings’, namely videos that film the influencer unpacking their free product, because they receive less engagement (Cherry, Micro-Influencer). Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, brands and businesses albeit ask for product selfies more than any other style of content:

> Brands always want a product selfie, and I feel awkward taking them because they look so inorganic and don’t receive the best engagement (Aria, Micro-Influencer).

Thus, despite not receiving positive engagement, selfies authenticate the use of the product and symbolically suggest that purchasing said product will lead to the acquisition of the favourable qualities obtained by the influencer modelling it. This suggests that the brand selfie transcends beyond the symbolic representation of the company to include the “material and technological facets of consumer-brand relationships” (Presi, et al, 2016, p.3).

Payment and Charging

As evidenced in my research, collaborations highly impact consumer-brand relationships. An influencer emphasised the effectiveness of such transactions in my sample:

> "I always hear back from followers telling me they have bought or done something I have recommended or been inspired by me; it's really humbling" (Tiffany, Macro-Influencer).

This follower feedback is valuable because it emphasises the influencer's ability to sell consumer goods. The amount influencers charge brands for this ability varies. However, the consensus is that you could charge $100 per post for every 10,000 followers. Additionally, if a brand wants to utilise an influencer's content for advertising purposes, for example, place a budget behind it or use it in an EDM or on their website for promotional purposes, creators can charge brands "usage fees" on top of content creation fees, which usually range from $100–$1000 per image depending on the contractual agreement. This is because it is assumed that influencers cannot work with competing brands during the duration such an ad is running, and thus 'usage fees' cover this expense. There are also different fees associated with creating content to promote on an influencer's feed, compared to creating content simply for a brand to utilise on their channels, which is often termed a 'content creation' job rather than an influencer collaboration. This differentiates the practices of advertising and content creation.

Moreover, 80% of influencers in this research admitted to having either a rate card or a media kit that they provide clients who want to work with them, including bundles of content for a discounted price. One influencer in this research, who chose not to be identified, provided me with her rate card. This influencer had 233k followers at the time of writing, and her rate card included two bundled options, as shown in Figure 23 below:

Figure 23 - Example of Influencer Rate Card for Instagram Deliverables

OPTION 1. | $3,575* (45% discount)
1 x Instagram Reel (shared to stories)
3 x Content Images (brand use only)

OPTION 2. | $4,375* (50% discount)
1 x Instagram Reel (shared to stories)
1 x Set of Stories (minimum 3 frames)
3 x Content Images (brand use only)

In comparison, I, a micro-influencer who engages with influencing as a side project, am happy to do mostly gifted collaborations if I genuinely want the product and perceive it as valuable enough for a contra arrangement. However, if the product is not worth significant value, or the client expects too many deliverables, I will typically charge $100 per post and bundle in stories for free. Due to my micro follower count, unless I apply for collaboration through an agency or influencer platform, I am rarely offered payment for content in the initial negotiation stages. Instead, it is not until I ask if the client has a budget that any monetary discussion arises—particularly if I am contacted directly. This sentiment was mirrored among the findings of the other nano- and micro-influencers in my sample group, evidenced in the statement from a respondent below:

> Companies never offer me money unless I ask. I have learnt how important it is to negotiate because usually brands have budgets, and they just don't offer it straight off the bat because they would rather just do a gifted collaboration. (Elle, Micro-Influencer)

Additionally, a nano-influencer stated:

> I pretty much only do collaborations for free because I have such a small audience, so I will take any networking opportunity or possibility for the exposure I will take. (Katy, Nano-Influencer)

This statement highlights that those influencers who have a smaller following engage in 'aspirational labourer' (Duffy, 2015), namely the pursuit of productive activities that hold the potential of social and economic capital rewards. This pursuit is not as crucial for macro content creators and celebrity creators who already obtain high social currency and thus, do not need exposure. This was evidenced in findings highlighting that payment was always discussed for celebrity creators, and that 100% of these influencers would not do a collaboration for "free":

> This is my job, and unfortunately, exposure doesn't pay the bills. Also, if anything, I am the one giving them exposure, so why should I work for free? (Lily, Macro-Influencer)

This data indicates that popular lifestyle bloggers, notably macro content, and celebrity creators, can sustain a living from the profits they earn from collaborations, while lower-profile influencers, namely nano- and micro-content creators, feel limited to 'free' product exchanges. This highlights distinctions between different tiers of digital influence, as individuals with higher followings are often perceived as 'overestimated' for their value, while less popular users participate in labour that companies would otherwise cover for little or no monetary compensation. This concept frequently arose in my survey responses, where influences discussed feeling underpaid and undervalued. For example, one influencer stated that "companies look at you as free labour, so many will deny paying you" (Melanie, Micro Influencer), which echoed another response: "Sometimes brands expect a lot and quite quickly, so you don't get a genuine return on creation" (Elle, Nano-Influencer).

There was also a recurring sentiment that micro-influencers feel like they are taken advantage of by the industry, particularly when brands believe gifting is sufficient payment, as evinced by one respondent: "I think most brands take advantage since there is also someone willing to do the work for free since they just want free stuff" (Lisa, Micro-Influencer). This was reinforced by another blogger who stated: "I feel brands ask for ridiculous content

expectations in exchange for gifts" (Katy, Nano-Influencer) This fundamentally highlights that the more exposure you can provide for a brand through engagement and audience size, the higher the financial reward for content due to generating superior brand publicity, thus heightening the value of exposure. In turn, influencers engage in public relations to increase such exposure, illustrating the "hierarchical, market-driven, quantifiable, and self-promotional realities of the blogosphere" (Duffy, 2015, p. 61), to be further discussed.

PR, Events & Showings

Influencers in my research believe that Public Relations (PR) activities play a significant role in gaining maximum collaboration opportunities. Participating in PR constitutes the final practice in an influencer's pursuit of visibility that emerged in my findings. In the digital world, PR, and social media agencies are essential because they are the intermediaries between influencers and brands. They are marketing companies that host several brands and influencers and unify the two stakeholders for collaborative campaigns. PR professionals and agencies, which will be defined in Chapter 4.4, are fundamentally concerned with creating favourable press for their clients. In turn, they typically send free products to influencers on their database, hold showings and events for influencers to attend, create hype around products, and organise specific collaborative campaigns. My fieldnotes show that it is in an influencer's best interest to maintain positive relations with various PR professionals and agencies to be invited to relevant events and receive maximum jobs. One way they can achieve this is by attending showings. According to one of my interview respondents, showings are "exclusive by-appointment displays introduce bloggers to new product ranges hoping they will borrow items for Instagram photo-shoots and credit the brands respectively" (Cherry, Micro-Influencer). Lifestyle bloggers commonly attend these proceedings because they better company relationships and snowball into increased opportunities. This was evidenced through the

responses, which implied that they primarily attend showings and events for “networking purposes”:

> Showings and events are hit and miss. Sometimes you don't feel like you are getting an ROI for the time spent there, but even if you meet one person, I guess it's valuable in terms of connections and could lead to more followers if you make an influencer friend who will tag you, or later work down the track if you build a relationship from someone who works in their PR team who may move to a different agency you have never worked with. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

A micro-influencer’s response furthered this: “I go to showings purely to build relations with PR. Events are nice for making friends in the industry and solidifying contacts with brands” (Cherry, Micro-Influencer).

These quotes reinforce influencers as aspirational labourers who pursue in the hope of receiving social and economic capital (Duffy, 2016). This finding confirms that lifestyle bloggers can justify the cost of their social media labour in terms of improved public relations because such development provides them with both present and future rewards through the currency of exposure.

Exposure Tactics

In the context of this thesis, exposure tactics are practices executed with the specific intent to achieve visibility or reach larger audiences. These tactics are formed by observing online content that attains visibility, as users can detect the ‘participatory norms’ that social media algorithms reward (Bucher, 2012). These exposure tactics include i) hash-tagging, ii) following trends, and iii) participating in re-gram culture. The successful execution of exposure tactics also involves monitoring metrics and navigating algorithms, all of which are here further explored.

Hashtagging

An exposure tactic commonly employed by influencers is utilising trending hashtags. Hashtags are a combination of clickable letters preceded by the # symbol. According to Abidin (2016), Instagram users commonly annotate posts with hashtag keywords to categorise and contextualise content, which are digitally transformed into hyperlinks that redirect the text to other content labelled with that specific hashtag. Hashtags enable users to ‘self-curate’ content thematically (Meraz, 2017) generating a user-driven taxonomy of images online (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). However, my findings show that Influencers predominantly utilise hashtags to receive more reach, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

> I use 30 trending hashtags under every photo. The trick is to find a series of hashtags that relate to your content but is trending currently. But you must also ensure the hashtags have under 100,000 photos associated with them, so your content doesn’t get lost. If I do not utilise trending hashtags, my images or videos won’t perform as well. (Elle, Micro-Influencer)

Additionally, another content creator influencer stated:

> I keep a close eye on my insights, particularly when using hashtags. My business account lets me know where most of my impressions have come from on a photo, and if a post does particularly well, it will tell me which hashtags the reach has come from, and I will re-use those hashtags. (Lisa, Micro-Influencer)

As evidenced by the above data, utilising hashtags is common practice for the influencers, particularly content creator influencers, with 90% stating that they use them habitually. Influencers however, reported that they yielded positive results from the practice: “Yes, I do 30 hashtags under most pics. I use them because they have proven effective for me!” (Katy, Nano-Influencer); “There is no other way of driving traffic” (Sophie, Macro-Influencer). These quotes highlight a positive correlation between hashtags and content performance.

Regarding how they decide which hashtags they use to achieve such performance, 30% admitted to utilising apps that generated trending hashtags according to the niche of the specific photo. Additionally, 80% of the influencers in my sample stated that they have hashtags saved on the 'notes' app on their phone and constantly rotate them depending on the photo's contents. It is interesting to reinforce that the celebrity creators did not feel the need to utilise hashtags as much as their content creator counterparts. The influencers that fell under the celebrity creator category stated that they do not use hashtags unless it is for satirical or comical purposes:

> I don't need hashtags because I feel my content is well received regardless. My audience is big enough that I don't really need to push it out towards certain hashtags, but I get why people use them! (Daisy, Micro-Influencer).

These findings suggest that those influencers who obtain offline social capital are less reliant on online currencies, like exposure. Instead, they receive their exposure through broadcast/legacy media, meaning that the currency is there, just acquired differently.

Following Trends

Another exposure tactic that became particularly evident among findings was purposefully creating content adhering to trends, evidenced in the following statement:

> "I find myself posting trending photos and videos because they are more likely to go viral. One trend going around is shooting in an empty car park [Figure 24]. They do so well" (Melanie, Micro-Influencer).

Figure 24 - Example of Carpark Photo Trend.

Note. Copyright @shitbloggerspost.

This concept of strategically following trends to perform well was supported by another interviewee who stated:

> There are certain images that are doing well right now that are quite random. For example, there is this pose where you lift your leg and take the photo in a mirror [Figure 25] –, it's hard to explain, but doing that pose I guarantee will get you more likes. (Jess, Micro-Influencer).

Based on these insights, I argue that following trends has become a viable means for gaining visibility.

Figure 25 - Example of Pose Trend

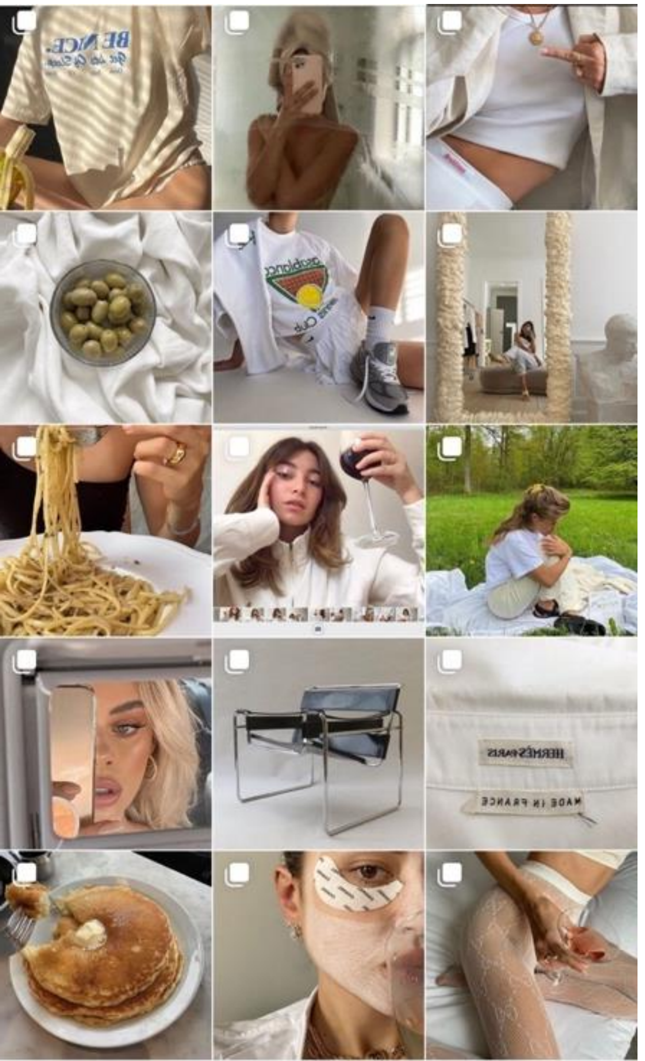
Note. Copyright @shitbloggerspost.

Along with partaking in particular content trends, influencers have also begun strategically creating particular reels using trending audios or songs: “I am pumping out several reels a week using trending music” (Katy, Nano-Influencer). Influencers are also re-appropriating specific viral formats: “My best performing reels seem to be the ones where I have jumped on a trend, like a voice-over daily vlog or the transitions everyone is doing” (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Influencers also mentioned receiving much greater engagement from reels than static photos and shifting their content, accordingly, highlighting the process-based art cycle.

This process is reflected in my field notes on the Instagram profile @shitbloggerspost, an account popularised during the global lockdowns of 2020. The profile was produced to mock the unoriginality of influencer content, “whether that be precise angles, niche set-ups like a sink filled with flowers or the harder-to-nail leg-in-the-air pose” (Rudhran, 2020, p. 1). The

Instagram account catalogues instances of 'same, but different' and is, therefore, a valuable case study for exemplifying the cultural movement of replicating and reappropriating others.

Figure 26 - Screenshot of @shitbloggerspost Instagram Feed



Note. Copyright @shitbloggerspost.

When I asked my respondents whether they were affronted by the page, one respondent stated:

> That account is funny because it is so true. A specific aesthetic is going around Instagram now; it's tracing back to Tumblr days. It's cool to post a lone photo of your plate of oysters suddenly, whereas before, that would never have attracted likes. Sometimes I go on that account to get inspiration because I know that those are the kind of photos doing well and are appreciated by others now. (Katy, Nano-Influencer)

This statement reinforces that Instagram has become a microcosm of trends where pursuits of visibility have ironically led to repetitious aesthetics of Instagram culture, which thus makes it harder for influencers to stand out.

Regram Culture

Another practice that influencers employ to gain visibility is creating content purely with the objective for it to be reposted. According to the influencers in my data set, this tactic produces favourable results, particularly in the new algorithm era, as evidenced by one influencer who stated: “Now I only grow if a huge account post one of my photos" (Katy, Nano-Influencer). The concept of gaining exposure through other accounts was prevalent throughout findings among content creators, as evidenced in the following responses: “The only time I ever notice a significant increase in followers is if an image or reel goes viral or is reposted by a big company or profile” (Daisy, Micro-Influencer,); “mine is a slow burn account, but I would get a stream of followers if someone big, like Inspo accounts, reposts me” (Jess, Micro-Influencer).

An ‘Inspo account’ describes ‘inspirational’ accounts that purely repost aesthetic content, particularly in outfit photos (for example, @ootdmagazine, @styelmefresh, @minimalstreetstyle @classystreetweargirls). These accounts usually have many engaged followers in specific niches and can function as advertising spaces if an influencer’s content is featured. Influencers who tag these accounts in their content to gain attention are participating in ‘Regram Culture’, which defines influencer practices that purposely seek out being reposted. Regram culture can be illustrated in the following responses: “Even if I am not working with a high clout brand, I will tag them in the hope they regram me, and then their followers might follow me” (Jess- Micro Influencer); “I don’t take content in hopes for extra exposure. However, when I post, I do always tag brands and into accounts for a potential increase in exposure” (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Here, users attempt to leverage the large audiences of other

brands and tastemakers to gain followings through an exchange of exposure. However, it was identified that a 'shout out', or 'repost' does not always equate to new followers.

> The account that reposts you must have an audience that is like yours; otherwise, the regram won't amount to anything, and you won't see any return on your followers. I have sometimes had huge brands repost me where I do not see any new followers from it, and I am guessing because their audience is different to mine or maybe they just don't resonate with my content. (Cherry, Micro-Influencer)

This statement suggests that other factors, such as audience alignment and content quality, are also meaningful. Thus, influencers cannot purely rely on the exchange of exposure. It must be substantiated and accompanied by other visibility vessels such as alignment and engagement because these measures validate an influencer's social status (Marwick, 2015).

Monitoring Metrics

Another critical exposure-seeking influencer practice I found in my research was the act of monitoring metrics. My study found that influencers decide what content style they produce on the app based on the engagement metrics they are likely to receive. According to Cotter engagement describes activities such as "liking and commenting" on posts. Social media companies orient algorithmic ranking" toward increasing these activities "because it generates valuable insight about users that Instagram can sell to marketers" (2019, p.9). Additionally, Instagram utilises it as a proxy measure to discern user satisfaction (Dimson, 2017).

My research found that many of the practice's influencers engage with prioritises engagement and discourages behaviours that threaten engagement data fidelity (Cotter, 2018). For example, due to the candid nature of Instagram stories, many users upload a significant amount more to stories than their actual profile due to the higher levels of engagements they receive, as evidenced by a macro-influencer respondent: "I upload way more stories than photos to my Instagram feed because I get way more views, and there is less pressure to edit

them, and they disappear" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). Here, themes of spontaneity and user desire for instantaneous content are significant. Another interviewee stated more candid stories enable her followers to get to know her better:

> Stories provide a behind the scenes look at my life and allowed my personality to shine through as I could talk to my followers. It's one of the reasons why I use polls and question boxes all the time because I feel like I am having a conversation with my audience. I always found it challenging to project my personality through photos alone. (Hanna, Macro-Influencer)

These responses suggest highlight Belk's (2013) argument that such popular social media practices enable the audience seemingly authentic 'backstage' access into a user's personal life and simultaneously present an idealised view of how we would like to remember ourselves.

Similarly, since the arrival of reels, influencers have been attempting to leverage the feature to gain more engagement and, in turn, exposure. This was highlighted by a micro-influencer in my study, who stated:

> I have been posting sponsored content on reels more than posts now because they receive way more views and engagement than my normal posts. I think this is because the Instagram algorithm is favouring reel content to encourage people to use the new feature (Melanie, Micro-Influencer).

The increased utilisation of reels for visibility purposes was mirrored by 80% of my interview respondents, including myself. I had stayed stagnant at approximately 10k followers for four years as a micro-influencer. Recently, however, I uploaded a reel that went 'viral', amassing over 500k views at the time of writing. This one video led to an increase of over 900 followers on my personal Instagram. While the video was not significantly different to my usual content, it received considerable engagement and was thus picked up by the algorithm. This exposure led to more followers than I had gained over the past four years on Instagram, causing me to

shift my focus from static imagery to video content in hope of achieving more opportunities for virality. This participant observation supports Cotter's finding that "Instagram's algorithms reward engagement with exposure, which increases the chances of being seen and, thus, gaining followers" (2018, p. 9). In this vein, my findings confirm that, as "influencers view engagement as a measure of success and a means of increasing visibility" (ibid), they are more likely to place effort into the content they know will receive such engagement. For this reason, 100% of my content creators in this data pool admitted to regularly checking their engagement insights. One micro-influencer stated:

> I like to know where most of my reach is coming from. If I notice that a photo or video has more engagement than usual, I will try and figure out what my audience likes about that content and replicate it. I believe if you are not looking at insights, you are not making informed decisions, and your engagement rate will suffer. (Lisa, Micro-Influencer)

Having knowledge of engagement rates is essential because many agencies and brands will only work with influencers who sit within a specific percentage. Strong engagement typically falls around 1% to 5% according to industry standards. This number is calculated based on the number of followers one has in comparison to the average amount of engagement (likes, shares, comments) a user receives. However, unless businesses utilise third-party apps, the only way to discern an influencer's engagement rate is by analysing their profile.

This became challenging in July 2019, when Instagram removed the visibility of the 'likes' metric on Instagram photos to decrease social pressures for users. According to my field notes, in the initial days after the like count display was removed, general zeitgeist surrounding the modification was that users could now shift focus to the actual photos and videos shared rather than how many likes such content could obtain. From a content creation perspective,

many influencers took to their stories to express feelings of liberation as individuals felt they could now revert to the spontaneous, creative purposes Instagram was built for:

> "I felt like I could upload whatever I wanted without the pressure of others knowing whether it performed well" (Jess, Micro-Influencer).

This sentiment was mirrored by an interview participant, who stated:

> "I started to upload whatever I wanted and at whatever time of day when before, I would strategically time my posts with the times that perform the best" (Daisy, Miro-influencer).

These statements imply that the removal of likes correlated with a heightened level of liberty, as furthered by the following: "I don't feel the same 'shame' once associated with a post with a low like count, as no one else can see it." (Katy, Nano-Influencer), and "It made it less stressful and removed the embarrassment for many people because it didn't feel like a competition. I really like the feature" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer). These quotes highlight Marwick's (2015, p. 142) suggestion that likes, as highly visible metrics of social media success, function as social currency and social reinforcement, and thus drive competition among creators. Thus, the removal of likes led to a decreased feeling of opposition. However, my field notes show that the public invisibility of likes did not impede my habits of routinely monitoring metrics, as it was still available for creators to privately view. Another observation was that my likes significantly decreased in general. A micro-influencer content creator from my sample agreed with this sentiment, stating: "I had to start posting at peak times again, especially for sponsored posts where the client asks for insight screenshots" (Interview Respondent 19). Similarly, one influencer stated that the removal of likes put further pressure on other visibility factors, such as followers, aesthetics, and comments:

> Since likes were removed, I have really noticed an emphasis placed on making sure your feed is immaculate again to gain followers. Since I have stopped getting as many

> likes as possible. I am focusing so damn much on how my feed looks and trying hard to incite comments through my caption. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

This data suggests that, once likes were removed, influencers sought visible engagement through other metrics. This is because the removal of like counts did not change the fact that an influencer's career success is based on visibility metrics that make influence and status explicit to advertisers and audiences (Duffy & Hund, 2019). In turn, insights are essential to influencers, both celebrity and content creators, because they provide an understanding of what their audience resonates with, thus allowing them to create more likeable, sharable content, which subsequently leads to an increase in engagement due to the algorithm privilege, which will now be discussed.

Working Alongside Algorithms

Working alongside algorithms has become a critical practice for influencers because the platform's algorithmic rules demand a focus on visible indicators of influence. As mentioned in Chapter 2, "playing the game" thereby captures the disciplinary normalisation of algorithms treating visibility as a reward and, asserts an "influencer's role in directing and making sense of their behaviour through interpretations" (Cotter, 2018, p. 6). This process describes how individuals work around algorithmically mediated environments knowing what to do to be recognised (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). My research shows that influencers engage in this process through resistant practices, namely engagement hacking and paid promotion, both which come at the risk of being 'shadowbanned', which will now be explored.

Engagement Hacking

Engagement hacking defines the practice of partaking in laborious practices that actively orient influencers toward the demands of the technological infrastructures to make themselves 'algorithmically recognizable' (Gillepsie, 2017). The most common example of engagement hacking is the participation in Engagement pods, namely "grassroots communities" where

influencers "agree to mutually like, comment on, share, or otherwise engage with each other's posts, no matter the content, to game Instagram's algorithm into prioritising the participants' content and show it to a broader audience" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 2). When I asked my influencer respondents if they participated in engagement pods, also known as 'comment groups', all micro-bloggers interestingly said yes, while macro bloggers stated that they did not. Such data suggests that the algorithm organically promotes the more prominent players, excluding their need to participate in 'quick fix' engagement labour, because they are more content with the amount of exposure they receive. This means that macro-influencers do not need to work as hard for their social capital, reflective in the fact that influencer's believe engagement pods are strenuous labour:

> Engagement pods are annoying because they are much labour, but without them, I feel like no one sees my content because I don't get that level of engagement straight away, meaning the algorithm thinks that my content isn't worthy enough. (Lisa, Micro-Influencer)

This was further highlighted through responses about the mechanics of these groups, where it was collectively agreed that for engagement pods to work, participants must write meaningful comments to other members of the group, as emojis or short, generic comments, for example, will be flagged as 'bot activity[18]' and subsequently deprioritised by the algorithm (Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Additionally, it was determined that speed is essential as substantial engagement numbers within the first five minutes trigger the algorithm to amplify content and circulate it across the newsfeed of a broader audience – highlighting how the current algorithm prioritises posts with higher engagement levels (ibid).

[18] In 2017, Instagram banned bot services such as Instagress, which identified accounts and photos based on a set of keywords provided by the user and automatically "liked" and commented on them from the user's account (Wilson, 2017, p.1).

While engagement pods have been circulating the Instagram ecosystem for the past five years approximately, it is noteworthy that anxieties over the algorithm and the downfall of visible quantities spurred their popularity:

> I am in a few comment groups. They make me feel less helpless about the algorithm because I know that even if my post does not show up on the news feed straight away, the girls in the pod will like it, and my post will get instant engagement. (Daisy, Micro-Influencer)

Here, the word "helpless" is significant as it highlights the practice as a direct attempt to gain agency and work alongside the algorithm in response to the "coercive force of the threat of invisibility" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 2). This subsequently evokes Consalvo's (2009) inference that "discourses of 'cheating' within the culture industries, wherein what is deemed 'acceptable' user activity is situated within ever-evolving power relations (Petre et al, 2019, p. 3).

Paid Promotions

Algorithm-induced visibility anxieties have also led to the arrival of paid tactics that promote rapid growth in followers, such as Influencer buy-in giveaways. Buy-in giveaways involve multiple paying accounts (usually brands or influencers) seeking reach and follower growth and presenting new commercial avenues for the businesses that organise them. The premise of these giveaways is that to enter users must follow all participating users and tag a friend in the comment of the giveaway post. By pooling influencers together in such a manner, participants reach a much larger audience, thus heightening exposure. According to my respondent, the cost to participate in this type of Instagram competition was approximately $3,000AUD:

> The followers are genuine, so the investment was worth it for me and would be to anyone serious about maintaining their influencer status and lucrative appeal to brands. (Cherry, Micro-Influencer)

This statement suggests that maintaining influencer status is directly correlated to a 'genuine following', which is challenging to achieve through organic exposure alone as it is now a scarce resource. Additionally, such finding suggests that influencers, as well as their audiences, are distinguished with tiers, herein being the differentiation between genuine and ingenuine.

Another influencer in my focus group admitted to utilising a different form of paid service called TREE BLOOM.

> I caved and signed up for TreeBloom because I just couldn't catch a break. I know my content is high quality, but I am just not receiving any exposure, and so I am not growing. (Cherry, Micro-Influencer)

According to their website, TreeBloom (2020) is an agency that facilitates "exceptional results" for models, influencers, and businesses, guided by a team of marketers through "unique marketing for the best results in a shorter time". Their selling point is that they attract 'real, organic followers' for clients through targeted strategies, including tactics like the buy-in giveaways and sponsored ads. The rate for such a service is significantly less than buy-in competitions, starting from about $90AUD, making it an alluring service, particularly for micro-influencers struggling to supersede the algorithm and gain exposure. However, according to my respondent, her use of the service was a "waste of time" and did not convert to much return on investment:

> Lucky it was cheap because I only saw my account grow to about fifty followers, so it was not worth the money. I also did not see my engagement go up at all, which means the addition of followers wasn't even worth it because it would have made my engagement rate go down. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

In turn, these services do not guarantee results for influencers, which makes engaging with them somewhat risky, because they risk tainting ones and, makes them suspectable to becoming shadowbanned.

Shadow Banning

According to Cotter (2018), shadow banning "refers to the (perceived) suppression of one's post(s), such that a user becomes virtually invisible to others" (2018, p. 2). My findings showed that 40% of influencers in my sample stated were deterred to engage in the above exposure-seeking practices for fear of being shadow banned.

> I don't engage in engagement pods or use any apps because if you're shadow banned, your content won't appear on anyone's feed unless they already follow you. Shadow banning also hides your posts so all the hashtags you are using to expand reach are for nothing. It's debilitating, really. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

While influencers are divided on whether shadow bans genuinely exist, it is undeniable that fears of such sanctions have a direct impact on their strategies. This was exemplified through my research through a micro-influencer:

> I make sure I switch up my 30 hashtags every so often, so the algorithm doesn't attack me. I also always make sure I don't engage with too many of my content creator friends at a time in case they think I am a bot or something. Just don't want to get shadow banned.

Here, the diction "attack", which connotes violence, highlights a fear response to the material conditions of platformised cultural production on Instagram, where proprietary curation algorithms seize knowledge and control of the labour process from the producer (O'Meara, 2018). Thus, I argue that the threat of being shadow banned is a tool utilised by platforms to "Undermine users' confidence in what they know about algorithms and destabilize credible criticism" (Cotter, 2021, p. 1), and ultimately - keep influencers in line with commercial intentions.

In sum, engagement hacking and paid promotional efforts are ultimately a collective resistance against selective content algorithms that have reconfigured the influencer labour process (O'Meara, 2019). Perhaps more significantly, however, is that these practices highlight

a capitalist style system whereby some actors must put in more work to achieve exposure for their cultural production and be assigned value within the Instagram economy. Thus, platforms' instructions to "eschew strategic visibility-enhancing tactics" and instead, focus on creating "high-quality, meaningful content" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 8), is contradictory as my findings display that smaller influencers and content creators often put significantly more effort into their content yet receive fewer results in comparison to macro-influencers and celebrity creators.

These settings also highlight a salient double standard when considering large technology companies valorise "fast growth, scalability, efficiency, and use of automation whenever possible" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 8). Additionally, Instagram encourages its users to utilise its own paid advertisement services within the platform, thus highlighting their paradoxical commercial interests and leading to some influencers becoming frustrated with the system, which will now be further discussed.

Self-Reflections on Influencing

How influencers perceive their role within the social media landscape is a crucial insight into their practices and cultural participation. When respondents were asked about their thoughts on influencing as a job in my research interviews, most respondents initially yielded positive responses, many emphasising the creativity involved in the job:

> Being an influencer is so frowned upon these days. I love receiving products to be creative with, and I like that people care about your opinion enough to follow you/your life. (Minnie, Macro-Influencer)

This response highlights a degree of self-awareness regarding negative perceptions surrounding influencing as a profession, drawing parallels to sentiments from earlier in this chapter. Other respondents spoke of meeting like-minded people and material perks: "Getting to work with amazing brands, free clothes, beauty products and other perks, making friends

with like-minded women. Meeting people" (Katy, Micro-Influencer); "the amazing opportunities that money can't buy, events, flights, hotel stays and experiences, people you meet, and all the FREE SHIT!". (Jess, Micro Influencer). These statements were mirrored by 90% of respondents who also noted that friends, gifts, and services were the primary perks of the job, along with the fact that they no longer spend much money to sustain their lifestyle, which amplifies their total profits.

Moreover, 30% of respondents alluded to building relationships with followers as a key reason as to why they love what they do. This supports Abidin & Ots assertion that "the deep and intimate relationships between their personal brands and their followers" is central to influencer success (Abidin & Ots 2016, p. 154):"I love feeling like I am helping my followers – they come to me with advice and often tell me how grateful they are for how open I am, and that makes me so happy!" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of 'parasocial relations' can be utilised here to describe how followers develop one-sided interpersonal relationships with influencers, producing an illusion of profitable intimacy. However, maintaining these relationships can be a burden, with a micro-influencer admitting she feels "pressure to constantly post, reply to comments and mine life for content" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). The metaphor of 'mining' for content suggests a purposeful extraction process, connoting a sense of labour involved in commodifying life moments (Fuchs, 2021). This constant need to be creating content, and the subsequent commodification of the self, leads to increased pressure on individuals: "I feel pressure to be younger, skinnier, more stylish. Pressure to post more often and more of my life" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer); "The pressure placed on influencers and having to change to fit with what's trending" (Melanie, Micro-Influencer).

The above statements suggest that the job of influencing puts normative pressures on influencers to conform to specific aesthetic standards. This highlights Maguire and Mathew's

(2014) concern regarding the emergence of cultural intermediaries as being related to an "economic system that not only requires the production of needs but also intends to create an ideal 'self' that is based on consumerist behaviours" (Aires, 2020 p. 3). Other interviewees mention specific pressures regarding posting and navigating the algorithm:

> I feel pressure to post frequently because if I took a few days' breaks, I would have to restart my "algorithm" again as your followers stopped engaging with you the past few days. Also, being inactive means getting fewer job requests. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

This was reinforced by an influencer who stated: "Yes. I often feel pressured to be active in order not to lose my engagement" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). The notion of always being "active" highlights the tension and mutual dependency of an influencer's online and offline identity (Chittenden, 2010; Hardey, 2002).

Implications related to constantly connecting with one's work identity were highlighted through an influencer's statement that her Instagram account had become "energy draining" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). This was supported by influencers' expressing constant anxieties over their sponsored content not performing well:

> Brands always ask for insights after a collaboration, so I always feel super stressed if my sponsored content does not perform. I get worried that brand will tell others and companies will think my followers are not engaged, and they will not want to work with me again. (Jess, Micro-Influencer)

Here, I argue that concerns over insufficient exposure for social media labour and content creation can be compared to the stressors of not receiving financial compensation for a physical job.

Another finding was that there is a degree of emotional labour involved in influencing, as evidenced in the following statements: "The amount of hate I get for the most trivial things makes me so anxious to post some days, especially when I am just not in the headspace to deal

with hate" (Tiffany, Macro-Influencer); "I feel like as an influencer you are damned if you do and damned if you don't most of the time - I just don't want ever to be cancelled, which is why I stress less when an agency or brand approves my content first" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer).

Interestingly, the term 'cancelled' arose eight times during interviews, particularly among macro-influencers and celebrity creators. According to Velasco (2020), the act of "cancelling" someone is a collective practice primarily targeted against public figures or organisations who defy the norms of social acceptability. Cancelling an influencer is a by-product of 'cancel culture', which is highly prevalent in today's social media landscape and promotes "a form of public shaming initiated on social media to deprive someone of their usual clout or attention to make public discourse more diffused and less monopolised by those in positions of privilege" (ibid, p. 1.). My data shows that 80% of respondents implied that they felt pressured to be mindful of social and political issues to avoid being cancelled:

> I always feel so tense on social media during times of social distress. Like the bushfires and the start of the Covid lockdown, for example – it seemed frivolous to be posting about skincare when people's houses were burning down, and people were dying, and people were cancelling influencers for posting as usual. (Amelia, Macro-Influencer)

Based on these findings, I argue that pivots in social expectations have recently resulted from various global issues that have played out on social media over the past few years, which have led to influencer backlash for the industry appearing tone-deaf (Abidin, 2020). This is because influencers on social media are 'digital-first personalities' (Hutchinson, 2019) and thus, their followers are "attuned to online trending topics and news coverage on the industry" (Abidin, et al, 2021, p. 115). In turn, influencers' must substantiate their content beyond commerciality to stay relevant as a public figure. However, many expressed feelings of not being 'qualified' enough to be vocal about such issues. For example, one responder said: "I don't feel articulate enough to speak about politics. But I do make sure I engage in conversations that are seen as

important because if you stay silent, followers will think you are not an ally and cancel you" (Lily, Macro-Influencer).

This highlights an explicit pressure for influencers to engage in social and cultural debates to remain relevant. The impact such engagement has on influencer perceptions was evident through interviewee, Jess who spoke publicly about the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and stated that her "engagement went up drastically, which was comforting" (Jess, Micro Influencer). This quote sparked concerns about lay influencers engaging in public discourse purely for the value of exposure, as further evidenced through findings that some influencer participants would purposely utilise the 'stay home' sticker on their Instagram stories during lockdown to receive higher engagement and exposure on their content: "Whenever I used the stay-at-home sticker, my story views went up!" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer).

Subsequently, when influencers were asked if they feel any tensions surrounding giving advice to followers, responses varied from: "Not at all; I'm always transparent and tell them to seek professional advice alongside what I say from personal experience and prior studies" (Minnie, Macro Influencer); "Sometimes yes, I rarely do as I don't see myself as an expert" (Melanie, Micro Influencer). Several responses also mentioned the concept of expertise as a vital variable in speaking about topics in the public interest, again resonating with user findings in Chapter 5.

This concept of being an 'expert' is noteworthy as one of the critical reasons for their online prominence is their lay expertise, whereby the visual representation of beauty, rather than education, authenticates knowledge to followers. However, my findings reveal that contemporary influencers are conscious that aesthetics are no longer sufficient to sustain a following:

> I am very conscious about what I produce these days. I know my followers don't just want to see pretty pictures; they want content that gives them value, so even if I am just posting an image for aesthetic purposes, I try to make the caption something meaningful, so I don't just look superficial. (Amelia, Macro-Influencer)

This highlights a notable shift in influencer practices where it is no longer enough to sell a lifestyle simply. Instead, influencers are also expected to be held accountable for their messages and be sensitive to changing socio-political climates to remain profitable within the social media economy.

Influencer Summary

This chapter counteracts existing claims that Web 2.0 allows "anyone to become a public figure by virtue of being themselves" in front of an anonymous audience (Whitmer, 2015, p. 40). Instead, it was found that numerous exposure-seeking practices are involved in the progression from an everyday user to a profit-making digital influencer that not all stakeholders in the economy are aware of. Thus, while the "digital economy's guiding logics of attention and visibility rouse social media users to put themselves out there" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p.1), this chapter found that even influencers experience digital visibility in profoundly uneven ways.

I argue that this vexed nature of visibility stems from how an influencer grows their audiences, which sorts them into two categories: content creators, influencers who gain followers for their content and creativity; and celebrity creators who gain prominence through external sources, such as their careers. While equally profitable, findings demonstrate that content creators engage in increased labour because their celebrity counterparts already obtain a level of social currency. Additionally, their following is built upon different foundations and more closely aligns with 'fans', which forms the foundations of the digital inequalities that exist between the two influencer groups.

Despite nuanced origins, findings demonstrate that both types of influencers seek to construct a marketable persona that attracts a particular niche audience to start or continue following them. This manifests through influencer practices, which are implicitly and explicitly strategic and coherent to gain exposure. One such example was the practice of narrative construction, which involves curating and maintaining an online persona. My findings hereby showed that influencers engage in specific online practices that make them appear ‘aesthetic’, ‘aspirational’ and ‘authentic’. They display these virtues through various content creation types (OOTD images, flat lays, selfies), which they also monetise through collaborations.

Collaborations are crucial components of an influencer's primary offering and reflect their ability to function as profit-making cultural intermediaries. There are differing collaboration options (brand-led, influencer-led, agency-led) and forms (sponsored ads, contra agreements, ambassadorship, gifts). To attain numerous collaborations, findings highlight that an influencer strategically engages with PR professionals to network and build strategic relationships. Influencers also commonly deploy exposure tactics, such as utilising specific hashtags and following viral trends to achieve visibility. Here, the imminent threat of invisibility has led to influencers’ closely monitoring their social media metrics and navigating alongside algorithms to gain increased exposure. This has led to anxieties of becoming shadow banned or cancelled and, in turn, heightened the need for influencers to ensure that they are creating the type of content that the platform ‘rewards’ with visibility and substantiating themselves to safeguard both their careers and perhaps, more importantly, their relationship with followers. They can enhance these efforts by working with agency professionals, which I will now discuss to conclude the chapter.

4.4 Agencies

The final component of this findings chapter discusses how the agency stakeholder group, assist in the circulation of exposure within the social media economy. These agents are "located between content producers and platforms" as they function by enabling increased visibility through several strategies "including a nuanced understanding of platforms and technologies, along with the collective publishing power of multiple online content producers" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 1). Chapter 4.4 explores such power through in-depth interviews with industry professionals and business owners who utilise influencers for advertising purposes. These interviews were semi-structured and conducted over Zoom. Respondents include two business owners who engage in nuanced influencer management, namely a Sydney Salon Owner who performs her own PR in-house (Small Business Owner Respondent), and a CEO of a Food Manufacturing Business who utilises a PR Agency (CEO Respondent). Also interviewed was an owner of a PR Agency (PR Agent Respondent) and a Content Manager from influencer platform Vamp (Influencer Platform Respondent). These individuals requested to be kept anonymous by name and will be identified using the titles listed above. The sample was carefully chosen due to their representation of different sectors within the agency stakeholder. Associated findings situate agencies within the social media economy and examine how they assist and rely upon exposure trading through sourcing influencers, creating agency criterions, managing deliverables, and ensuring ROI.

Sourcing Influencers

Connecting with influencers for a campaign is a crucial component of the collaboration process and is navigated in nuanced forms, i) in-house, ii) PR Agencies or iii) Influencer Platforms. These are elaborated below.

In House

Business owners can connect with influencers by organising collaborations in-house, which involves the brand or business directly contacting an influencer, usually through Instagram messenger or email. This type of influencer sourcing is displayed through my interview with a Sydney Salon Small Business Owner, who conducts all collaborations with influencers herself. To source the influencers, she wishes to work with, this business owner scrolls through:

> Tagged photos of influencers wearing or using a brand or service that fits my salon's personality, but not a competing salon. An example is a venue with the same target market or aesthetic as my salon. (Small Business Owner Respondent).

The respondent revealed she then reaches out to such influencers directly via Instagram. This strategy is a tactic to find influencers that align with her business and reinforces earlier findings that exposure through tagged photos is a significant way for new audiences and prospective clients to find influencers.

Significantly, however, the Respondent added that this was a "time-consuming" exercise and often took away from everyday duties. This is because she must then negotiate an agreement, organise the logistics and all other administrative work that comes with the territory of collaborating. Additionally, when su8ch respondent was asked how successful this type of influencer sourcing was, she replied:

> It usually works because I have done the heavy lifting myself and know which influencers would align with my brand. There have been some occasions, though, when I have done an influencer's hair for free, only for them to never tag me, which was obviously a waste. (Small Business Owner Respondent)

Here, the respondent highlights the risk of engaging in collaborations where no deliverables are stated or contracted beforehand. For this reason, many business owners choose to engage with PR agencies to connect with influencers who have accountability to an agency.

PR Agencies

The role of a PR Agency is to connect brands to public figures who can create positive press around a product or service. Some PR agencies also manage specific influencers, exclusively organising their collaborations and receiving a cut of the profits. PR agents typically have numerous brands as clients whom they work with to enhance their reputation for a fee. Activities they organise on behalf of their clients include PR send-outs or ‘gifting’, paid campaigns, showings, events, and any other publicity practice. The CEO respondent interviewed as part of this research is a client of a leading Sydney based PR agency and stated: “I engage with a PR person every 12 months for three months, and she chooses whom we approach”. Many brands and companies who do not fully understand the social media landscape will choose this type of marketing management as they do not know which influencers are suitable to reach out to and may not have the time or capacity to do so. This was reflected in the business owner’s statement:

> I think going through a PR agency is great because I don’t have to think about it. Also, I feel like the influencers want to perform to continue their relationship with that agency. We always get quite a few followers from the experience and content to re-purpose on our social media, which makes it worth the money. (CEO Respondent)

Thus, while this type of interaction comes with a PR agency fee, the labour time is saved for the client, and outcomes of the collaboration are usually more successful, as evinced by higher return.

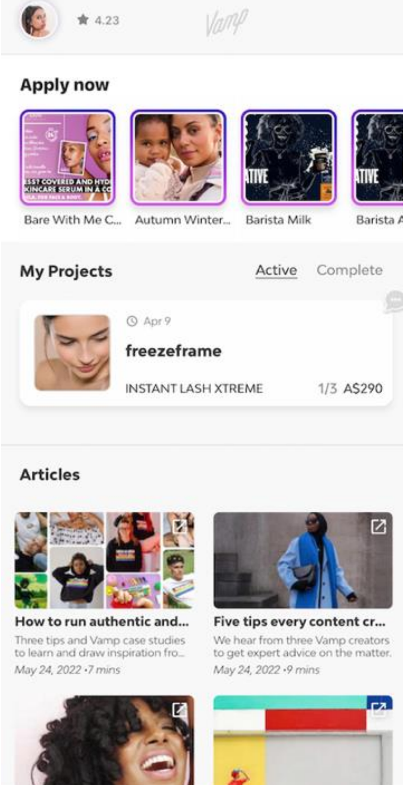
Influencer Platforms

Another option for brands seeking a collaboration or influencer campaign is registering with an Influencer platform. Influencer platforms are businesses that work with brands and social media influencers to facilitate social media marketing campaigns, usually in an app or website format. The role of an influencer platform is like that of traditional PR agencies, as they

essentially enable "increased visibility by leveraging the collective contribution across technological infrastructures" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 1). However, influencer platforms exclusively host influencers and no other 'talent', and thus are "targeted tools for buying access to bloggers through digital marketing platforms" (Keller & Fay, 2016, p. 2). They also provide briefs and facilities for users to upload and post their content directly through the app. The existence of platforms such as Vamp have popularised in Australia, alongside similar digital platform formats such as The Right Fit and HypeTap, which are available as smartphone applications and internet websites.

According to Vamp's Head of Content, an employee from Australia's leading influencer platform Vamp, the business is "a tech-based solution that connects brands with a global community of content creators."

Figure 27 - Screenshot of Vamp Interface



Note. Copyright Vamp Application

Figure 27 is an example of the Vamp app interface from a user perspective. The influencer's 'Rating' is featured at the top and is based on the score brands give them at the

end of a campaign. The ‘Apply Now’ header shows the active campaigns an influencer can apply to (which scrolls horizontally) and contains the briefs, expected deliverables, campaign dates, and monetary rates for each campaign. Under the ‘My Projects’ header, creators can view their active and completed campaigns. Below are value-adding articles that influencers can read to assist with content creation.

When asked how VAMP functions from a brand perspective, Influencer Platform Respondent stated:

> Brands can log on to our platform and submit a brief that will appear in the apps of all our relevant creators. Next, the brand can select [out of the influencers who applied]; then, the platform simplifies the whole campaign process from end to end. We distribute products, chat to creators, and approve content (Influencer Platform Respondent).

This highlights the critical benefit of working with an influencer platform, as it ‘simplifies’ the campaign process for all parties, as all collaboration components are managed through the app, thus reducing resources. Additionally, to source influencers, the respondent revealed that while most users apply to join the app, they also “recruit specialised talent through social media and ask them to join our platform if we're seeking people for a specific campaign and don't have enough creators in that niche” (Influencer Platform Respondent). Importantly, however, influencers must ultimately satisfy a criterion to be selected for these campaigns, which are now discussed.

Agency Criterions

My findings show that agencies and industry professionals have varying criteria that dictate which influencers they choose to work with. For example, Vamp only accepts influencers on their platform with a “real” audience of over 5,000 followers. According to my interview with their Head of Content, influencers must also have “high engagement levels, high-quality content creation skills and high standards of professionalism”, and each is influencer “vetted

before being added to the community" to ensure they meet such criteria (Influencer Platform Respondent). This sentiment was mirrored by the PR Agent Respondent, who admitted to looking for factors such as "reach, personal relationships, aesthetic, authenticity, and creative output". This data makes it clear that having followers is only one collaboration benchmark, and that other factors, such as engagement and content quality, play a more important role. In turn, agencies commonly work with micro-influencers because they have the capability of sensitising people with their close reach and have "higher engagement power over their communities" (Leonardi, 2020).

Small Business Owner Respondent furthered this finding, stating, "most of my connections have around 1m followers and aren't as influential as the current influencers and have a smaller following." Additionally, the CEO Respondent stated: "Whilst micro-influencers may get more exposure and following; I feel like micro-influencers translates to sales more for us". This marks a trend of industry agents moving away from influencers who have large, disengaged followings as their exposure is deemed not as valuable as small authentic audiences, which is ironic considering this chapter has thus far revealed that micro-influencers are often underpaid and receive other digital inequalities—a notion revisited in Chapter 5.

Moreover, a recurring motif throughout the interviews was the inference that, influencers should be perceived as 'on trend' to be influential. This criterion is grounded in literature we visited in Chapter 2 that understands influencers as "tastemakers" who operate as a matchmaker between people and things (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). Here, the PR Agent Respondent stated that it is an influencer's job to "stay up to date with what is trending and communicate that to their audiences". Additionally, the Influencer Platform Respondent claimed a good influencer is "someone who has an endless stream of ideas and a good eye for trends". These quotes highlight how media professionals expect social media influencers to be

on top of their game so they can leverage such trendiness by symbolically aligning it with their business.

Another theme that arose when discussing influencer collaboration criteria was the importance of evoking a sense of intimacy. This was evidenced by the CEO Respondent who stated: “I want my customers to feel like they are receiving the recommendation from a family member or friend”. Similarly, Influencer Platform Respondent stated that a good influencer has “the ability to evoke a feeling of intimacy at scale. Making thousands of people you've never met feel like your best friend. The relationship fuels the influence”. The concept of intimacy suggests that the industry values influencers for their ability “to produce a seamless account of the self to digital audiences in which the intimate and the commercial are deeply intertwined” (Kanai, 2018, p. 9).

This ability to intertwine commercial and intimate messages brings forth the final theme that arose through answers to this question: authenticity. Here, the PR Agent Respondent indicated that she likes to work with “influencers who can communicate the value of a product without making it seem forced”. Her following statement echoed this concept:

> Authentic love of the brand is also important. And a desire to support when payment isn’t always available...if payment is available, I still only want them signing on if there is an authentic connection because otherwise, I know their content won’t perform as well for my client. (PR Agent Respondent).

Additionally, the Small Business Owner Respondent stated that she searches for those who are “authentic and committed to producing content consistently”. She also stressed that she only works with influencers who live local to her salon to ensure that the partnership maintains authenticity. This was akin to the CEO Respondent, who stated that he and his PR team prioritise “Someone that can communicate the value of a good product without making it seem staged or forced”.

The unpremeditated use of the word authentic here highlights literature in Chapter 2, which states that appeals to authenticity are deeply ingrained within the commercial landscape "with social networks invoking ideals of sincere expression" and realness" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 6). The concept also arose in Chapter 4.3, as influencers stated that they believed displaying authenticity was imperative to their follower growth and ability to engage in successful collaborations.

Collaboration Types and Requested Deliverables

Methodological findings revealed numerous ways in which professionals choose to collaborate with influencers and the return on investment they receive from their exposure. For example, the Small Business Owner Respondent explained that she likes to create long-term partnerships with influencers: "We have partnerships with influencers where we do their hair for free, and they create content for us, allow us to use their photos and advertise us to their following".

In this type of collaboration, often referred to as contra, there are no monetary funds exchanged; however, the service, in this case, hairdressing, usually has a high economic value and is being traded for the value of content and potential exposure. Additionally, the CEO Respondent stated that as part of his contract with his PR agency, he sent free pizza to popular influencers on a gifting basis.

> We did not ask them to do anything for us in return, but most influencers at least took a photo and put it on their Instagram stories. We also got some content out of influencers with smaller followings (CEO Respondent).

Here, I argue that the more value a business offers an influencer, the more return they receive from them regarding content and visibility. This is an example of the "norm of reciprocity", which assists in establishing perceived obligations an influencer may feel to provide social media coverage in exchange for the gifts they receive (Giesler, 2006, p. 284).

Conversely, Vamp pays every influencer on their app. Prices are dictated by audience size, but my participation observation found that micro-influencer rates generally start at $200 a post and $90 a story, however, these rates change in accordance with the briefs users must abide by, and the deliverables each campaign requests. When interviewees were asked what deliverables, they commonly ask from influencers, responses were varied, including specific "posts and talking to the camera stories" for the Small Business Owner Respondent and the request to be simply "tagged in content" organically by the CEO Respondent. In contrast, the PR Agent Respondent revealed:

> It depends on the influencer and what their audience likes. That will be the most successful format if they're used to seeing face-to-camera stories, which drives the highest engagement. We always encourage brands to let influencers decide how to showcase a brand or product. They know their audience best and know what will resonate (PR Agent Respondent).

In terms of what these agents find most compelling, piece-to-camera talking Instagram stories was unanimously agreed to be the most desirable by brands, followed by a tag in a story. This was reinforced again by the PR Agent Respondent who asserted:

> "When they post or a story that gives more than a brand tag, for example, they explain why they like the brand or product, that content is powerful!"

This suggests that industry professionals hope for a perceivably authentic narrative around their product or service to make it a believable partnership, paralleling earlier findings, which found it to be a content creation tactic commonly utilised by influencers.

Another variable that was recurring among responses to this question was ensuring that content did not appear as an ad, as evidenced by the Small Business Owner Respondent: "I do not want followers thinking my influencers are posting an ad – I want them to think that they are just so happy with their hair that they want to upload it and tag me!" This statement

reinforces the literature in Chapter 2 regarding the aim of collaborations to incorporate clients "in a manner so subtle that their advertorial does not come off as a hard sell" (Abidin, 2016, p. 8). Thus, influencer ads produce a better return on investment as they are more trusted, a finding to be further elaborated on.

ROI of Influencer Marketing

Collaborations fundamentally generate dialogue with target audiences to increase purchase potential. The effectiveness of such a transaction is evidenced by data showing that 100% of agency respondents believed influencer marketing was more effective than traditional types of advertising. This was emphasised by Influencer Platform Respondent, who stated:

> They are more trusted than traditional media and the brands themselves. Plus, with so many of us spending so much time online, influencers can reach customers where they are - on social media. 63% of people trust influencer messages about a brand more than a brand's advertising. And 61% of 18 to 34-year-olds have, at some point, been swayed in their decision-making by digital influencers (Influencer Platform Respondent)

According to business owners, influencer marketing is also more affordable:

> I can outsource the editing of the imagery and videos. Also, I get approached and choose from them; I do not have to cast anyone. I still do shoots, but they cost around $5k, so this [influencer collaborations] is different and cheaper. (Small Business Owner Respondent)

The concept of influencer marketing being of a lesser financial burden is significant as it demonstrates influencer marketing as a more valuable output. This is because the influencer takes on jobs a business would have once paid premium for in marketing campaigns, namely photoshoot location fees, models, hair and make-up artists, stylists, photographers, copywriters, and ad space. However, the reasons why influencer collaborations are effective is thought to be due to their ability to build connections:

> Influencers have the amazing ability to build genuine connections with their audience. This relationship fosters trust, allowing influencers to influence their audiences' buying habits. I think it's this building of trust that makes influencer marketing surpass traditional types of advertising. (PR Agent Respondent).

The term 'trust' is significant and arose several times throughout interviews, reminiscent of earlier findings that reinforced trust as the most critical factor for authentic influencer experiences. This was reinforced by the following quote:

> "Traditional marketing means are now overlooked, and unless you spend a huge amount of money, your ads generally don't get viewers. Influencers are constantly being watched, and whatever they do is constantly being copied, shared, or bought by followers as they already have that relationship with them. Traditional advertising is obvious, and for a food company like ours, they need to try our product to trust it. However, if an influencer that already believes in tells them, it's good, their trial process is lessened (CEO Respondent).

Here, the respondent stresses how trust is the most effective way to gain sales. One way in which trust is achieved is through alignment. According to the PR Agent Respondent, this has marked a shift in brand priorities as "clients are more focused on alignment than ever". The Influencer Platform Respondent reinforced this sentiment:

> Relevance is so important. The collaboration will be more authentic if the influencer looks and feels like a genuine user of that product or brand. It will be more effective as a result (Influencer Platform Respondent)

In turn, the consensus among industry professionals is that the exposure made available by influencers is a worthy investment, as long as it is embedded with trust.

Agencies Summary

In sum, the agents sampled in this study play a fundamental role in digital intermediation through their ability to promote specific information to collective audiences (Hutchinson, 2021). This highlights the value of exposure as brands leverage the audience of influencers who provide visibility for their business. After interviewing a content manager from influencer platform Vamp, a small business owner who conducts influencer collaborations in-house, a CEO who utilises a PR agency for partnerships, and a PR Agent who represents both influencers and brands, it was found that sourcing influencers is navigated either in-house, through PR agencies, or influencer platforms. While both in-house and PR practices have been prevalent in media industries for decades, the growth of influencer platforms in Australia has become a vital signifier of increased activity within the social media economy. According to Hutchinson (2021), these agencies are primarily responsible for creating genuine engagement between the online content producer and their audiences through specialised, niche online content producers and have thus shaped the industry at large.

Despite nuances in the dynamics of how each of the industry representatives operates with influencers, it was found that each respondent had a similar premise in the way in which they connect influencers and brands to mediate that relationship and secure a result that can be utilised as marketing materials through collaborations and requested deliverables. Industry professionals recruit influencers to ultimately assist in selling a product as audiences trust the influencer's taste and feel intimacy with them, perceiving it as an authentic recommendation. However, such authenticity is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in an era whereby audiences have become more aware of the promotional nature of influencer practices. Therefore, the industry client's job is to ensure that they choose influencers who fundamentally align with their brand values and provide creative freedom so that their content is true to them as a creator.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

The data from my digital ethnography above reveals crucial findings regarding the stakeholders of the social media economy. This is because such data represents not only notes, transcripts, and observations but also jottings, artefacts, feelings, and experiences (Dourish & Gómez Cruz, 2018) which were utilised to study how we experience Instagram as a platform along with its users, influencers, and associated agencies.

This experience was approached through a walk-through of Instagram, which provided insight into how individuals appropriate app technology. Findings illustrated that, through design affordances, the platforms aim to encourage users to engage with features that generate engagement to keep them on the app and, thus, create more data that can be sold. It was hence established that Instagram's workings manifest an increasingly algorithmic media landscape that commodifies visibility.

Next, through the methodology of surveys, observations found that users can no longer be grouped under homogenous categories because they display nuances in social media consumption behaviours. This research subsequently presents three distinct user groups that differentiate the ways individuals participate on Instagram as engaged users, private participants, and need-centric consumers. While engaged users are the most active social media participants, all three groups create or consume content and are therefore profitable to the business of Instagram and facilitate exposure. This is because social media platforms require consumers like everyday users to heighten the social worth of the players monetising the app. If all users were 'influencers', then the value of influencer content would not be perceived as high, and thus, the exposure would not be inflated. Perhaps most significantly, there would be no consumers buying into their content, thus generating profits. Another interesting finding was that all three user groups relate through their similar perceptions of influencers, which are primarily negative. Paradoxically, however, my research shows that influencers participate in various practices on Instagram to maintain positive relations with users.

This was evidenced through a culmination of interviews and textual analysis with influencers. Here we explored the rise of influence, influencer practices, content creation and self-reflections on influencing to situate social, cultural, and economic roles within the social media economy. Data suggested that influencers strategically construct online personas and create content that appears authentic to be perceived as relatable and thus have more successful collaborations. Additionally, this research found that influencers are highly conscious of the Instagram algorithm and employ various exposure-seeking practices to maximise their visibility. They are also mindful that they can no longer simply post aesthetic imagery because audiences seek substance from them as public figures to shift the aforementioned negative perceptions.

Finally, findings showed that agencies and industry professionals function as intermediaries between influencers, users and brands and assist in circulating exposure by promoting specific information to selected audiences. Here we found various ways to source and work with influencers. It was also reinforced that exposure is the most valuable currency to brands and influencers alike, if that exposure is substantiated by engagement and derives from a persona considered on-trend, intimate with followers and genuinely authentic.

Thus, while Chapter 4 frames my digital ethnographic data and findings in the contexts of existing research, Chapter 5 proposes a new model that can be utilised to view the social media landscape and its current stakeholders, The Exposure Economy Model, which will now be discussed in depth.

Chapter 5: A Discussion of the Exposure Economy Model

Chapter 4 displays a series of findings from my digital ethnography to uncover the exposure-seeking digital practices among users, influencers, and agencies on the Instagram platform. After collecting and analysing the data extracted from participant observation, surveys, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis, my work establishes that being seen is a crucial concern for individuals on social media. This is particularly the case for content creators who have subsequently developed strategic visibility methods to stand out in media-rich environments as 'exposure', the process of being publicised, has become a scarce resource on Instagram. This finding reveals that the structures and systems operating within the social media landscape closely align with a capitalist-style economy: a parallel reflected in the production, circulation and consumption of material and symbolic goods and services and the subsequent uneven distribution of capital.

In this economy, those who possess high social capital, as evinced through having large public audiences, are endowed with more exposure than those of lower online social status, creating a notable power imbalance attributed to unequal value among stakeholders. This is because wealth in digital visibility correlates to high social currency, as one's exposure becomes transferrable to other agents within the market and can thus be monetised. I argue that this system resonates with the interconnected nature of the current social media landscape, which is fundamentally designed to circulate the process of online production and consumption between platforms, users, influencers, and agencies, whereby each has its own interests to be served (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Therefore, such findings shift academic frameworks that understand the social media environment as an 'ecology' to that of an 'economy' and is

displayed through my central intellectual contribution, a theoretical model I have titled, The Exposure Economy Model (See Figure 28).

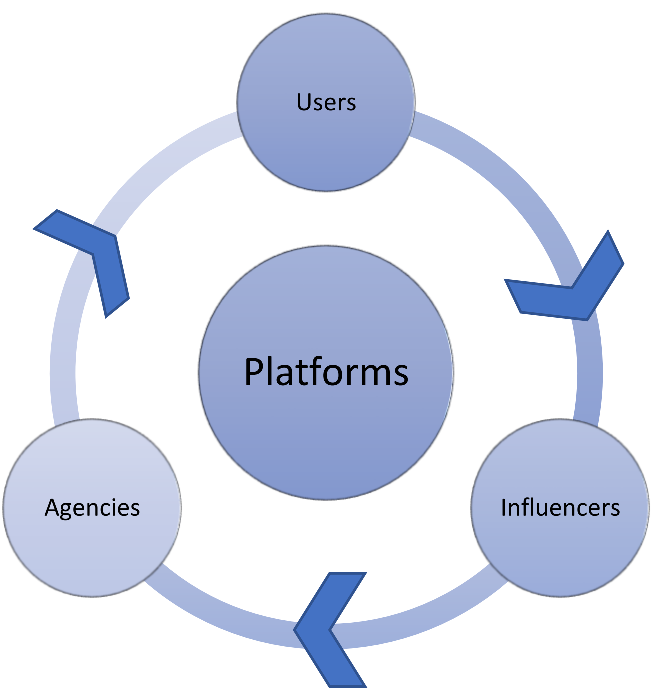


Figure 28 - EEM

Here, the circulation of exposure is controlled by platforms, consumed by users, sought after by influencers, and traded by agencies. The model, therefore, presents the overall state of the social media economy as it proceeds through four stages in a cyclical pattern. This multi-sided market infers four key parallelisms between social media and financial stakeholders. These categories were grounded in Nguyen and Kobsa's (2006) categorisation of the production and consumption chain for consumer goods, as referenced in Chapter 2, and is herewith explained:

i) Social media platforms function as retail institutions in the way that they provide, or in some cases deny, visibility to manufacturers (influencers) and are ultimately responsible for building the infrastructures that sell products to consumers (users).

ii) Everyday users are market consumers through their engagement with platforms and subsequent production, circulation, and consumption of both material (products) and symbolic (content) goods.

iii) Influencers parallel brand manufacturers, acting as brands themselves and producing goods (content) to generate profit. The content they produce reflects their context's social, cultural, and political climate.

iv) Agencies are essentially distributors who function as the intermediaries between all stakeholder groups, assisting in keeping the supply chain moving efficiently.

Whilst these agents exist synergistically, they experience digital visibility in uneven manners, making exposure a scarce resource and inflating its value. Chapter 5 explores the theoretical underpinnings of EEM by applying the findings in Chapter 4 to a discussion of all four stakeholders, namely Platforms, Users, Influencers and Agencies, and the way they compare to their economic counterparts. This discussion includes a comprehensive examination of how platforms have utilised algorithmic structures to make it increasingly challenging for content creators to be seen, as well as the role of users as market consumers and the importance of segmenting them for research and industry purposes. Additionally, the practices in which influencers navigate the system and leverage their social currency are assessed in conjunction with how agencies support market through mediating transactions to circulate exposure.

5.1 Platforms as Retail Institutions

Retail institutions function as critical drivers in financial economies and, as evidenced by EEM, play a similar role to platforms in the social media landscape. This is because platforms provide structures that fulfil the needs of online users and are essential to social media's functioning, assisting in building the digital world in its entirety. Platforms, like retail institutions, provide liquidity and tangible assets to the social media economy and permit a level of online activity that would otherwise not be possible. In turn, Instagram is a marketplace for producing and consuming material and symbolic goods and services, providing the infrastructure and

leveraging the output of its users. This stakeholder is discussed in consideration of how the Instagram platform functions as a retail institution by i) commodifying the consumer experience, ii) allocating shelf space and managing supplier risk and iii) monopolising markets.

Commodifying the Consumer Experience

The underscoring objective for retail institutions is to provide a consumption space to trade goods for profit among distinct groups of customers (Armstrong, 2006). While this aim may be accompanied by intentions to entertain, cultivate tastes, and provide a positive experience for customers, the commercial interests of this stakeholder group are indisputable. Comparably, while Instagram was initially built as a creative space for posting 'instant' photos, it has become a site whereby the cultural work produced by media users revisit Marxist theory of variable capital by residing in "capitalist circuits of accumulations" (Butosi, 2012, p. 3). Here, I argue that the social media platform of Instagram is fundamentally a business model that is primarily concerned with targeted advertising that converts user data into a commodity.

This is evidenced in my walk-through method, which examines the structures and affordances of the Instagram app and confirms that many features in-built focus on commodifying the user experience. The first way the platform achieves this is through the collection of user data. When signing up for Instagram, users must agree to the platform's data policy, which involves consenting to the platform's utilising personal and device data for tailored content and advertising. Fieldnotes also show that Instagram scrapes user activity information from partner sites and applications, even when users are operating outside the platform, including: "purchases you make, the ads you see and how you use their services whether or not you have an account or are logged in to our products" (Instagram, 2022). Instagram, therefore, commodifies the user process through its implicit and explicit collection of data, reinforced linguistically through its use of the diction 'products' to describe platform functions within its official policy, symbolising commercialisation of its application features.

Additional findings demonstrate that the Instagram newsfeed, namely the landing page of the app that presents a continuous feed of content, has become a "catalogue of ads" for users (Fieldnotes, Chapter 4). While scrolling the newsfeed, observations revealed that almost every second photo was an advertisement or sponsored post, encouraging an endless drive to consume. This is furthered through the ability to 'shop now' through images, which links users directly to the product from the respective retailer for ease of sale. Other commercial features include: 'Instagram Guides', where users can upload curated step-by-step recommendations that link to seller pages; 'Instagram Check Ins', a feature that provides visibility for nearby businesses by connecting a feed of tagged photos from customers who have uploaded content from that location; 'Instagram Shop', where individuals can browse shops, see editors picks, view collections and explore guides; and, the 'Explore' page, a unique collection of public photos, videos, reels and stories tailored to help users discover posts, accounts, hashtags or products that may be of interest to them (Instagram, 2022). The contents of each feature are made visible to users according to the data that Instagram collates from them, so generating exposure for businesses, and thus encouraging consumption within the platform. This supports Craig & Cunningham's (2019) argument that platform governance over creators fundamentally serves their own corporate interests.

This is the case with 'automated rights management systems' (ibid), such as the fact that the newsfeed is not chronological but algorithmic, determined by what Instagram believes users want to see based on data. Here, Bucher claims that Instagram transforms content's "information flow and presentation" to "deliver relevance" (2020 p. 5). This is highlighted in Instagram's statement that the organisation of the newsfeed is: "based on the likelihood you'll be interested in the content, your relationship with the person posting and the timeliness of the post" (Instagram, 2020). As the design of the newsfeed thereby lacks neutrality, it is argued that it exists purely to produce an 'audience commodity' whereby advertising attention is sold

to marketers (Fuchs, 2009). According to Omeara, this is because preference-driven algorithms are "designed to create seductive environments that keep people on the platform through liking, commenting, and inevitably producing data" (2019, p. 1).

This system can be viewed through the concept of affordance, which according to Bucher (2012), describes what media technologies ultimately allow people to do. In the context of this research, affordance determines how technological properties enable and constrain sociality in particular ways. In other words, social affordances are "the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure" (Postigo, 2016, p. 5). The concept of technology providing sociality is significant when discussing EEM and the affordances, or lack thereof, that Instagram provides. In this vein, I argue that the algorithm suggests almost an anti-affordance, particularly for creators, whose livelihood depends upon visibility. This is because the algorithmic newsfeed makes it challenging for individuals who do not obtain high social currency on the app to be seen, as the algorithm assumes their content is irrelevant if they do not receive the instant engagement that comes organically to macro-influencers and celebrity creators. This was highlighted in my field notes, as I expressed that I rarely see the content of my personal friends or family on the newsfeed—thus demonstrating the scarcity of visibility for those who do not have high social capital. In turn, the newsfeed represents "the total commodification of human creativity" because social media platforms, originally designed to be social, now function in accordance with producing profits (Beer, 2008; Dean, 2010; Fuchs, 2011).

Profit prioritisation is further displayed through the affordance of business accounts to assist businesses and creators in making more informed decisions on what they produce for consumers. My walk-through method showed that business accounts provide creators access to data, such as audience demographics, which reveal the age range, gender and location that comprise a creator's following, as well as the times audiences are most active so that they can

tailor to them for increased engagement and in turn, profits. At the other end of the scale, tailored content encourages audiences to stay on the app by seemingly creating a more positive, personalised experience, leading to more data and further commodification. This heavy focus on data is a testament to a broad metrication of social and economic life, which is powered by the currency of exposure and as result, allows platforms to afford and disafford accordingly. This highlights Cunningham & Craig's (2019) assertion that creator power is exerting significant influence on platform fortunes.

In sum, Instagram exercises structures to ensure that those users who do not contribute to revenue generation, receive less visibility on the app. For influencers—compared with everyday social media users—"the imperative to be visible is a professional mandate, hitched to financial success as well as professional autonomy" (Petre, et al., 2019, p. 2). Through their process of commodification, Instagram is henceforth able to control such visibility through their unequal allocation of 'shelf space' and management of supplier risk, which is discussed herein.

Allocating Shelf Space and Managing Supplier Risk

Product proliferation has increased manufacturing complexity and created new incentive issues in shelf space allocation (Martínez-de-Albéniz & Roels, 2007). This is also the case on the Instagram platform, as content proliferation has enhanced the difficulty for creators to attain visibility on the platform, forcing them to abide by particular unspoken rules to be seen. As this discussion has established that Instagram is a marketplace for commodification, its primary aim is inevitable to keep users engaged with the platform. As a result, they reprimand those who taint the user experience, in a similar way in which retailers allocate and remove shelf space to manufacturers according to whom offers them the most value. For this reason, Instagram removes content that may harm the activity of the company:

> We develop and use tools and offer resources to our community members that help to make their experiences positive and inclusive, including when we think they might need help. We also have teams and systems that work to combat abuse and violations of our Terms and policies, as well as harmful and deceptive behaviour. (Instagram, 2022)

Moderation practices in this vein include platform forced policies such as deleting content or banning users, which manifest through rating mechanisms, block functionalities and, the ability to report infringing content (Chancellor et al, 2016). As evidenced by field notes, Instagram removes content that is sexually explicit in nature, promotes self-harm, obtains pro-eating disorder messaging[19], and any imagery or videos that violates community standards, or is considered spam. Users can report posts they feel are inappropriate for the platform or breach community established norms. Removed posts function as an example of what Instagram considers 'deviant behaviour', triggering discussions regarding the platform's power and authority to determine what is socially acceptable. An example of this is discourse on social media's definition of 'nudity' and what is tolerated regarding the female body. According to Faust (2017), women are regularly barred from the app for posting photos with any portion of the areola exposed, while other degrading images remain unchallenged, highlighting deeply ingrained gender inequalities. This example highlights the institutional power of Instagram and the authority they exert on what is visible to other users, and the impact such can have on the perpetuation of social norms.

Another way in which Instagram asserts authority is through its method of 'shadow banning', which "refers to the (perceived) suppression of one's post(s) such that a user becomes virtually invisible to others" (Cotter, 2018, p. 2). My fieldnotes show that a critical identifier of shadow banning is when one's content does not appear under a hashtag they have utilised,

[19] Pro-eating disorder content promotes eating disorders as legitimate lifestyle choices instead of dangerous psychosocial disorders.

or their profile account name cannot be searched by others. If a user is shadow banned, they also do not appear in their followers' newsfeeds or story feeds. One influencer in my interviews described this process as "debilitating" (Jess, Micro-Influencer). Others suggested that the risk of being shadowbanned keeps them from breaching the rules of Instagram through for example, engagement hacking via partaking in engagement pods or utilising third-party services to increase their following. Here, the fear of being shadow banned represents a response to the "material conditions of platformised cultural production on Instagram, where proprietary curation algorithms seize knowledge and control of the labour process from producers" (O'Meara, 2018, p. 2), which I revisit later in this chapter.

Instagram frames the existence of its regulation as tools for managing supplier risk by responding to app concerns that occur within the public domain. One example was their response to arguments that photo-based activity on social networking sites contribute to esteem issues, which led to the removal of the 'like' metric being publicly visible on the platform. The consensus for Instagram removing this metric was to decrease the "shame" that was once associated to "posts with a low like count" (Katy, Micro-Influencer). My findings showed that this was perceived as a step in a positive direction for mental health by the public. Like the way retailers are often praised for being more size or age inclusive through their stock supply, Instagram was celebrated for removing this superficial metric for the benefit of its users.

However, observations show that removing likes paradoxically led to a higher focus on other vanity metrics, as evidenced through Jess (micro-influencer), who claimed that since likes were removed, she "noticed an emphasis placed on making sure your feed is immaculate again to gain followers". Here, she claimed that once she stopped getting likes she had to reorientate her focus to her feed and ability to "incite comments" through captions. This increased attention to visibility was fundamentally due to an increased threat of invisibility, particularly among influencers, whose online livelihoods depend on sustained social media

visibility. In response to creator complaints that their content was no longer being engaged with, Instagram encouraged producers to "focus on their brand, improve their content, and produce more consistently to see positive results on the app" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 5). However, this encouragement is contradicted by my findings, which display that smaller influencers and content creators, who experienced the brunt of decreased visibility after the like metric removal, often put significantly more effort into their content, yet receive lesser results in comparison to their macro influencer and celebrity creator counterparts. In turn, I argue that the "algorithmic architecture of social media platforms" imposes hierarchal logic onto users and organises "participatory norms" that have both online and offline implications (O'Meara, 2019, p. 4).

In sum, removing likes on Instagram can be viewed as a transition to the new currency. The old currency (likes) was phased out of the economy, and the new currency (exposure) gained exchange value. My interview data found that this put pressure on influencers by heightening the need for other engagement metrics, leading to adaptive influencer practices such as focusing on curating the perfect feed and partaking in quick-fix engagement hacking, which will be revisited later in this chapter. Nonetheless, it is clear Instagram creates certain rules that determine the means of succeeding on the platform, which frequently change due to Instagram's constant attempt to monopolise markets.

Monopolising Markets

A retailer's primary goal in today's competitive environment is to engage customers by keeping them interested to consume (Arnold et al., 2005). This is similarly the case for Instagram, as it is situated among a global social media landscape with various competing platforms that have similar affordances. As established in Chapter 2, social media platforms thus exist in monopolistic competition. In such a configuration, various sellers and suppliers of products are

alike, but not idyllic substitutes, leading to firms engaging in product differentiation to slightly differ from one another (Albarran, 2016). Due to stronger competition, "price is set by a combination of market forces and the firms themselves" (Albarran, 2016, p. 67). I argue that this process compares to the way Instagram toggles algorithms to achieve a monopolistic advantage over other platforms. In multi-sided networks such as Instagram, this is significant because social media platforms compete at monopoly prices to the other side that is trying to reach them (Armstrong, 2006).

Social media competition became clear in my walk-through method, as it was notable that Instagram draws inspiration for many of its features from competing platforms. For example, the introduction of Instagram stories was noticeably modelled on the social media application Snapchat, which was known for user content only being available for short periods before becoming inaccessible. In Snapchat's prime, one of its most popular features was the 'Snapchat Story'—a collection of 'Snaps' (images or videos) captured within the past 24 hours for collective viewing. Instagram replicated such function by introducing 'Instagram Stories'. This product offering significantly changed the practices of both users and influencers alike, as they were provided ability to offer audiences with "behind the scenes access" into their lives (Cherry, Micro-Influencer) beyond the curated feeds and edited imagery the app was known for. This was highlighted by multiple everyday users in my survey, who suggested that they purposely utilise Instagram stories over uploading to their feed due to its fleeting nature and subsequent lack of pressure to produce high-quality content (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 30). This sentiment was paralleled among influencers, who praised the candid nature of the feature, stating that they upload to stories more regularly than Instagram feed posts due to the increased engagement they receive.

In this monopolisation process, themes of spontaneity and user desire for instantaneous content, which were the unique selling points of Snapchat, were adopted by Instagram,

providing users with the ability to "project their personality" and "talk to followers" more intimately (Hanna, Macro-Influencer). My field notes show that most individuals who previously utilised both apps subsequently transitioned to Instagram as their primary social media platform of choice. Thus, by implementing this feature, Instagram was able to impede users from having to switch between dual applications because it was also providing more affordances than Snapchat, such as a profile feed to post content, which means an Instagram profile could be more easily monetised, thus offering a higher interest account for its users.

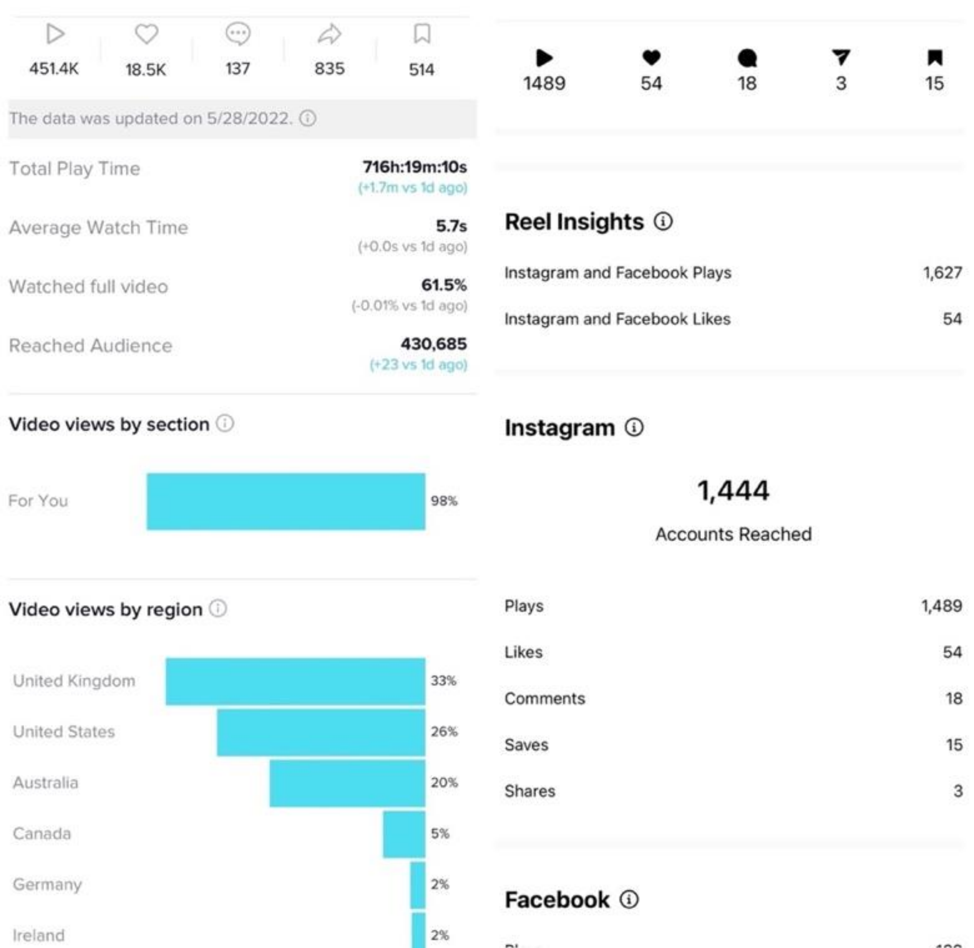
A similar trajectory occurred through Instagram's newest video platform, reels, which was introduced to compete with TikTok. My research shows that the Instagram platform is currently favouring video content in its algorithm to encourage utilisation of the feature. This was empirically highlighted through my data which showed that influencers create more reels as they received "way more views and engagement" compared to their static posts (Melanie, Micro Influencer). The increased utilisation of reels for visibility purposes demonstrates a trend that social media users are more likely to place effort into content that they know will receive more engagement. In this example, Instagram has not only introduced a feature that users were previously enjoying on TikTok, but they have also provided an incentive for audiences to use the feature with the reward of exposure as a way of monopolising the market. Based on these insights, I argue that user practices, such as purposefully utilising features that garner more engagement, are a by-product of the exposure economy, and a viable method of gaining visibility. This was further reinforced in my data that showed that influencers consciously make certain popular reels and use trending audio songs or voiceovers as their audio.

However, I argue that the reason Instagram has not been able to divert the TikTok market as successfully as it did to Snapchat is because; reels mirror the aesthetic nature of Instagram imagery and, therefore, do not have the appeal that TikTok holds for many users. According to Abidin (2020), TikTok has reshaped creator culture through its aversion to the

‘Instagrammable’ lifestyle and instead encourages the crafting of relatable video performances that are both entertaining and accessible. This has manifested through an “explosion of diversity in content genres on TikTok”, which tend to favour discursive content and performance talent over the “Instagramesque physical appearance of simply ‘posing for a photo’” (Abidin, 2020, p. 83). Furthermore, users in my sample admitted to preferencing TikTok videos over Instagram Reels due to less pressure to be curated as the ‘feed’ is not a core focus (Daisy, Micro-influencer). The demobilisation (Turner, 2010) of influencer culture has shifted content away from merely satisfying followers with visual aesthetics to actually providing valuable entertainment and information. As a result, influencers are “moving away from ‘picture perfect’ content” and toward more personalised “disclosures and storytelling” (Abidin, 2020, p. 84).

Additionally, TikTok’s ‘For You Page’ (FYP), the equivalent to the Instagram newsfeed, has a seemingly different algorithm to Instagram, as exposure is accessed more easily, and creators are experiencing the ability to go viral regardless of their level of social capital. This was evidenced in my field notes where I reflected on a recent occasion whereby, I simultaneously uploaded the same video to both platforms. As displayed in Figure 30 below, the video on TikTok garnered significantly more engagement, as seen by the comparison of insights on both platforms.

Figure 29 - Comparison of TikTok and Instagram Insights



Here, the TikTok video attracted 451.4k plays, 18.5k likes, 137k comments, 835 shares, and 514 saves, compared to Instagram's 1,489 plays, 54 likes, 18 comments, three sends and 15 saves, respectively, for the same video. This highlights a significant disparity between reach, engagement, and visibility, which in turn, encourages me as a creator, to move towards posting more on the TikTok. Thus, I argue that TikTok is functioning as a retailer that is providing more value for its customers through a superior rewards system and therefore dwarfing the Instagram platform. This change in market lead is evidenced through users expressing frustration over Instagram's move toward video content, as evidenced by one of my user survey respondents:

> I haven't been enjoying Instagram lately; my newsfeed sucks; I keep getting fed recommended content and not people I follow, and I get shown like 70% reels and never see static images anymore; it's just not the same used to be. I would rather watch video content on TikTok. (Survey Respondent, Female 29)

Thus Instagram attempts to monopolise the market by appropriating competing platform features and rewarding users who engage with more visibility. My findings show that this fundamentally impacts the user experience by charging monopoly prices to the other side that is trying to reach them (Armstrong, 2006). However, Instagram faces challenges because users are ultimately becoming more conscious as consumers, a notion discussed next in this chapter.

Platform Summary

To summarise, platforms function as retail institutions by commodifying the user experience through implicit and explicit data collection and algorithmic features that tailor the user experience to encourage consumption. Here, platforms "cultivate, demonstrate and legitimate their power" and in the process "intensify inequality between different classes of cultural workers" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 2). This is manifested through unequal offering of shelf space to consumers on the app, privileging those who foster more engagement and removing content from users that function as a supplier risk and do not contribute positively. To tie Instagram to a financial paradigm, the way that the market is currently operating thus mirrors a capitalist economy, benefiting those who are already 'rich' on Instagram (Certo-Ware, 2017). This is because the app rewards those who fit the mould of their desired customer, which is typically those that attain social currency - because they keep people on the app.

Additionally, Instagram monopolises the market by competing with fellow social media platforms, rewarding users who utilise features mirrored from rival platforms with extra visibility. This monopolisation ultimately affects the user experience, resulting in configurations of sociality on social media and, ironically, tainting Instagram's position as the

market leader in the minds of consumers. Ultimately, these parameters heighten exposure value due to the scarcity of visibility, forcing individuals to formulate tactics accordingly. The rules, however, are constantly changing, based on technological, social, political, and structural events, and hence require constant re-navigation and strategic thought.

5.2 Users as Market Consumers

Personal consumption is a critical driver of an economy. In a financial context, consumption defines how individuals purchase goods and services for personal use. For this reason, personal consumers play a vital role in a supply chain. In the absence of market demand, manufacturers fundamentally lack the critical motivation to produce, which means little or no supply in a retail setting. This thesis argues that, in a social media environment, users of platforms function similarly to 'personal consumers' as they use, consume, create, and disseminate content online for personal reasons without being paid for such labour. They ultimately invest their own time, money, and resources into the app, thus signifying a transaction. Additionally, the absence of users would correspond to a notable lack of content creation and engagement and hence, the demise of a platform, making this group a crucial component of the social media economy. This will be unpacked through a discussion on the active role users play within EEM, how they can be segmented into consumer markets, and their shift into conscious consumption habits.

Active Consumers

In marketing contexts an 'active consumer' is a customer who has engaged with a business entity's products at least once in the past 12 months. The fundamental goal of any retail institution is to have a large portion of active consumers because this suggests that customers are recurringly circulating profits into the business. In a digital media setting, an active user is a by-product of Web 2.0, characterised by "the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement" (Bruns, 2006, p. 2). Jenkins defines this movement as participatory culture, "the explosion of new media technologies that

make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (2006 p. 8). In this thesis, my definition of an active consumer within EEM is a culmination of both marketing and media definitions.

Research findings show that a large segment of users within my survey sample were active consumers on Instagram, with 37% stating that they use the platform for over two hours daily. Furthermore, findings revealed that 81% of users had purchased an item from the app in the past 12 months. How these users are mobilised to make purchases was evident through assertions that actors "increase awareness of [a] brand" (Engaged User, Female, 30), encouraging platform-induced consumption.

Importantly, however, not only is this user group trading monetary resources through the consumption of goods; they are also circulating content themselves, just increasing their activity. This was evidenced in findings that many everyday users engage with the affordances of the app, through uploading their own content, for example: "shots of daily life" (Engaged User, Male, 22), "photos with friends" (Engaged User, Female, 28), and "travel snaps" (Engaged User, Female, 25). Data also demonstrated that most everyday users 'like' and 'share' the content of other users. This is significant as, by engaging with content on the app in, everyday users are inevitably helping determine which content is rewarded visibility from the algorithm. In turn, this raises concern regarding whether seeing and interacting with posts is a form of audience labour.

As discussed in Chapter 5.1, the Instagram platform is a private company that relies on users to create content to profit from their data collection (Fuchs, 2013). This highlights Beller's (2006) argument that everyday users of commercially owned social media platforms, namely, those who do not earn money from posting on the app, are essentially free labourers. Zwick et al. (2008) support this by suggesting that consumer co-creation is a form of 'governance', where sites that rely on user-generated content (UGC) serve to "expropriate the

cultural labour of masses and convert it into monetary value" (2008, p. 180). These perspectives argue that the more everyday users engage in 'presumption' sites such as Instagram, the greater the revenues generated for businesses.

This literature draws attention to the free labour performed by individuals in the current economic exchange cycle. My findings show that everyday users experience opportunity costs, as evidenced by an inspiring influencer in my survey who stated that 'Instagram work' often disrupts the productivity of her real job (Katy, Nano-Influencer). This disruption leads to questioning as to whether the loss of intrinsic rewards matches the revenue that influencers can potentially generate from the professionalisation of their Instagram accounts. Here, it is important to note that, while such 'aspirational work' (Duffy, 2016) can be eventually rewarded, this is the case for only a select few. As a result, Instagram tends to romantic the idea of precarious labour as a steppingstone to financial success (Driel & Dumitrica, 2021) Comparably, an everyday user in my survey findings stated that she dislikes going on holidays with her "Instagram-obsessed friends" as creating content during their travels has become a stressful experience rather than something enjoyable (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 22). This problematises UGC as a form of agency as the user's "role as a facilitator of civic engagement and participation" merges with this "economic meaning as a producer, consumer and data provider" (van Dijck, 2009, p. 55). In turn, critical media theorists often argue that prosumer labour generates profit for businesses without monetary compensation for users (Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Leaning into cultural studies literature, one might conversely argue that a 'wage' is provided in the form of free access to a valuable service that incites communication and creativity. This was apparent in survey responses which revealed that many users receive value from the platform when participating for such purposes as: "communicating with friends", "to scroll through when bored", "for inspiration/education", "[staying] up to date with what is

trending and news", "a creative space to create content", and "to network" (Survey Responses, Chapter 4). Additionally, some specific survey users suggested that social media has encouraged them to make helpful life changes through "[adopting] a more positive lifestyle" (Engaged User, Female, 32), and getting "inspired" to take "proactive" behaviours on board (Private Participant, Female, 22). My data also demonstrates that Instagram content had raised awareness on various topics within the public interest, as evidenced by the word cloud below, which is a visual display of the most popular words that occurred in response to the Survey Question asking everyday users if they have ever been influenced to change a value or belief after seeing someone speak about it. Here, the most popular responses were that Instagram has increased user awareness on issues such as changing the date of Australia Day, the diversity of gender pronouns, mental health, and racism. This data, therefore, highlights a notion discussed in Chapter 2 that the use of SNS can constitute a "self-activity" that has value to the users engaging with it (Kang et al., 2009).

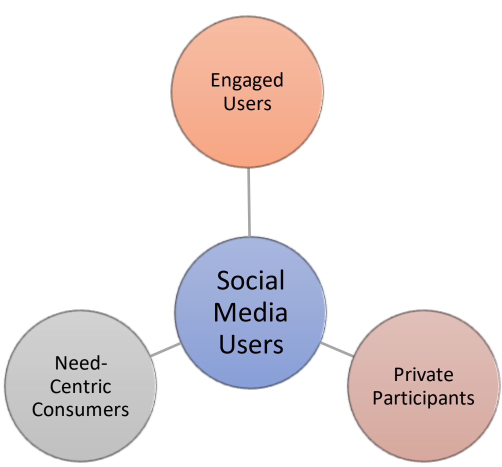
In turn, social media labour aligns with Terranova's assertion that productive activities can be described as both voluntary and subject to exploitation. From one perspective, "users produce use-values for themselves and others", creating a "social relation between users and public visibility" (2000, p. 1). However, it is impossible to dismiss the fact that everyday users also produce use-values for capital, such as targeted advertising spaces and valuable data. Thus, while posting practices can offer intrinsic rewards for users such as creative expression, and inspiration, their value has become externalised and derived from revenue generation. Additionally, EEM demonstrates that little control is attributed to users regarding how their information is commodified when utilising digital platforms (Beer, 2008; Dean, 2010; Fuchs, 2011). I subsequently argue that everyday social media users inevitably participate in a capitalist exchange within an exposure economy that while value generating at times, has become increasingly professionalised, hierarchical and market driven.

Customer Segmentation

Market profit drastically depends on the probability of its consumer's choice. Therefore, it is crucial but "immensely challenging for retailers to learn exactly what customers want, and when and where demand occurs" (Wen et al, 2019, p. 1). Retailers come closer to such knowledge through the practice of customer segmentation, which involves dividing broad consumer markets into sub-groups based on specific shared characteristics (Hunter, 2016). The purpose of segmenting customers into distinct groups is to assist enterprises in selling products according to the diverse needs of their segmented customers (Wu & Lin, 2005).

To strengthen my argument that social media platforms function as retail institutions, it made sense to segment social media users similarly to retail consumers. As mentioned in Chapter 3, data on everyday users was hence gathered through a survey completed electronically by 142 Australian respondents. These results underwent a thematic coding practice that determined what users fell into each category. Here, it was found that users belonging to the same groups "had certain similarities, while different segmented groups of customers had distinct characteristics" (Wu & Lin, 2005, p. 1). Through this process, three main types of users on the Instagram platform emerged, which parallel the types of consumers prevalent in traditional marketing theory (See Figure 32).

Figure 30 - User Segmentation Categories



As displayed in the figure above, the three main user categories on the Instagram platform are: Engaged Users, Private Participants, and Need-centric consumers, who are comparable to Loyal Customers, Wandering Customers and Need-centric Customers, respectively (Hunter, 2016). In this framework, engaged users are the most active group on social media, making them extremely valuable to both the platform and the circulation of exposure and comprising 37% of my database. This group spends a large portion of time on social media and engages in all its features, namely content creation (creating content and posting it both on their Instagram feed and stories) and content engagement (liking, sharing, and commenting on images of other user profiles). They are also the most likely group to purchase products on Instagram through sponsored ads or influencer marketing. Hence, engaged users yield the most significant investment return for platforms and businesses. The group invests substantial amounts of time on the Instagram app for various reasons (communication, leisure, inspiration, news, creativity, and networking) and the majority have public profiles, meaning they are pivotal from a data collection perspective. Moreover, they

are seemingly comfortable with their role as an Instagram user and do not perceive uploading content as particularly hazardous behaviour, meaning they upload regularly.

However, findings showed that this user group was conscious of what others perceived, seeking a degree of social approval and validation, as evidenced by one user stating that she posts for a "bit of approval from friends" (Engaged User, Female, 26). For this reason, the user group predominately only show the highlights of their life on Instagram and are generally conscious of the amount of engagement they receive when posting. I argue that engaged users, therefore, assist in perpetuating 'highlight reel culture', namely the tendency only to post the highlights of one's life. This is because this user group does not obtain the same professional obligations as influencers, as social media is not their 'job'. Significantly, however, they are contributing to content creation and thus have the power to impact their small, albeit real audiences, which can subsequently encourage social comparison among users (Taafee, 2022).

In turn, engaged users are pivotal to the social media economy, not just from a financial perspective but also from a social standpoint. They assist in the trading of exposure by actively consuming and engaging with the posts of others while also uploading their own, hence strengthening the currency as it creates a tier between those who utilise social media for-profit and those that do so for leisure. I suggest that it is in the best interest of platforms and influencers to nurture users because they enhance the process of attracting new users. This is because "satisfied, loyal clients provide brand exposure and reassurance to new customers through word-of-mouth communications" (Moisescu, 2011, p. 2), which is invaluable to the EEM.

Next, private participants are also crucial to EEM as this user group both implicitly and explicitly trades within the app, despite not publicly engaging with its affordances. These users are highly passive, rarely post, and unsurprisingly, 92% had their accounts set to private. My findings showed that private participants choose not to post for several reasons, including: "not

looking to build [a] following" (Private Participant, Male, 22), wanting "control" over their social media (Private Participant, Male, 29), and not feeling the "need" to share their life (Private Participant, Male, 30) or "having nothing to post" (Private Participant, Female, 27). My fieldnotes also highlighted a strong resentment towards Instagram, particularly influencers, among this group.

Like wondering consumers (Hunter, 2016), this group albeit enjoy 'window shopping', as evident in findings that private participants spend an average of two or more hours on Instagram daily and thus generate a considerable amount of traffic within the app. Results also highlighted that this group admitted to privately sharing content with their friends more than any other user group. As highlighted in Chapter 4, 'sharing' is a favoured metric by the algorithm, as it signals that the content is valuable and, therefore, pushes it out to more users. The behaviour of frequently sharing content with other Instagram users is an example of a direct exchange of exposure as it essentially heightens the value of the original content creator's work, thus elevating them further.

However, my findings revealed that much of this sharing was due to "hate following", which involves purposely following a disliked user for enjoyment or amusement, as emphasised in the following quotes: "I love to discuss fails" (Private Participant, Female, 25)" and "if I follow an influencer now it's generally a hate follow" (Private Participant, Male, 22). This is noteworthy as it is evident that both likes and, in this case, hate assist in the circulation of exposure. Broussard's (2018) work on "artificial unintelligence" hereby resonates through questioning the effectiveness of mathematical algorithms in cases such as this one, where negative commentary often leads to increased engagement and, thus, higher visibility for the original poster. From a sociological level, this has the power to give rise to harmful content and cultivates an environment where individuals follow some creators purely to engage in gossip. I speculate that private participants 'hate follow' more than other users because their

time on social media is spent consuming rather than creating content, leading to more judgemental attitudes. Nonetheless, lurking is not only common but also an active, participative, and valuable form of online behaviour to study (Edelmann, 2013). While this group does not engage in positing practices, they represent considerable value to the social exchange (Williams et al., 2012). Ultimately, there would be fewer consumers of posted content and significantly less reach on such content due to less traffic without this group.

Finally, need-centric consumers are more utility-centric in their approach to Instagram and engage with the app for specific reasons, such as for "business", "information", or "entertainment" (Survey Findings, 2021). As highlighted in Chapter 4, they upload content and partake in most of Instagram's functions. However, they do not invest as much labour as engaged users as they are not spending as much time, energy, or emotions on the platform. This was evidenced by various responses from this user group, such as "I only go on Instagram when I have a specific need in mind, for example, if I want to look up a hotel" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female). As these customers thus use social media for specific needs or occasions, they are more difficult to upsell with new platform features. This was evident through findings that this user group rarely engages in features other than the occasional story or feed post.

This temporal pattern of Instagram use differentiates need-centric consumers from engaged users and private participants. It is sporadic rather than regular: "I can spend lots of time on Instagram but then go weeks without touching it" (Need-Centric Consumer, Female, 37). Furthermore, many admit to having an account purely to stay informed socially, touching on Fuch's (2013) idea that users are objectively alienated if they are not present on monopoly capital platforms like Instagram. Moreover, since this group does not delve into the dynamics and politics of the app, they are less judicious with the engagement they offer and hence, are valuable to the exposure economy. For example, 80% of users in this category admitted to liking a photo in their newsfeed if it captured their attention, which was in stark contrast to the

private participant category. Additionally, findings show they do not consider whom or how many people they follow. This group admitted to sharing content with friends regularly if they feel like they would enjoy it. Thus, while this need-centric group does not utilise the app as much as their engaged and private counterparts, the bouts of investments they make heighten the hierarchy that pre-exists around them. It is important to note that need-centric consumers can be quickly drawn to other platforms and influencers and thus, it is crucial to initiate positive personal interaction to retain them. Furthermore, awareness of the needs these users seek to fulfil through Instagram have sociological and commercial significance. This is because they reflect cultural reasons for participating in social media more broadly and, provide crucial insight into what needs market actors should aim to fill.

In sum, as EEM suggests everyday users are highly comparable to consumers in a marketplace, a customer-centric view of them as a stakeholder is necessary to gain improved understanding of the way they navigate the supply chain and develop, maintain, and structure their relationships with other stakeholder groups. The concept of segmentation was thus applied to investigate how users perceive the market structures of Instagram and its various products and services. This enables an understanding of how the group generate and circulates exposure and predicts trends in the economy. In turn, learning the characteristics of engaged users, private participants, and need-centric consumers is fundamentally useful as it can be utilised to develop and implement stronger market positions in the minds of the consumers.

Consumer Consciousness

Consumers have become increasingly conscious of their purchase decisions within the retail environment, evinced through behaviours such as purchasing local, ethical, and environmentally friendly products and demanding more inclusivity in product offering terms of size, gender, and culture. As a result, retailers have been forced to adjust their production practices to satisfy the culturally learned needs of their target consumers (Kramer & Herbig,

1994). My research shows that this is the same trajectory for platforms, as a significant finding among all user groups was that they have become more conscious of their content consumption, leading to a subsequent shift in how they utilise social media.

For instance, my findings illustrated that most users felt that social media somewhat impacted how they felt about their own life, particularly for engaged users, as 70% of respondents selected a two or below on a Likert scale that asked them to rate how much Instagram affects overall satisfaction[20]. This was not as significant for private participants or need-centric consumers, suggesting that the deeper users are immersed in Instagram, the more conscious they become about the negative way it can affect them. This supports existing literature that active social media use is correlated with higher levels of social connectedness, which has a higher ability to considerably impact users (Ellison et al., 2007; Verduyn et al., 2017). As a result, some users have become wary about the amount of time they spend on the platform, as evidenced by findings that 45% of users I surveyed had, at some point, purposely stayed off social media for some time. Known as a 'social media detox', this voluntary practice defines a period when a person abstains from using digital devices such social media platforms. This form of detoxification has gained popularity I line with individuals increasing their time spent on digital devices and the internet.

Similarly, there has been a notable shift in perceptions of influencers. While the user segments presented nuances in social media behaviour and usage, an overwhelming similarity was their negative opinion of influencers. This was apparent when respondents were asked what words came to mind when they heard the term 'Influencer'. Here, 59.8% of respondents included negative descriptors, 20% positive, and 9% had impartial words, with the most common words to arise being "Fake", "Money", "Instagram", "Sell", and "Products". This was

[20] The scale ranged from 5, 'it does not affect me at all,' to 1, 'it can make me feel highly dissatisfied,' with a 3 being a neutral type of response.

supported by additional words that were frequented, namely “sponsored”, “pretty”, “followers”, “influence”, “entitled”, “rich”, “aesthetic”, and “marketing”. Interestingly, most of these dictions have connotations of superficiality or commerciality and thus highlight that they perceive influencers as synonymous with these terms. A by-product of these attitudes has seen a rise in ‘influencer clear-outs’, which signify the purposeful act of unfollowing accounts that users identify as not serving them positively. This was evidenced by survey respondents that mentioned that they regularly “go through and clean out” their follow list and that they “unfollow people who post things I disagree with politically, socially, economically, and environmentally” deeming it as “irresponsible not to” (Engaged User, Female, 35). This supports Tang and Cheng’s (2020) assertion that dissatisfaction with information quality significantly influences unfollowing intention.

The practice of unfollowing influencers reflects a shift in consumer values and has significantly impacted influencer cultural production. Examples include influencers and businesses reorientating content by being more body inclusive and less refined in general to gain user approval, based on claims that users “appreciate it” when they see influencers and brands trying to “show ‘realistic’ lifestyles and untouched photos” (Engaged User, 29, Female). This movement has therefore pivoted the landscape—from being “positively biased” by exclusively engaging in favourable forms of self-presentation by selecting affirmative aspects of their lives to display (Lup et al., 2015), towards a more authentic type of content that showcases more relatable, behinds-the-scenes content. However, this raises questions regarding the performative nature of such content shift and how influencers curate themselves to achieve ‘authenticity’, a notion I revisit in Chapter 5.4.

Nonetheless, just as market consumers have become more informed on what they are “purchasing and are switching towards more socially and environmentally responsible products” (Freestone et al., 2007, p. 1), social media users are irrefutably demanding more from

both platforms and influencers, thus are raising the bar for how they practice corporate social responsibility. This highlights the symbiotic nature of the EEM.

User Summary

To summarise, market consumers are individuals who buy or use goods and services to satisfy their needs. This is also the case for social media users, who have different consumption behaviours yet are integral to the marketplace. Without them, there is no demand and, in the case, of Instagram, also no data. In chapter 4.3, I discussed that, as the platform relies on UGC, Instagram plays a significant role in expropriating the labour of everyday users and converting it into monetary value. This suggests that, regardless of an individual's use of the app, whether they receive value from it or not, the labour costs for the individual should always be considered.

Moreover, as Instagram is a marketplace that trades both material and symbolic goods, it is essential to view its user base as a broad market that can be sub-grouped based on shared characteristics (Hunter, 2016). The data collected from my survey methodology highlighted three main types of users on Instagram that parallel the types of consumers in traditional marketing theory: Engaged Users, Private Participants, and Need-centric consumers, comparable with Loyal Customers, Wandering Customers and Need-centric Customers respectively (Hunter, 2016). While each of these user segments display differing social media habits, their type of internet usage is similarly classified as productive consumption because it creates value and a commodity that is sold (Fuchs, 2012). Thus, all three user groups play a critical role in the EEM as not only is their data utilised to tailor the experience for individuals on the app, but because they endow visibility to the content they engage with. In turn, everyday users essentially determine which content performs algorithmically. This power is intensified as findings demonstrate that users are now more conscious of what they are consuming, and

subsequently pressuring platforms and influencers to be responsible for the content they create to reflect a shift in societal values.

In sum, everyday users “play a pivotal role in the transformation of the media economy”, not just regarding their “tastes and preferences, but the “allocation of attention and expenditures on media-related products and services” (Albarran, 2016, p. 190), thus emphasising the significance of this stakeholder group.

5.3 Influencers as Manufacturer Brands

Manufacturer brands are owned and marketed by producers who sell products under an identified name and cultivate a targeted customer base utilising direct advertising (Glynn et al., 2012). They play a crucial role in a marketplace by contributing to the success of both themselves as a business and the growth of retail companies that supply them. This depiction parallels the Influencer stakeholder group as these high-profile individuals operate under a specific brand name, usually, an Instagram handle that constitutes their micro-celebrity persona (Senft, 2008), and promote directly to a niche audience group for consumption. Influencers play a significant role in the success of the Instagram marketplace because they are responsible for the circulation of both real and symbolic goods and services on the platform.

Furthermore, just as brand manufacturers compete for visibility in a retail setting, my findings show that influencers similarly contend for visibility on Instagram, competing with other influencers within their niche and the algorithmic structures that impact how their content is supplied to users. As a result, this group engages in specific visibility practices to receive maximum exposure and increase profit. According to my research, such engagement practices mirror how manufacturers aim to develop long-term success through i) delivering a marketable product, ii) establishing relationships with loyal buyers, iii) operating with solid profit margins, and iv) competing for brand visibility. These themes are further discussed in this chapter to

illustrate how influencer stakeholders adapt to the various expectations deriving from their interaction with followers, agencies, and the platform itself.

Delivering a Marketable Product

Delivering a marketable product is necessary for manufacturers to succeed in a supply chain. These stakeholders provide a marketable product by creating a consistent brand image that generates interest and attracts new customers, a practice similarly integral to an influencer's online career. Chapter 2 conceptualises such a process through Senft's concept of 'brand me discourse', which describes the tendency for Internet stars to utilise images and cross-linking strategies to "present themselves as coherent branded packages" to audiences (2012, p. 22). Constructing oneself as a brand "enables an influencer to become an entrepreneurial subject, crafting new spaces of agency by retaining control over and reasserting their own economic worth" (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 4). This construction responds to social media's role in encouraging self-commodification whereby 'everyday' individuals can seemingly access tools of "cultural production to become profit-making micro-celebrities online" (Senft, 2012, p. 2).

In the process of becoming profitable, my findings demonstrate that influencers on Instagram undergo specific branding exercises to curate their online persona. This initially occurs by aligning with a particular genre to attract a targeted audience. While all influencers in my sample broadly operate within the lifestyle space, namely the production of content inspired and curated from daily activities, the niche categories in which they claimed to post primarily were fashion (60%), beauty (15%), health and fitness (15%), and travel (10%). Creating content for a particular audience is a critical exercise for self-branding, as evidenced by an influencer in my sample, who stated that her genre loyalty drives more engagement and helps her grow faster because "people know what they are getting into when they decide to follow you, which enhances your personal brand" (Jess, Micro Influencer). This outcome

resonates with the reasons why brand manufacturers produce products within a niche category; it makes it easier to establish a loyal audience and assists in finding engaging ways to communicate to that audience (Alampi, 2019). For this reason, 80% of the respondents stated that the niche they operate within is on their Instagram bio.[21] This is to clarify to current and prospective audiences what content they are investing in when following the influencer. Importantly, however, my findings showed two distinct types of influencers that brand development can derive: content creators, influencers that gain followers for their content and creativity; and celebrity creators, who gained prominence through external sources or offline careers. While equally profitable, findings demonstrate that content creators engage in increased labour because their celebrity counterparts do not have the same creative expectations, as their following more closely aligns with 'fans'.

Nonetheless, findings demonstrate that both types of influencers seek to construct a marketable persona that attracts a particular niche audience to start or continue following them. This manifests through a process of narrative construction, which involves curating and maintaining an online persona. Here, influencers engage in strategic online practices that make them appear 'aesthetic', 'aspirational' and 'authentic', which is a new contribution to research. I argue that these qualities comprise the crucial branding elements of lifestyle Influencers more broadly.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics are communicated through content motifs and the way in which such motifs are shown stylistically (Przyborski, 2017). My findings displayed that 50% of influencers believed that audiences follow them for their creative content and the way they consistently capture, style, and attractively edit photos to followers. This was highlighted through Elle (Micro-

[21] An Instagram bio is a description of a user's account that can be up to 150 characters long and features at the top of one's profile page, next to one profile picture.

Influencer), who stated that she started growing an audience because of her consistent content quality and overall look of her feed, as implied through her recount of followers "always asking" how she edits photos and what camera she uses. Additionally, a micro-influencer stated that she started gaining attraction once she began posting "really arty, dark images" (Cherry, Micro-Influencer). These findings suggest that stimulating and inspiring content increases followers' susceptibility to being influenced (Zhang et al., 2017).

For this reason, many influencers invest time in 'scheme curating', namely, the practice of only scheduling and uploading content that holistically suits their profile feed to create a consistent aesthetic. The popularity of scheme curating was evidenced by the 80% of influencers in my sample group who admitted to applying presets on their images, namely filters that use a consistent colour pallet over a photo. Additionally, 'filler images', which describe the content influencers place between photos to break them up and "create a consistent grid" (Lily, Macro-Influencer), were also an essential component of such exercise. According to data, creating a scheme is "super important" because it "defines who you are as a creator and acts as a portfolio for your personal brand" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer), which in turn leads to new followers and thus, increased brand deals. The concept of an influencer's feed acting as their "portfolio" reveals the immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996) influencers engage with to ensure their Instagram content suits personal branding perceptions. This was emphasised through field notes reflections that I often feel restricted with what I upload as a micro-influencer due to the self-inflicted need to ensure all content suits my overall scheme aesthetic, which in my case, is a neutral colour pallet. This is contingent on Mulvey's concept of the "edited self", whereby individuals "constitute their ego" by relating to their "image being watched" (1999, p. 837). Paradoxically, however, survey data with everyday users revealed a lack of appreciation for the labour invested scheme curation, most expressing that they are "over" the "refined look" (Survey Respondent, Female, 28), thus highlighting a push back on

curated content, which is revisited later in this chapter. Nonetheless, the aesthetic of a product is undeniably critical to how the market perceives a brand and, thus, influencer because it contributes to the way in which they appear aspirational.

Aspiration

In consumer marketing, an aspirational brand describes a product line whereby a large segment of its exposure audiences wishes to own but, for economic reasons, cannot (Hunter, 2012). This branding encourages customers to base purchase decisions on an emotional level to enhance their self-concept. My findings show that influencers function as a form of aspirational brand as they are a source of "inspiration" for audiences, a notion evidenced by data that showed the word appeared in my interview transcripts 57 times in similar contexts. Here, Influencers in my sample group were found to create content dedicated to satisfying the consumer need for aspiration, as evidenced by a macro influencer who stated that she is a "big sister" to her followers, providing them with knowledge on how she lives her life, including the food she eats, workouts she does and brands she wears (Aria, Micro-Influencer). Additionally, another influencer revealed that she posts a lot of "high-end" designer goods and feels like she is a muse for her audience (Hanna, Macro-Influencer). This reinforces Abidin's assertion that the engagements of "influencers are premised on inciting aspiration among followers" (2016, p. 10). A macro-influencer in my study furthered this concept, stating that her followers utilise her travel content as a "mood-board for their own trips". Here, she references her trip to the Maldives surging engagement because people were "awing" over her content, and followers were "so invested" because the Maldives is such a luxurious place to visit" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer). This suggests that influencers offer audiences continuing ideals that they can aspire to, but may not always be able to achieve, thus increasing their appeal.

The aspirational investment audiences show influencer content was validated through a textual analysis of an influencer's OOTD content where Figure 14 showcased that an

influencer's outfit encouraged comments such as: "I want your hair", "this is a whole mood", and "I NEED this whole outfit", thus symbolising the influencer as a source of consumptive inspiration. This supports Arriagada and Bishop's (2021) assertion that influencers are aspirational tastemakers due to their superior capacity to create effects, shape opinions and drive audience behaviours. This is one of the allures of OOTD content: it leverages aspirational qualities and incites commentary, thus providing the creator increased exposure.

In turn, my findings show that influencers utilise aspirational lifestyles as a core branding strategy to advertise products. Paradoxically, however, one of the critical roles of an influencer is to inspire in a way more interesting and convincing than traditional advertising "because they are perceived to represent commonality" (Danesi 2008, p. 225). Their power stems from being 'laypersons' whose "cultural content production is grounded in their personal lives" (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 3). For this reason, influencers often downplay "their existing social and economic capital" (Duffy, 2016, p. 449) to balance their brand image in a simultaneously relatable way to audiences. This can be achieved by "carefully balancing" the display of their aspirational qualities "with less crafted images of everyday life" (Duffy, 2016, p. 449), which is further explored below.

Authenticity

In a digital society "marked by brand cultures, "realness" has become a pervasive and animating force" (Cotter, p. 2018, p. 897). Brand authenticity is thus a significant value within the marketplace, centred around how a consumer perceives a business to be trustworthy and faithful to its ethos. Similarly, influencers stress the importance of appearing authentic to intuitive audiences from which their strategic advantage derives (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017).

My findings show that influencers construct authenticity by precariously balancing the display of themselves as both aspirational and applicable to their audiences. This was evidenced in the influencer statement: "the brand image I portray is stylish yet effortless, like

‘girl next door vibes” (Lily, Macro-Influencer), which implies a desire to be seen as trendy yet relatable. To achieve this, practices involve “putting a face to your account” (Daisy, Micro-Influencer), providing glimpses into one’s “real life, not just the good stuff” (Sophie, Macro-Influencer), “leaving bloopers in videos”, and including “behind the scenes content to show life in more of a candid manner” (Amelia, Macro-Influencer) all give ‘the impression of “spontaneity and unfilteredness” (Abidin, 2017, p. 7).

Additionally, my interview participants strongly agree that audiences prefer ‘candid’ content. For instance, one Influencer stated that her audience’s preference ‘day in the life vlogs’—videos where audiences are invited to follow along with an individual’s ‘ordinary day’, because they are “more relatable” and showcase what she “gets up to in a less curated way, such as getting ready in the morning” (Minnie, Macro-Influencer). Here, authenticity is inferred through the vlogs ‘less curated’ in nature. However, I argue that this type of content is albeit curated to a large degree, as influencers choose which ‘backstage’ moments they wish to share and then proceed to cut and edit such moments. This intent was evidenced in interviews through the frequent use of dictions such as “natural”, “raw”, and “candid” to explain how they create content as part of their narrative construction. This suggests that influencers are conscious of appearing authentic, “shaped by the influencer’s goal of developing a commodifiable audience that is of interest to advertisers” (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 10). Abidin’s concept of ‘tacit labour’ can explain such dichotomy, defining “a collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibilized from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious” (2016, p. 10).

However, widespread appeals to ordinariness are tempered by evidence that many influencers “are not just regular people but, rather, have certain attributes, skills or forms of capital that afford them unique access to the cultural circuit” (Duffy, 2016, p. 448). In this vein, it is noteworthy that the influencers in my sample were not simply ordinary individuals as they

may attempt to portray. Most participants conformed to heteronormative beauty standards, all relatively youthful and thin, and 80% of them are Caucasian. Moreover, 50% modelled as their career profession, and 5% gained fame from reality television. This parallels Marwick's work that the "Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in "cool" industries, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture" (2015, p. 139). In turn, influencers deploy the authenticity mythos to downplay a baseline of economic capital and construct the relatability of their brands with audiences. This is essential because an influencer is deemed more aspirational by consumers if their characteristics are seemingly adaptable. As a result, authenticity becomes 'carefully choreographed' (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014) and a strategic form of self-presentation to establish relationships with consumers within the economy.

Establishing Relationships with Consumers

Establishing relationships with customers is crucial for a manufacturer's brand longevity. This is because focusing on building customer relationships increases the value of a business and encourages the acquisition of loyal customers. Additionally, having relationships with consumers allows a brand to deeply connect with its target audience, better equipping them to both satisfy customer needs and create a sense of mutual understanding.

Considering an influencer's following is the selling point that makes them attractive to advertising industry bodies, investing in audience management is pivotal for this stakeholder group (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). Influencers are highly responsive to their followers and communicate reciprocal intimacies "by responding to, acknowledging, and publicly appreciating them" (Ashton & Patel, 2018, p. 5). This was exemplified by an influencer who stated that when she is feeling "disconnected from followers" or "hasn't posted in a while", she will upload a selfie because "it is more personal" (Jess, Micro-Influencer). Here, using a selfie is a ritual strategy for fostering interpersonal relationships (Kwon & Kwon, 2015), as evidenced

by the influencer in Figure 16 who decided not to photoshop her blemishes to make her more ‘relatable’. According to Abidin, this practice highlights how influencers “use their ‘realness’ to create a sense of proximity to and parity with their followers” (2015, p. 2). This was further evidenced through textual analysis of my own branded content, whereby I strategically did not “dive straight into the advertisement” and instead added a layer of personality through a humorous caption about Sydney Lockdowns to dilute the advertisement. This highlights Abidin's assertion that influencers “chiefly engage in displays and impressions of intimacy towards their followers to convey the closeness and relatability upon which the success of their advertorials lies” (2015, p. 11).

Other intimacy displays in my findings include speaking to followers in informal conversation styles and producing candid and casual content through Instagram’s story feature. According to one influencer, providing a ‘behind the scenes’ look into her life through stories was integral to building relationships with audiences as it allowed insight into her personality as she was able to “talk to [her] followers” in a way static posts cannot offer (Hanna, Macro-Influencer). My field notes show that many influencers similarly utilise the affordances of stories to interact with their followers in real-time, integrating polls and question boxes to generate conversation. Engagement’s role in this process urges “influencers to orient themselves toward data-driven self-branding”, which involves “responding to and generating more feedback via engagement data” (Cotter, 2019, p. 19), so increasing exposure.

Analysis of interview transcripts highlights that this positively impacts audience relationships, evidenced by assertions that followers often approach influencers for advice and express gratitude for how “open” they are (Amelia, Macro-Influence.). Additionally, influencers in my sample stated that their followers “feel like they know” them (Minnie, Macro-Influencer) and can identify when they’re “going through a tough time” (Tiffany, Macro-Influencer), with one respondent stating her followers even knew her relationship ended

before she publicly announced it (Lily, Macro-Influencer). Here, it's evident that underlying patterns of need-perceptions a follower experiences with an "influencer can generate or reinforce a connection between both actors" (Jiménez-Castillo, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019, p. 367). This "connection can be described in terms of a dependency relationship" (ibid). Here, audiences have become dependent on influencer content, as sharing details about the self is a crucial component of the job. However, with increased mobile access, this perceived need to constantly be sharing has led to an 'always-on' (Mullen, 2014) mentality that encourages influencers to document constant details of their daily lives. My findings display that this can lead to fatigue due to pressure to always "mine" their life for content (Elle, Micro-Influencer) by commodifying every important life moment (Fuchs, 2021).

Another consequence is an increasing concern with their "imagined audience" by "anticipating" what followers will think (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 78). This was evidenced by interviewee Amelia, who said that she "must be careful with the collaborations" she accepts because her "followers are on to" her: she explained that she often says no to a "huge paycheque" to a collaboration that may taint her reputation with followers (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). This highlights a self-negotiation process whereby influencers constantly manage through revolving processes of "interpreting audiences, goals, and contexts" (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 344). This was furthered through survey findings, where users stressed the importance of influencers not giving advice beyond their niche. For example, one user stated that she does not feel like she can trust influencers "who give unsolicited advice outside their scope" (Engaged User, Female, 29). This sentiment was reinforced by data that showed the word 'qualified' and 'expertise' were utilised multiple times regarding the degree to which users trust influencer recommendations. These findings highlight shifts in research from previous literature regarding the ability of lay influencers to mobilise audiences purely due to their word-of-mouth style recommendations. I, therefore, argue that cultural intermediation no

longer solely relies on legitimacy based upon claims to expertise (Maguire and Mathews, 2012). Instead, users are more conscious of the marketing messages that they are being sold and want actual evidence of proficiency.

This is in line with my findings that show a movement toward audiences' being more conscious of the content they are consuming and the growing general perception of influencers as 'superficial'. In response, influencers commonly align themselves with political or social issues to substantiate their online persona to audiences, mirroring rising brand concerns about enhancing corporate social responsibility (CSR). My findings highlighted that 80% of respondents I interviewed felt pressured to align themselves with social-political problems because they believed their audience expected it. However, many influencers expressed difficulty in hitting the mark, with one macro-influencer stating that she feels that influencers are "damned if you do and damned if you don't" (Minnie, Macro-Influencer). Those that did admit to posting content of this nature reported positive outcomes with audiences. This was highlighted through interviewee, Aria, a micro-influencer, who revealed that her body positive and self-empowering content performs well. Another influencer expressed that when she spoke publicly about BLM in 2020 her "engagement increased drastically" (Jess, Micro Influencer). With this in mind, I argue that looking at an influencer's advocacy and consumption and whom this serves is essential.

Upon asking influencers if they post about social issues because they feel passionate about them or because they think it was 'necessary', most failed to answer, perhaps cautious of admitting their intentions aloud, or perhaps they just did not know. Nonetheless, it is arguable that an influencer's participation in activism is part of a process of continually managing audience reactions to ultimately increase their profit margins – which will now be discussed.

Operating with Profit Margins

The core objective for brand manufacturers is to generate profit by producing products for monetary gain. As discussed throughout this chapter, an influencer's "accumulated social capital and audience relationships have made them marketing intermediaries, brand endorsers", and brands themselves (Abidin & Ots, 2016, p. 154). At their most basic capacity, influencers produce advertorial-style content "on social media platforms in exchange for payment" or complementary products and services (ibid). Here, followers utilise influencers as online sources that provide valuable "information that helps decision-making and guides personal actions" (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019, p. 367).

This was highlighted through a macro-influencers reflection that she often receives feedback that followers "have bought or done something" that she has recommended (Tiffany, Macro-Influencer). Additionally, 81% of users in my survey sample stated they had purchased a product promoted by an influencer in the past 12 months. This figure is consistent with observational learning theory, which posits that "people in their role as observers use information learned to simplify their decision-making processes" (Bandura, 1977, p. 1). However, it is essential to note that 60% of these respondents were classified as engaged users, thus positing that the more engrossed a user is in social media, the more likely they are exposed to and impacted by influencer messages.

Nonetheless, influencers function as cultural intermediaries who "construct value by framing" how end consumers "engage with goods, affecting and affecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate" (Maguire, and Matthews, 2012, p. 552). As referenced in Chapter 2, intermediaries are "contextually specific actors involved" in generating exposure and "framing the interactions between cultural goods and those who encounter them" (ibid). They do so by the "social and cultural legitimacy they accrue", such as through followers and the display of aspirational lifestyles; presenting a valuable lens to explore the association between influencers and their followers (ibid). In such a relationship, 'tastes' are constructed

around a dominant social group that operates as a ‘matchmaker between people and things’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). This process manifests through the content they ‘sell’ to brands where the aim is to incorporate clients in a manner so subtle that the advertorial does not come off as a “hard sell” (Abidin, 2016, p. 8). My findings showed that such is the case in OOTD-sponsored posts (Figure 20).

While content of this nature aims to provide inspiration in the form of fashion, power lies within the fact that consumers can visually see what purchasable products look like styled on an individual in real life, therefore providing an alternative lens to view clothing than what can be offered by E-Commerce websites and professional look books. Additionally, as the products are worn by a tastemaker, cultural legitimacy is given to the products and brands featured. This heightens the consumptive nature of OOTD images because consumers receive them with the same impact as a word-of-mouth recommendation, making the content appear more authentic. Additionally, these types of photos are highly shareable, as evidenced by my survey findings which showed that all user groups participate in sharing photos with friends, particularly content they find that they think their friend end would like or if they want an “opinion on whether I should buy an item of clothing” (Engaged User, Female, 25), thus highlighting its promotional effectiveness and exposure the image generated to the brand.

Additionally, selfies have been heavily incorporated into marketing strategies that embrace the genre's candid, spontaneous nature (Saltz, 2014). My findings show that the effectiveness of branded selfies is the visual rhetoric they offer. This was evidenced in Figure 22, which featured a close-up of one of my interviewee respondents holding a hair product. A textual analysis of this image highlighted that proximity between the product and fresh hair suggests product use. The influencer at this moment utilises herself as a tangible example of the good's effectiveness, delivering a message that if followers purchase the product, they too can achieve fresh, clean hair, as strengthened by the positive connotations of “good hair days”

in the caption. Here, the influencer appropriates the narrative generated in explicit sponsored imagery by “reorienting followers to a sense of positive self-improvement” (Abidin, 2016, p. 17).

For this reason, my field notes show that brands prefer this content, despite influencers stating that they do not yield the best engagement, evidenced by insights that the image above received approximately 50% fewer ‘likes’ than her other Instagram photos, which average 800 likes per image. I argue that brands favour sponsored selfies because they authenticate the use of the product and symbolically suggest that purchasing it will lead to the acquisition of the favourable qualities of the influencer. This highlights Belk's (2013) assertion that, in hybrid spaces, selfies become a kind of “avatar” of the consumers themselves.

The final type of sponsored content analysed in my fieldwork is a flat lay, an image that features an array of products placed aesthetically on a surface. These types of imagery peaked in popularity in 2012; however, they are still often utilised today as ‘filler photos’ for influencers to break up the feed while also promoting the brand they are collaborating with. An example of a flat lay was displayed in Figure 21, which featured a combination of products that connote self-betterment to advertise the vitamin brand featured. Here, the caption, “My morning essentials” was utilised to diffuse product placement and create a narrative around the product by suggesting that it is an integral component of the influencer's routine. These images can easily be repurposed by brands who use them on their websites and social media channels, thus saving on labour companies would have to pay for if they were to organise their own product shoot.

For this reason, the costs of the work that goes into such content should be considered. Within EEM, Influencers charge for their creative work and advertising space on their page to profit from their content creation labour. According to field notes, the average pricing model for an influencer is approximately $100 per post for every 10,000 followers an influencer has,

with higher rates usually changed for reels and video content and 'story features' generally being free for gifted products, depending on the creator. Influencers often display these prices in a media kit or a rate card. These rate cards also often include 'bundle deals'. For context, one influencer in the study had a rate card that offered a discounted rate of 1 x Instagram reel and 3 x content images for exclusive brand use, for $3,575AUD. The existence of price points, and the ability to discount offerings, strengthen comparisons between influencers and brand manufacturers.

However, even as "influencers bring themselves in line with the advertising industry, their work remains precarious" (van Driel & Dumitrcia, 2021, p. 80). My findings show that some influencers, particularly nano- and micro-content creators, collaborate for a 'debt investment', working for exposure from a brand with different audiences or connections with brands and agencies that can offer further collaborations. This was evidenced by Katy, who revealed that she only engages in free collaborations because she has a "small audience" and thus will "take any sort of networking opportunity or possibility for the exposure" (Katy, Nano-Influencer). Therefore, influencers engage in "aspirational labour", hoping to lead to further brand opportunities (Duffy, 2015). This type of cultural production was furthered in findings where influencers openly admitted that it is in their best interest to maintain positive relations with agencies, brands, and other influencers to stay relevant and receive more job opportunities. One influencer stated that events and showings are "hit and miss"; however, participating could lead to "more followers" through outcomes such as making an "influencer friend" or building a "relationship with someone who works in their PR Team" (Jess, Micro-Influencer). Thus, influencers justify the cost of such social media labour in terms of improved public relations because such an outcome provides them with both present and future rewards. Additionally, as users ascend the hierarchy of digital influence, their aspirational labour and networking

practices surpass monetisation and become a pursuit of contriving attractive and lucrative careers (Khamis et al., 2016).

Besides the financial benefits of such lucrative careers, findings also highlight other influencing benefits that increase the job's profitability. For example, my results showed various perks such as friendships, opportunities, holidays, and gifts. It also became clear that becoming an influencer is directly correlated with less personal expenditure. Many businesses are willing to provide their products or services for free or, in many cases, pay the influencer to use them to receive exposure. Additionally, these individuals experience the clout and perks of traditional celebrities because they can inhibit the celebrity subject position and "amass enough fans to support themselves through their online creative activities while remaining unknown to most and ignored by mainstream media" (Marwick, 2015, p. 140).

Despite receiving payment for content, as well as luxurious gifts and social capital, profit is not always stable due to the dynamic nature of the EEM. According to my findings, influencers experience risks in two keyways. The first is 'individual risk,' whereby an influencer risks losing followers' engagement. One such example is when an influencer's content does not perform as expected, which is a source of stress constantly felt by those in my sample, as typified by an influencer interviewee who stated that she often feels stressed if her sponsored content does not perform, and she becomes "worried that brands will tell others and companies" and think her followers are not engaged and thus not want to work with her again (Jess, Micro-Influencer). This suggests influencers must ensure that they produce content valued by their audiences and constantly reorient their brands to both achieve profit for themselves and, a return on investment for the businesses working with them.

The next type of risk is systematic risk, which highlights the risks associated with what is occurring in society at the time and how such happenings may affect the influencer and the content they can upload. My findings show that influencers often lose money in times of social

or political unrest because they experience trolling when they upload their usual content during national and international crises, claiming that their content is 'tone deaf' (Abidin, 2020). This was evidenced through findings where influencers admitted to feeling "tense on social media during times of social distress" because it seems "frivolous" and, people cancel "influencers for posting as usual" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). This highlights that influencer profits are often dictated by the social-political climate around them. Also prevalent are systematic risks, which include platform changes impacting the influencer's exposure, such as algorithmic shifts, which will be further explored in the subsequent section.

Achieving Brand Visibility

Brand visibility is the rate at which a brand is seen by an audience and is thus an important goal in any manufacturing business's marketing department, as it is a critical sign of success (Miller, 1997). Similarly, the crux of influencer success is their ability to maintain high visibility online. However, according to Tufekci, the emerging new media economy, which "integrates participatory media into the structure of global information flows", has profoundly impacted the production and distribution of attention (2013, p. 1). As a result, exposure has become scarce, and my findings show that influencers must engage in a series of strategic practices, or they face a systematic risk of invisibility.

The desire to reach a larger audience is based on findings that once an influencer obtains a certain level of capital through their follower count, the faster it is for them to grow further. This was evidenced in my findings by a macro influencer who stated that once she gained 50,000 followers, users would come across her page, see that she had a large audience and follow her, meaning she "grew from 50–150k pretty fast" (Amelia, Macro-Influencer). This logic suggests a significant correlation between one's social capital and subsequent exposure-reliance. In economic theory, how influencers operate can thus be applied to the Matthew Effect of accumulated advantage (Perc, 2014, p. 1). While this theory is about the cumulative

advantage of economic capital, the concept applies to matters of fame or status in an online setting. The Matthew Effect can be explained by "preferential attachment[22] in which individuals "probabilistically accrue a total reward", namely "popularity, audiences, and wealth, in proportion to their existing degree" (ibid.). This has a net effect of exposure being increasingly challenging "for low ranked individuals to increase their totals, as they have fewer resources" (ibid.). Preferential attachment is evident within the exposure economy of social media because "Instagram's algorithms reward engagement with exposure, which increases the chances of being seen and, thus, gaining followers" (Cotter, 2019, p. 10). The state of such a landscape has made it challenging for creators who now must constantly negotiate the threat of invisibility caused by the algorithm (Bucher, 2012).

For this reason, 100% of micro-influencers interviewed expressed distaste for the Instagram algorithm, complaining that it has made "organic reach and engagement near impossible for its users" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer). This has led to the creation of influencer practices that aim to navigate the algorithmic structures of Instagram that appear only to benefit high-ranked individuals with strong pre-existing engagement rates. These practices are called 'exposure tactics', a term coined by this study to define the methods influencers execute with the specific intent to reach wider audiences. Exposure tactics are formed through observing the content of users that attain visibility to "discern participatory norms the algorithms reward" (Cotter, 2021, p. 896). Examples of such tactics include participating in specific content trends, for instance, taking photos of specific things, such as "your plate of oysters" (Katy, Nano-Influencer); in particular places, such as "shooting in an empty carpark" (Melanie, Micro-Influencer); and engaging in certain poses, such as the one where influencers "lift [their] leg and take the photo in the mirror" (Jess, Micro Influencer). My findings display that influencers

[22] A preferential attachment process describes settings whereby some quantity (typically in the form of wealth or credit) is distributed among several individuals according to how much they already have, meaning that those who have pre-existing wealth receive more than those who do not.

are likely to imitate trending content because they "are guaranteed to attract more likes" (ibid.). Another tactic involves "pumping out reels" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer) because the Instagram algorithm is favouring video content to compete with TikTok.

For this very reason, influencers are also utilising 'trending audio' on their videos, participating in popular dance challenges, and mirroring viral video formats as an effective way to achieve more views, evident in Elle's assertion that her "best-performing reels" are the ones where she has "jumped on a trend, like the voice-over vlogs or transitions everyone is doing" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Thus, the strive for engagement ultimately determines the content influencers take and the features of Instagram they utilise. As a result, I argue that Instagram has become a microcosm of trends whereby influencers feel the need to replicate and reappropriate content with high social capital to survive and thrive within the influencer economy. The cultural significance of such a movement is evidenced through the popularity of satire pages such as @shitbloggerspost, which are created to mock the imitation culture among influencers who are competing for visibility. This ironically has led to influencers becoming even less visible, as it is harder to stand out among a landscape of homogenous content.

Another tactical way influencers compete for visibility is by utilising hashtags under the impression that strategically tagging photos can lead to new likes and followers (Titlow 2012). Here, 90% of influencers in my study admitted to the practice of including up to 30 relevant hashtags on content. It was found that most influencers are storing various hashtags on their notes app and utilise them according to what content they are posting. According to Elle, a micro-influencer in my study, "the trick is to find a series of hashtags that relate to your content but is trending currently". However, there are specific politics involved in this process, as one must ensure the hashtags have under 100,000 photos associated with them so the "content doesn't get lost" (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Furthermore, it was interesting to note that the 10% of influencers who did not partake in the practice of hashtagging for discoverability

purposes were macro-influencers, claiming they did not need to because their "content is well received regardless" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer). This sentiment emphasises how the algorithm benefits those with higher social capital, as they rely less on visibility, reflecting a chasm of power.

Moreover, my findings show that all influencers consciously trade exposure through tagging other influencers and businesses as a symbiotic networking exercise for those who rely on it. Many influencers suggested that being 'tagged' by a more prominent influencer or company was critical to their follower growth. Additionally, a micro-influencer in my study claimed that the only time she ever notices "a significant increase in followers is if an image or reel goes viral or is reposted by a big company or profile" (Katy, Nano-Influencer). This was furthered by another micro-influencer who stated that her account was a "slow burn", but she would get a stream of followers if "someone big, like Inspo, accounts" repost her (Jess, Micro Influencer). These findings demonstrate that influencers try to create content that is likely to be shared, a practice I term as 'regram culture', which involves creating shareable content that aligns with the perceived criterion of being re-posted. This exposure tactic was evident in numerous statements from influencers, such as this micro-influencer who revealed that she will always tag a brand "in the hope they regram me and their followers might follow me" (Katy, Nano-Influencer). This movement highlights how influencers aim to leverage the audiences of other brands and tastemakers to gain followings through an exposure exchange system.

Importantly, however, exposure does not always lead to a "return on followers" (Cherry, Micro-Influencer), as many influencers believe that regram culture only works if the reposting profile has an engaged audience and if their audience aligns with the original poster, thus highlighting the importance of engagement as a variable that inflates the value of exposure. This is significant when "social media companies orient algorithmic ranking toward increasing

engagement activities because it generates valuable insight about users that Instagram can sell to marketers" (Cotter, 2019, p.903). These settings have led to influencers' becoming fixated on their insights even after the 'like' metrics were removed from public viewing. My findings show that influencers monitor their metrics to continue producing the content that receives the most engagement, as displayed through their business account insights. This is in response to pressures to "think of their audiences in an instrumental way, constantly managing their reactions to gauge the most 'effective' post" to retain follower attention (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021, p. 9).

However, due to the inconsistencies of such metrics, my research showed that many influencers turn to 'quick-fix' engagement practices that 'cheat the system' (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). I argue that this is reminiscent of the way in which brands cut corners in the retail industry through fast-fashion tactics. One example involves participation in 'engagement hacking' through participating in engagement pods, which my findings suggest are particularly popular among nano- and micro-influencers. My study confirmed that engagement pods, Instagram communities that mutually agree to engage with each other's content in a timely fashion, function "as an emergent form of resistance that responds to the reconfigured working conditions of platformized cultural production" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 1). These working conditions were evident through influencers such as Lisa (Micro-Influencer), who claimed that engagement pods were "annoying" and "a lot of labour", but without them, her content was not picked up by the algorithm. This highlights how influencers are required to work to earn their exposure, displaying a "milieu within which the capital-labour relation is enacted" (Gandini, 2019, p. 2, 7). Nonetheless, practices such as engagement pods allow influencers to feel "less helpless about the algorithm" (Daisy, Micro-Influencer), whereby the word "helpless" is a symbol of an attempt to gain platform agency. Therefore, the phenomenon of Instagram engagement pods" essentially represents an "organic form of worker resistance

that responds to the unique conditions of such workers" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 1) within exposure economies.

Another quick-fix exposure tactic revealed in my findings was paid promotional services, which generate engagement for influencers through artificial intelligence or giveaway formats. My results showed that influencers who partake in these paid services do it as an "investment" (Cherry, Micro-Influencer) due to the challenge of achieving exposure organically. These services can be metaphorically paralleled to financial services such as lenders or debt consolidators, where businesses and individuals loan money for a price. I argue that these services have risen in response to anxieties about decreasing engagement levels and increased competition within the influencer market. In turn, utilising paid services as an exposure tactic is a "tactical response developed" to compete with the "algorithmic conditions of an influencer's cultural production" (O'Meara, 2019, p. 11).

While the respondents in my sample study were acutely aware of how to navigate the Instagram algorithm, it is noteworthy that no participant explicitly condoned it. Instead, many expressed fears of being shadowbanned, which is the process of one's content not being pushed out by the platform for violating the rules of Instagram. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Influencers in my sample express fear over being shadowbanned, with one respondent describing it as "debilitating" (Jess, Micro-Influencer). Thus, the central irony here is that the very services influencers use to increase exposure are now avoided because of fears that they will lead to decreased visibility. This highlights how "technology platforms have defined and operationalized the concept of algorithmic manipulation" within communities of cultural production by "establishing, maintaining and legitimizing their institutional power" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 2)

In sum, the exposure tactics that influencers engage with involve a dynamic investment in navigating the changing Instagram algorithm. This is because "each change threatens to

render" the influencer's content "invisible" and the sanctioning of behaviours by Instagram delineates "further rules that limit the range of acceptable growth strategies" (Cotter, 2018, p. 904). In turn, Influencers aim to produce content that defends potential invisibility and, engage in practices to "help contain the vagaries of unpredictable markets for cultural products" (Petre et al, 2019, p. 4). However, it is essential to note that not all users know the platform's algorithmic rankings, let alone how to navigate them for visibility. This insinuates that the exposure economy fundamentally reinforces offline hierarchies of social privilege, with the wealthiest being those with greater access to social, cultural, political, and economic resources—which in this case, are the influencers with large audiences.

Influencer Summary

To summarise, for brand manufacturers to succeed, they must create products that fulfil consumer needs, trade profitably, and establish market opportunities. This is also the case for influencers who are perceived as the 'new brands' (Weinswig, 2016) in the exposure economy of Instagram.

This chapter demonstrated that despite Web 2.0 claims that "anyone can be a public figure by virtue of being themselves" in front of an anonymous audience (Whitmer, 2015, p. 40), my findings show that there are specific practices influencers put in place to receive exposure. Such methods include creating a profitable brand through engaging with niches to attract targeted audiences and strategically curating an online persona through a process of narrative construction. Influencers maintain specific aesthetics to construct their brand narrative, utilising presets, and strategies to create consistent feeds. Additionally, lifestyle influencers function as luxury brands, becoming aspirational sources for their audiences, who utilise them as tastemakers that shape opinions and drive profitable audience behaviours. However, findings showed that they must do so authentically by "carefully balancing professionally looking content with less crafted images of everyday life" (van Driel &

Dumitrica, 2021, p. 4). Such authenticity practices are what differentiate influencers from traditional media, and thus influencers ensure their advertorials remain relatable as a core tenant of self-branding. Despite my sample group expressing identities that are anything but 'ordinary' due to their baseline of social and economic capital, these influencers albeit proactively balance the advertisers they work with and the perceived expectations of their followers to achieve relatability.

This is because influencers know the value of gaining trust with their audiences by establishing relationships with them, which occurs through providing behind the scenes access to their lives and other intricacy practices such as candidly speaking to their audiences and engaging with them through live stories. This 'always on' nature of the job has led to pressures to constantly appease audiences who have not only become reliant on content but are also conscious of the messages such content displays, forcing influencers to reorient services to display themselves as socially and culturally sensitive. However, this pivot has raised questions about whether participation in public dialogue is genuine or, simply another way to generate profit.

Moreover, while influencing can be a lucrative career, my findings show that smaller influencers are still struggling to receive monetary value, and thus, often engage in collaborations for free in the hope it will generate exposure. This highlights the value of exposure as a currency, which has become particularly scarce in the wake of Instagram's platform changes. As a result, a landscape of practices for strategising how to navigate the new economy has become the norm for influencers, particularly those not high in social capital. These practices are termed 'exposure tactics' and entail the methods influencers execute with the specific intent to reach wider audiences. This involves navigating with algorithms through following trends, creating content for it to be reposted by profiles with larger followings, participating in 'engagement hacking' and sometimes, paying third-party services for 'quick

fix' engagement—which is reminiscent of the way in which brands cut corners in the retail industry through fast-fashion practices. This has led to Instagram becoming a microcosm of trends, whereby content is imitated and reappropriated to achieve more engagement, ironically making influencers' content stand out less because they become lost in a vacuum of creative reappropriation. As a result, the necessity for influencers to engage with industry professionals to ensure they are thriving within EEM is heightened, which will be discussed to close this chapter.

5.4 Agencies as Distributors

Distributors are supply chain entities that function as intermediaries between retailers and manufacturers, providing enhanced communication and security in changing markets. Based on this description, my thesis compares the role of distributors to how agencies function in the social media exposure economy. Similar to the way distributors sit between brands and retailers, agencies are "located between content producers and platforms" as they enable increased visibility through several strategies, including a "nuanced understanding of platforms and technologies, along with the collective publishing power of multiple online content producers" (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 5). These intermediaries encompass PR personnel who develop and execute social media marketing strategies and client campaigns, similar to traditional talent agencies who manage deals for a fee (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Abidin, 2017; Hutchinson, 2017). Agencies play an important role in content production as they provide briefs, mood boards and captions for creators. Influencers can also upload and post their content directly through influencer platforms, signifying content interaction.

Chapter 5.4 examines this process and discusses how agencies contribute to the Exposure Economy Model as a prominent stakeholder group. This discussion draws upon findings from interview transcripts with agency representatives, namely a PR Professional (PR Agent Respondent), an Influencer Platform agent (Influencer Platform Respondent), and two

business owners who work with influencers: a Salon Owner who operates their media in-house (Small Business Owner Respondent), and a Food Manufacturing Business CEO who utilises an agency for influencer marketing purposes (CEO Respondent). Transcripts with such industry participants underwent a thematic coding analysis and found that agencies ultimately improve supply chain efficiency in three pivotal ways by: i) reducing investment needs, ii) imparting knowledge of local markets, and iii) providing risk management. These proficiencies are further explored as the final component of this chapter.

Reduced Investment Needs

In an economic context, manufacturers working with distributors have reduced investment needs because distributors take control of most functions required to make the product available to the final point of purchase. At the beginning of this transaction, distributors eliminate manufacturers' need to contact retailers individually to sell their products. This parallels the social media economy, as agencies fundamentally act as tools for brands seeking to "buy access" to influencers "through digital marketing platforms" (Keller & Fay, 2016, p. 1). From a brand perspective, if a company wishes to execute an influencer campaign for a product or service, agencies dismantle the need to contact various influencers individually because host numerous clients under one business. In turn, they are "responsible for creating genuine user engagement" between the online content producer and their followers, which often translates into accessing hard-to-reach audiences through such technological infrastructures (Hutchinson, 2021, p. 6).

In these settings, a brand typically registers with an agency or influencer platform to distribute a social media campaign to influencers who fit the 'brief'. From here, the influencer accepts or negotiates said brief and creates the content deliverables required to complete it for an agreed-upon rate or equivalent compensation. This process was evidenced through my interview with a content manager from influencer platform Vamp, who stated that their

platform "simplifies the whole campaign process from end to end", including tasks like "distributing products, approving content, chatting to creators, and approving content." (Influencer Platform Respondent). This is like the responsibilities of PR agencies who organise activities on behalf of their clients, such as PR send-outs or 'gifting', paid campaigns, showings, events, and any other forms of publicity practice, including choosing whom brands should approach. Despite nuances in operation dynamics, my research found that agencies considerably reduce investment needs by connecting and mediating the relationship between influencers and brands thus expediting response times.

While this interaction comes with a fee for the brand, the cost of labour time is significantly saved for the client. This was evidenced through my interview with the Small Business Owner Respondent, who described her in-house method of reaching out to influencers for collaborations on Instagram as "heavy lifting" and "time-consuming". Additionally, my data infers that the collaboration outcomes usually generate a higher return on investment (ROI) due to increased exposure. To maximise this potential for exposure, the Influencer Platform Respondent stated that their platform audits influencers before they enter the app. Here the interviewee indicated that influencers must "have high engagement levels, high-quality content creation skills and high standards of professionalism and that they are vetted before being added to the community" to be considered for collaborations. This provides reassurance for brands that the influencers will be a valuable asset to their marketing efforts, as furthered through data which found that agencies prioritise influencers who are 'on trend'—that is: "someone who has an endless stream of ideas and a good eye for trends (Influencer Platform Respondent); and someone who can 'evoke intimacy' so audiences "feel like they are receiving the recommendation from a family member or friend" (CEO Respondent).

Findings show that agencies also seek influencers who appear 'authentic', through their ability to "communicate the value of a product without making it seem forced" (PR

Representative). These findings suggest that the industry values influencers for their ability project an affective intimacy communicated through their presentation as a “unique, notable and authentic product” (Nathanson, 2014, p. 192). In this vein, agencies reduce investment needs for brands who may not know what criterion to look for in an influencer before collaborating with them.

Similarly, social media agencies reduce investment needs for influencers who sit on the other side of collaborations. While each intermediary model's remuneration structures and contractual obligations diverge, most assist influencers by connecting them with increased commercial opportunities, offering a spectrum of support for a percentage of influencer income (Bishop, 2021). According to my research, 80% of the influencers in my sample group stated that they utilised influencer agencies in some capacity, with 100% of those respondents agreeing that it simplified their workload, particularly the administrative and logistical side of influencing that occurs beyond creating content. The positive outcome of this mediation was evident through finings demonstrating that several influencers attribute much of their current opportunities to agencies as they enable paid collaborations and ignite a series of ongoing brand relationships. One respondent stated she was first invited to join an agency upon reaching 3,000 followers and has preferred the security of the process ever since, referencing that “they take care of everything”, including briefs, content approvals and payment as major perks, defining it “more secure labour” (Elle, Micro-Influencer). Thus, working with agencies is a viable way to retain, assert, and “gain control within a general context of uncertainty and flux” (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 200).

In turn, social media agencies, like distributors, ultimately reduce client investment needs due to their simplification of the collaboration process and assurance that the influencers who they match with brands are value-generating. However, much of this ability to reduce

investment needs is because of their knowledge of local markets, as this gives them greater know-how of the landscape—which is thus unpacked.

Knowledge of Local Markets

From a marketing perspective, it is undeniable that local distributors obtain a deeper understanding of their clientele than the brands and manufacturers in a company headquarters. This sentiment applies to social media agencies, which are skilled in influencer management and marketing. These management tools "surface hot talent in narrow verticals" (Forrester, 2020, p. 1), know which creators are trending and what forms of influencer promotions will be more effective to their niche audiences than most decision-makers in a company. Therefore, many brands and companies who do not fully understand the social media landscape will choose to work with agencies in some capacity as they "do not know which influencers are suitable to reach out to" (PR Agent Respondent) and may not have the time or capacity to do so themselves.

This mediation is evidenced by the CEO Respondent, who now overlooks traditional marketing in favour of agency led influencer marketing to leverage the fact that "whatever [influencer] do is constantly being copied, shared, or bought by followers as they already have that relationship with them". My data thus confirms that utilising influencer marketing is deemed valuable by business owners as they can visibly see the exposure that influencers bring to their brand through promoting specific information to collective audiences (Hutchinson, 2021). The work of these agencies and platforms thereby manifests Bourdieu's concept of digital intermediaries in the way that they reveal legitimate culture in new cultural economies by recognising the "guarantees of quality offered by their moderately revolutionary tastemakers, who surround themselves with institutional signs of cultural authority" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 326). In turn, high reputation agencies have the power to provide cultural capital to

the influencers they choose, and influencers with social capital simultaneously lend this to the brands they work with, thus creating a cultural intermediation circuit.

Having knowledge of local markets also assist in the ability to choose well-aligned influencers rather than simply selecting those with an objectively large following. My interview findings reflected this notion through responses to what agency professionals value most in an influencer. Here, it was found that agency professionals look for factors such as: "personal relationships, aesthetic and creativity" (PR Agent Respondent), rather than vanity metrics such as 'likes' and 'followers'. This suggests that having followers is only one component of their criteria and thus, having a large audience alone is not valuable to a business from an industry perspective. In fact, my research shows that creators with smaller audiences often yield more significant results. This was evidenced by the CEO Respondent, who stated that micro-influencers "translate sales" more for his brand. According to Hutchinson, this highlights the role of micro-influencers, "who often operate and engage with smaller, more engaged audiences or micro-audiences, which are so-called because of their relative size to the larger, yet relatively disengaged audiences of more popular social media influencers" (2001, p. 6).

However, as mentioned in Chapter 5.3, these smaller creators are often expected to work for less monetary compensation due to their less visible social capital. This brings forward another benefit of utilising agencies. Like how distributors have an increased awareness of what payment terms to offer retailers, agency workers have local knowledge of social media industry rates and expectations. This is important because my findings show that when smaller influencers deal with brands directly, they are often told there is no budget, as evidenced in my field notes where I stated that "companies never offer me money unless I ask". According to Duffy, this leads to various influencers' turning into what she theorises as "aspirational workers" who "professionalise their passion projects in hopes of a compensated career", leading to underpaid labour and reinforcing the "long-standing relationship between femininity

and consumption" (2017, p. 6). This cultivates a gendered environment that enables PR personnel to push sponsored posts onto smaller accounts that will knowingly accept for the profit of 'free' exposure. An influencer in my sample expressed frustrations over such a landscape, stating: "unfortunately, exposure doesn't pay the bills. Also, if anything, I am the one giving them exposure, so why should I work for free?" (Lily, Macro-Influencer). Furthermore, as indicated by Duffy, the reward system for these aspirants is uneven as not all exposure even results in followers for the labourer.

In turn, this inconsistent landscape makes working with an agency even more beneficial for influencers, albeit conceding a cut of payment, because agencies are ultimately aware of the market value of their work and are hence more likely to pay them. Agencies can also assist in mitigating risks associated with influencer collaborations, a notion to be further discussed.

Risk Management for Business

In a financial marketplace, utilising a distributor means a more spread-out supply chain and, subsequently, less risk for each party the chain encounters. Likewise, my findings suggest that one of the primary advantages of utilising an agency is reducing risk from both a brand and influencer perspective. Regarding the former, Bishop indicates that "influencer management tools sell expertise in influencer industries to reassure brands" who are unsure about working in new and "risky ecologies" (2021, p.1).

One of the most prevalent risks is not receiving ROI for influencer investments. This was evidenced in my findings through the Small Business Owner Respondent, who reflected on an occasion where she gave an influencer a free service, only for them never to tag her, a transaction she subsequently deemed a "waste". However, in a landscape where agencies are constantly providing PR packages to influencers in the hope their client will receive exposure

via a mention on their profile, such is to be expected.[23] In contrast, the CEO Respondent reflects on receiving “quite a few followers” when engaging in agency-led collaborations. For this reason, the business owner said that utilising an agency for influencer collaborations was “a good decision” based on his belief that influencers put more effort into their content because they want to “perform to continue their relationship with that agency” (CEO Respondent). This data suggests that agencies encourage norms of reciprocity (Giesler, 2006) driven by the influencer’s aspirational labour to network and receive more collaborations in the future. Social media agencies and PR professionals also decrease the risk of hiring an influencer who does not have a good brand fit. According to my findings, this is important because if the influencer looks and feels like a genuine user of that product or brand, the collaboration becomes more genuine and believable and will be “more effective as a result” (Influencer Platform Respondent) because “their trial process is lessened” (CEO Respondent). This reinforces that “influencers are commercially valuable for their authenticity”—where their “self-brands are hinged on consistent performance of amateurism and relatability” (Bishop, 2021, p 4)– a recurring theme throughout this entire study.

Moreover, such performance can be conveyed through the requested deliverables that agencies ask from influencers, as these professionals have increased awareness of what type of content yields the best results. This was evidenced by the PR Agent Respondent who stressed that deliverables should be dependent on the influencer and their audience; however, “face-to-camera stories” tend to “drive the highest engagement”, particularly when providing “more than a brand tag, for example, they explain why they like the brand or product” (PR Agent Respondent). This suggests that industry professionals hope for a perceivably authentic narrative around their product or service to make it a believable partnership for all involved.

[23] It is hereby important to note that the recipient of a gift is not always obliged to render any expected performance by promoting the goods on Instagram.

Nonetheless, this respondent stated that their agency "always encourages brands to let influencers decide how to showcase a brand or product" because they "know their audience best and know what will resonate" (ibid.). In turn, my findings show that agencies have an increased awareness of what content is most powerful and construct their content briefs accordingly.

Moreover, utilising social media agencies also reduces varying individual and systematic risks for influencers. One obvious reason is the security of payment, which was previously discussed. Working with agencies also means influencer content is audited and approved, and the tags and captions are usually provided before a post goes live. This is important for several reasons, particularly regarding ad disclosure as Influencers risk being fined for not adhering to regulatory guides, which can lead to losing "credibility among influencers, clients, and the industry as a whole" (Abidin et al, 2020, p. 72). Additionally, having content approved before publishing eases the anxieties influencers experience regarding becoming 'cancelled', as discussed in Chapter 5.3. Minnie, a Macro-Influencer, evidenced this by revealing that she "stresses less" when an agency approves her content first. The process of 'approving before publication' is the greatest way to "balance the necessary creativity of influencer marketing with the risk of misinformation" (Haenlein et al., 2020, p. 11). Here, working with agencies means influencers reduce the risks of providing incorrect information about a product and, in turn, tainting their reputation. Intermediary organisations hereby "promise brands increased control over the content and messaging by disciplining and narrowing cultural production to limited commercially recognisable genres" (Bishop, 2021, p. 3). Thus, working with agencies avoids potentially losing their earned relationship with consumers due to misleading them, which is highly important considering trust is a critical factor in the monetization of exposure.

Agency Summary

Akin to how distributors connect manufacturers to customers in the marketplace, social media agencies and PR professionals play a vital role in mediating relations between brands and influencers to generate and expediate influencer marketing campaigns. In this vein, I argue that the popularity of influencer platforms and agencies directly responds to Influencer economies becoming commercially viewed as "confusing, under-regulated, and messy" (Bishop, 2021, p. 3). Many intermediaries thus promote the ability to streamline and professionalise the communication between marketers and influencers. These agencies play a fundamental role in the exposure economy, functioning as "loose collectives that matchmake influencers with brands, charging membership fees" (Stoldt et al., 2019, p. 1). They do this by reducing investment costs, utilising their knowledge of local markets, and managing risks, which occur through such practices as expediting response times, aligning brands with the right influencers, and enhancing a company's reach. Without agencies, the brand or influencer would have to perform these functions themselves, adversely affecting both parties' bottom line, and subjecting themselves to multiple risks. Furthermore, discussions in Chapter 5,4 highlight the value of exposure, as when utilising an agency, brands are ultimately able get a product or service to a mass market more efficiently and in turn expand visibility, which is the ultimate way of excelling within the exposure economy.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The Exposure Economy Model (EEM) proves that Instagram fundamentally operates as a capitalist-style economy rather than ecology by comparing the stakeholders in the social media landscape to those within a financial marketplace.

To summarise, in this setting platforms, like retail institutions, provide, or in some cases deny, a space for influencers to 'sell' their goods to consumers. These platforms hold immense power as they commodify the user experience through data collection and control what content and creators receive visibility within the app. Here, Instagram privileges those who provide the

most engagement to ensure users stay on the platform to generate more data—and consequently increase profits. Crucial to their economic positioning, Instagram attempts to monopolise the market through visibility control by rewarding users who effectively utilise the affordances and features they re-appropriate from rival platforms. Paradoxically, however, Chapter 5.1 found that such a method impacts the user experience as individuals are expressing frustrations over Instagram becoming a less engaging version of TikTok, raising questions about the longevity of its position as a market leader.

Next, everyday users function as personal consumers because they invest their own resources into both producing on the platform and consuming its content without being paid for such labour. Chapter 5.2 shows that, like market customers, this group is broad and has vastly different consumption habits, behaviours, and online practices, and thus should be segmented accordingly. For this reason, EEM groups everyday users into three category types, engaged users, private participants and need-centric consumers, to display how they play different roles in trading exposure. Despite differences in usage types, one prevalent trend among consumers is their shifting concern towards social media and the subsequent pressure they place on influencers to integrate social and political concerns in their interactions with stakeholders. Therefore, this group is a critical driver of the exposure economy, as both their consumption preferences and behaviour ultimately determine the economy's supply and demand.

As a result, influencers invest significant labour into establishing relations with everyday users. This became evident in my comparison of Influencers as brand manufacturers. Influencers produce content for Instagram with the goal of achieving profit, increasing their own capital inflow and that of the platforms that host them. Chapter 5.3 introduces two types of influencer categories to complement industry-established tiers, namely content creators, and celebrity creators, which distinguish between the different paths to influencer status. Knowing

whether an influencer gained prominence for their content or career is critical to EEM because exposure is transferrable between offline and online spheres. Thus, obtaining exposure outside Instagram is a crucial determiner of wealth within the supply chain and gives such users an advantage in the digital economy.

My research demonstrates that influencers thus partake in strategic exposure-seeking practices to optimise such wealth, due to an over-saturation of content and the evident scarcity of visibility within the app. These practices are called exposure tactics and describe the strategic methods both influencers and aspiring influencers utilise to reach larger audiences within an algorithmic landscape. The commonality of such tactics has led to Instagram becoming a microcosm of trends, whereby content is imitated and reappropriated to achieve more engagement, ironically making influencers' content stand out less by becoming lost in a vacuum of creative reappropriation. Moreover, while it was found that influencers with higher social currency rely less on such practices, all influencers are forced to navigate their position in the economy in a way that appears aesthetic, aspirational, and authentic. In turn, influencer practices have also become carefully choreographed and curated, bringing their content creation closer to traditional advertising dynamics and, paradoxically, less candid, and real, as per their initial appeal.

Finally, agencies function as distributors by sitting between content producers and platforms as they work by enabling increased visibility for both stakeholders (Hutchinson, 2021). Chapter 5.4 highlighted the value of these agencies as their ability to combine production and consumption processes through such outcomes as reducing investment costs for brands and influencers, providing knowledge of local markets, and managing risks for all stakeholders within the volatile exposure economy. This group assist in seamlessly managing the supply chain through such operations as expediting response times, aligning brands with the right influencers, and enhancing a company’s reach. The prevalence of these agencies

fundamentally highlights the complexity of the exposure economy and reinforces the value of visibility, as the entire business model is dedicated to generating exposure for stakeholder groups.

The EEM supply chain is having a negative impact on content production and a significant effect on the inflation of exposure as a currency. While social media was initially dubbed a space where all individuals could freely present their ideas and communicate globally, we have witnessed a landscape in which capitalist structures have infiltrated. This is because social media exists as an economic system whereby conglomerate platform owners commodify user data and control content in line with commercial, rather than creative, interests. Central to this economy is the competitive market in which influencers compete for visibility, whereby success is determined based on who drives the most engagement leading to aspirational labourers pursuing practices with the promise of visibility. However, the reward system for aspirants is unequal due to algorithms favouring those with pre-existing high exposure capital, further disadvantaging 'resource-poor cultural producers' (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). While my research shows that it is possible to navigate the algorithm, this labour has led to a rise in trend-based social media content that does not celebrate diversity. Instead, the primary goal of online creation has become wealth in social currency. This has various implications for Instagram use because audiences are sold content determined by profit-driven algorithms rather than actual user preferences and, subsequently, experience divergence from the expressive, communicative network they originally signed up for. In response, market competitors such as TikTok are becoming increasingly popular among users, because they seemingly offer visibility in a less hierarchical manner, bringing more diverse newsfeeds to the forefront and granting new market actors the ability to access the currency of exposure.

In sum, while most would believe that contemporary "data-driven digital platforms provide cultural producers" with the potential to "broaden their reach and boost revenue", these

opportunities actually "exact a profound cost—both to creator-workers' labour conditions and to the cultural products that get circulated to mediated publics" (Petre et al., 2019, p. 8). The Exposure Economy Model hence demonstrates that, when visibility is scarce, the value of exposure is inflated. This results in producers not meeting the demands of users because the content becomes manufactured for material profit rather than for the symbolic, cultural enlightenment that social media can afford.

Chapter 6: Closing Comments

The digital landscape has rapidly become a consumer medium. Contemporary media companies and their users can no longer be adequately understood without better comprehending the technological and economic settings within which they operate (Jenkins, 2008). In the context of social media, this understanding necessitates engagement with the dynamic individual and collective meanings that stakeholders offer to social networking platforms (Fuchs, 2015), which this study found to be deeply embedded with commerciality.

An extensive review of media literature, however, revealed a tendency for researchers to discuss social media as an 'ecology', namely, an interactive ecosystem that connects a society's nature and culture (Postman, 2016). Ecological metaphors consider platforms such as Instagram as sensitive 'microsystems' that function according to the changes apparent in other ecosystem components. While this perspective is consistent with the synergistic way social networking operates within electronic environments more broadly, my research found that ecology theories fall short in encapsulating the economic transformations that occur within the Instagram marketplace—one that is fixated on attention, visibility, and profit. Media economy literature then appears more appropriate to study the Instagram platform, as it builds on supply and demand concepts and implies an impossibility to externalise the costs of commercial activity (Vermeij & Leigh, 2011).

To gain the in-depth understanding necessary to shift how we view social media from an 'ecology' to an 'economy' viewpoint, I subsequently navigated my way through Instagram as both a social media user and micro-influencer, recording field notes and 'snapshots' of my experience to utilise for coding purposes and further qualitative analysis. This manifested through a digital ethnography, inclusive of mediated fieldnotes, participant observation, online surveys, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis of Instagram posts and comments.

Being immersed in the “field between digital and physical spaces highlighted the ritualised aspects of daily life, both exotic and ordinary” (Goffman 1956, p. 1). As a result, I was able to acutely observe the operations of everyday social media use and “investigate how seemingly mundane practices were, in fact, crucial processes that structured the performance” of stakeholders in their pursuit of visibility (Abidin, 2014, p. 7).

Here, my fieldwork established that being seen is a fundamental concern for individuals on social media, particularly for content creators who develop strategic visibility methods to stand out in media-rich environments due to the scarcity of ‘exposure’ as a resource. Since having “access to working capital is a must for any industry, especially those operating in the media economy” (Albarran, 2016, p. 65), this finding revealed that the structures within the social media landscape closely align with a capitalist-style system, a parallel reflected in the production, circulation and consumption of material and symbolic goods and services and the subsequent uneven distribution of capital.

A deep understanding of these structures formed a theoretical framework created to describe this economy: ‘The Exposure Economy Model’ (EEM). The following concluding chapter therefore summarises this model and addresses the way it responds to the research questions posited in my introduction. Later in the chapter, I highlight the significance of my findings, acknowledge research design limitations, and close with recommendations for future studies in this field.

The Exposure Economy Model (EEM) Summary

This thesis' main contribution to literature is a new lens through which we can view the social media landscape: EEM, which emerged from a grounded theory of empirical data. This theoretical framework encompasses all activities related to production, consumption, and trade in exposure. It has four critical stakeholders, namely Social Media Platforms, Everyday Users, Influencers, and Agencies, that operate respectively as actors within a financial economy supply chain, specifically Retail Institutions, Consumers, Brand Manufacturers and Distributors. The currency traded among these stakeholders is 'exposure', which has become a scarce resource in such an economy. This is due to an over-saturation of content, creators, and the existence of capitalist algorithmic structures which benefit those 'wealthy' in social capital as they have more resources to leverage. In this market, the platform owner (Instagram) derives power by virtue of aggregating institutional connections (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

An analysis of such connections reveal that social media success is no longer simply about content production. Rather, it entails an understanding of the relative value of new currencies within contemporary media environments, whereby elevated digital visibility fuels both social media elitism and online monetisation, because it is a determinant of social capital wealth. The model presents the overall state of the social media economy as it progresses through four stages in a cyclical pattern and is summarised in the table below.

Table 1 - Four Stages of EEM

Platforms as Retail Institutions	Platforms provide the technological infrastructures that allow Instagram to be a profitable marketplace for producing and consuming material and symbolic goods and services. Like traditional retail institutions, Instagram collects data on its users for commercial purposes, and this data is utilised for targeted advertising and sold to third-party companies. To generate maximum data, Instagram's algorithm prioritises content that attracts high engagement under the assumption that such content is most relevant and enjoyable for users and thus, keeps them on the app. Instagram's workings subsequently manifest an increasingly algorithmic media landscape that commodifies visibility and determines which creators are seen online. This has a symbiotic impact on the market because influencers require visibility to exceed on social media platforms, akin to how brands require shelf space in retail settings in order to generate sales. This has cultivated a monopolistic market, with platforms in the industry competing for the same customers to use their products, and many influencers creating similar content for hegemonic target audiences. Instagram attempts to dominate such market by appropriating competing platform features and rewarding users who engage with them increased exposure. This fundamentally impacts the user experience through subsequent social costs, such as a supply of content manufactured commercially rather than for social or creative empowerment.
Everyday Users as Consumers	Everyday social media users are market customers who are the core focus of all stakeholder groups because they present demand that stimulates the economy. Crucial to this parallelism is their role as active consumers. Here,

Instagram relies on user-generated content, and expropriates the labour of ordinary users by converting it into monetary value; raising questions as to whether this group is inherently empowered or exploited by the platform. Users of Instagram can be segmented in a manner similar to retail customers by identifying their usage trends to gain better understandings of their overall needs. This study found three distinct consumer groups that display unique characteristics, yet all contribute to the circulation of exposure: Engaged Users, Private Participants and Need-Centric Consumers. These groups hold immense power for the economy at large because they consume both content and products within the app and in turn, control the market production across many domains with their demand. This power has intensified in recent years, as every day users have become more conscious of their consumer decisions, forcing platforms and influencers to adjust their production practices to satisfy the changing culturally learned needs of its target consumers.

Influencers as Brand Manufacturers

Influencers sell products under an identified name and cultivate a targeted customer base through direct advertising on their Instagram profiles. Influencers thus present themselves as brands manufacturers by commodifying their everyday lives through tools of cultural production. However, they attempt to do so authentically to proactively balance perceived relatability with their followers, whom they seek to establish profitable relations with by positioning themselves as more trustworthy than traditional advertising. In turn, a landscape of practices for strategising how to navigate the new economy has become the norm for this group. These practices are termed exposure tactics and entail the methods influencers execute with the specific intent to reach wider audiences while generating increased exposure currency. However, the vexed outcomes

	of these practices often provoke influencers to take market short-cuts through participating in quick-fix strategies such as engagement pods or paid services, sparking ethical concerns akin to modes of fast-fashion. These behaviours demonstrate that influencers consciously practice instrumental interactions with algorithms as a direct response to their pursuit of visibility.
Agencies as Distributors	Agencies are distributors who function as intermediaries between users and influencers. Without agencies, the social media supply chain would be less efficient due to their ability to reduce investment needs for brands and influencers, impart their knowledge of local markets and provide risk management for businesses. Many brands who do not fully understand the social media landscape will work with social media agencies as they do not have the knowledge of which influencers to reach out to and may not have the time or capacity to deal with negotiating and, the administrative work involved. Additionally, influencers will choose to be mediated by agencies to receive appropriate payment for their work. When utilising an agency, both brands and influencers can produce to a mass market more efficiently and expand their visibility, which is the aim of the exposure economy.

In sum, EEM compares critical stakeholders within a financial economy to that of the Instagram landscape as an alternative to viewing it as an ecosystem. Here, the circulation of exposure is controlled by platforms, consumed by users, sought after by influencers, and traded by agencies. While this research focused on Instagram as its primary case study, I argue that EEM can be applied to any social media platform with algorithmic newsfeeds and a core focus on visibility within monetised networks. The awareness and use of this framework is valuable in our media-saturated society because it draws attention to the fact that the economic returns

on exposure are disproportionately distributed across hierarchies, thus reaffirming traditional social roles that prevail within our capitalist-style economy offline. EEM also has implications for society as it ultimately demonstrates that, when visibility is scarce, the value of exposure is inflated, resulting in content becoming manufactured for material profit rather than for symbolic, cultural enlightenment.

Responding to Research Questions

In the conclusion of this thesis, I provide final answers to my initial research questions that were presented in the introduction.

Firstly, I posited "what are digital influencer practices?". Here I sought to investigate the practices deeply ingrained within the fabrics of influencer behaviour and how these practices operationalised via 'exposure'. This thesis defined influencer practices as a series of purposeful creative customs that constitute their job as online content creators. I found that these practices are both implicitly and explicitly strategic in nature and coherent to achieving visibility. One example is narrative construction, which defines how influencers rely on visual and textual stimuli to craft an online persona they can monetise on social media. For lifestyle influencers, this involves presenting certain ideals, aesthetics, aspiration, and authenticity, which broadly mirror influencer culture's appeal. However, it is essential to note that not every creator can manifest this model, challenging Web 2.0 claims that "anyone can be a public figure by virtue of being themselves" in front of an anonymous audience (Whitmer, 2015, p. 40). This is because succeeding as an influencer demands knowledge of the strategies that this group utilises to achieve exposure, which often involves tactics such as hashtagging, following trends, and partaking in regram culture. Those deprived of exposure further navigate the algorithm through 'engagement hacking', paid promotional services, and purposeful avoidance of shadow banning. These practices depict how influencers commodify themselves and their lifestyles to sell access to their audience. Perhaps more importantly, however, the answer to

this research question demonstrates that influencers pursue exposure by gaining knowledge of algorithmic rules and formulating tactics accordingly to succeed on Instagram.

This relates to my next question which asked, "how are these practices operationalised via algorithms?" My research found that the "sanctioning of behaviours" by Instagram delineate rules that limit exposure and hence the range of available growth strategies for users and influencers (Cotter, 2018, p. 904). This brings the power of platforms to attention, particularly regarding how affordances and changes to the application directly impact content visibility. As evidenced by my findings, the introduction of algorithmic feeds on Instagram meant that influencer content was no longer chronologically showcased to all followers, affecting overall engagement metrics, value to brand partners, and subsequent earning potential. Additionally, platforms indirectly determine the content produced on the app because influencers partake in certain creation practices to overcome the implications of their algorithms. This has led to Instagram becoming a microcosm of trends, whereby content is imitated and reappropriated to achieve more engagement, ironically making influencers' content stand out less because it is becoming lost in a vacuum of creative reappropriation. Therefore, the changes in Instagram's presentation strategy fundamentally function to reorganise the productivity and exposure of its users and, thus, the inevitable supply of content on the app.

It was then asked, "how do players in the economy learn the rules?" My findings confirmed that exposure tactics are formed by observing the creators and types of content that attain visibility to identify the norms that algorithms reward with exposure. In turn, I argue that influencers are not told what content they should be producing to achieve exposure, but instead, they logically familiarise themselves with seemingly successful standards in an attempt to both increase and maintain loyal audiences. In turn, influencer content has become gradually more planned and curated, bringing the industry closer to traditional advertising production. This

answer ties in with the enquiry regarding "how the interrelated systems within the social media economy operate?". Here, I aimed to explore the symbiotic structures within the economy and recognise how change impacts the process in its entirety. Instagram's stakeholders navigate "a connected system of organisations, activities, information, and resources designed to source, produce, and move goods from a supplier to an end customer" (Brookhouse, 2021, p. 13). However, value is created through the Instagram platform providing products that enable multiple different types of users to discover each other, interact and exchange value (Evans et al, 2011). As the social media economy is fundamentally intended to circulate the online production and consumption process between platforms, users, influencers, and agencies, each change impacts all actors in the market. One recurring example is when the platform introduces a new algorithm that threatens the visibility of influencer content. This subsequently shifts the content that influencers create and the features of Instagram they utilise, inflating the value of exposure and thus increasing agencies' work and impacting the overall user experience.

This process, therefore, poses the question: "is exposure the key currency that drives the social media economy?" My thesis explored whether exposure is a powerful currency on its own or if its economic value is tied to other forms of capital. It was found that while exposure evidently allows content to be publicised to larger audiences, certain variables determine the return of such a transaction. One variable is social currency, revealing that content produced by creators already wealthy in followers and reputation, such as celebrity creators, is favoured by the algorithm. Thus, these individuals do not rely as heavily on the acquisition of further exposure, highlighting that platform policies "disadvantage resource-poor cultural producers in a field that already lends itself to winner-take-all dynamics" (Cotter, 2019 p. 2).

Another variable is engagement, which is manifested through findings on regram culture, confirming that exposure is only of significant value if the reposting profile has an audience that aligns with the original post or creator. This concept resonates with the variable

of authenticity, which represents a core tenet of self-branding and commodification of the self (Cotter, 2017), and was a recurring theme throughout this study. My research supports extant literature that suggests the success of influencers as correlated with an appearance of authenticity to remain appealing to audiences and hence advertisers. This nexus has led to various strategies to evoke authenticity, such as influencers' hiding ads under the veil of personal narratives and constructing specific content to enhance personal relationships with followers. Other notable qualities that compound authenticity are displays of effortless 'trendiness' and the ability to create intimacies with followers—which lead to a standardisation of influencer practices and, ironically, raises questions regarding their capacity to be genuine amongst motives that are so calculated and commercialised.

Finally, I sought to discover "what interests the structures above favour?" Here, it was concluded that the economy first and foremost favours platforms as, they leverage UGC from all stakeholders for advertisement and valuable data. Additionally, they can determine algorithms based on their commercial interests to keep users engaged with the app and thus, maintain their role as a leader in a monopolised market. However, the economy also favours influencers who possess high social currency, as it seems that algorithmic structures do not affect the visibility of their content as severely as their content creator and everyday user counterparts and thus, do not impede their ability to profit from their use of the app. In sum, the milieu of monetisation described above has led to EEM mirroring a capitalist-style economy that benefits those wealthy in followers and disadvantages everyday users, small creators, and aspiring influencers. In turn, I argue that influencers who have been allocated 'shelf space' by the Instagram platform primarily represent a privileged few, which is problematic considering that their influence on social media culture—and culture more generally—perpetuates existing hegemonic ideologies and values.

Research Insights and Implications

Through this thesis, ample attention has been attributed to developing an in-depth understanding of the social media economy's operations and functions to update current knowledge regarding the practices involved in online production and consumption. In turn, my research "provides new insight into the challenges related to research models commonly used for observing" social media landscapes (Ketonen-Oksi et al, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, my study supplies several conclusions about the exposure economy that I predict will be helpful from scholarly, societal and industry standpoints—which I here discuss.

Firstly, my findings add to the extant scholarly literature on social media and have theoretical implications for researchers who wish to examine the digital economy. When reflecting on such findings, however, I realise that many insights raised are inherently paradoxical. The first paradox in my research is that platforms imitate their social networking competitors and award users who engage in reappropriated features more visibility. However, this is subsequently deterring its existing users from the app due to creating a culture of standardised content across different platforms. Additionally, users are displaying distrust and negativity towards the platform and influencers they follow yet demand to be involved in their personal lives. They also intentionally consume their marketing messages while critiquing those that are too explicit. Inversely, influencers are expected to be authentic but aspirational, aesthetic yet not contrived, and must maintain a level of corporate social responsibility—albeit receiving negative feedback for discussing issues that do not fit neatly within their niche. Lastly, agencies attempt to streamline supply chain processes by generating client exposure; however, they perpetuate similar ideals to algorithmic structures by choosing who is deemed as 'influential' enough to access their services and thus, receive such exposure. In turn, these paradoxes tell media researchers that the social media economy is not performing in a simple linear fashion and thus warrants constant exploration. Additionally, they confirm the vexed

nature of visibility in influencer economies, which as a landscape, have become "confusing, under-regulated, and messy" (Bishop, 2021, p. 3).

For this reason, my research presents numerous new terminology and theoretical frameworks to apply to the social media landscape to make it less perplexing for researchers. My first contribution is the differentiation between visibility, a concept heavily studied in the extant literature, and exposure. Throughout my thesis, I argue a crucial distinction between these two terms, which are often used interchangeably in literature: however, visibility is the state of being seen, whereby exposure is a currency used to publicise individuals and thus increase social capital. In this context, visibility cannot be traded, as it is a process, but exposure can be exchanged because it functions as a currency, albeit a scarce one. While exposure is not necessary for one's everyday participation on Instagram, it is frequently traded within the social media economy as it is crucial for those wanting to leverage social media and transcend from an ordinary social media user to a profit-making digital influencer, or successful online business.

Moreover, my work on user group segmentation is another pivotal scholarly contribution. While literature has always differentiated between active and passive users, with the former being users who publicly engage with media's affordances and the latter being those who passively 'lurk', I argue that such titles do not cover the complexity of the current social networking user base, who are fundamentally operating as market consumers. Therefore, I believe that future studies on social media and digital cultures can utilise my customer segmentation approach of engaged users, private participants and need-centric consumers when conducting any study examining online communication or social media use in general. Similarly, future studies in this domain may also wish to apply my theoretical categories of 'content creators' and 'celebrity creators' to categorise influencer types beyond their audience size and distinguish the different paths to influencer status. Knowing whether an influencer

gained prominence for their content or career is essential to EEM because it displays how exposure is transferrable between offline and online spheres. Additionally, obtaining exposure outside Instagram is a crucial determiner of wealth, which is vital for research on social capital. Another contribution that may be helpful for literature is my findings on how lifestyle influencers construct their brand narratives through aesthetics, aspiration, and authenticity. I argue that these ideals are fundamentally tied to consumerism and can be applied to other niche influencers on various platforms and are therefore a valuable framework for media studies and social and cultural analysis within literature.

From a social perspective, the exposure economy draws attention to existing digital inequalities by bringing into focus the value of online status in contemporary social media landscapes. Generally, influencers with high social currency, who are wealthy in exposure, view the platform as providing them with opportunity and resources, as the algorithm tends to favour them. In contrast, for those aspiring influencers, businesses or users who want their content seen by greater audiences, the economy is a landscape of ever-shifting rules that demand resources that not everyone can afford, thus creating digital disproportions.

This is because producers hold "onto the opportunities conferred by participation in the established capitalist exchange within the cultural industries, becoming increasingly professionalised, hierarchical, and market-driven" (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p. 68). My findings, therefore, have sociological implications by highlighting a capitalist-style system whereby certain actors are required to put in more work to achieve exposure for their cultural production to be assigned value within the Instagram economy. I, therefore, argue that the current digital influencer landscape thus strongly parallels Farrell and Mayer's (2011) assertion that the entry of 'non-professional' creative participants has failed to disturb the hierarchy in which creative professionals are the referent value and therefore, has the potential to impact the way users successfully navigate through modern society.

Moreover, my research insights highlight that the everyday social media user plays a pivotal role in the transformation of the social media economy, not just in terms of "tastes and preferences, but in their allocation of attention and expenditures on media-related products and services" (Albarran, 2016, p. 190). Thus, my research can increase the empowerment of audiences to make statements through their consumer choices, whether that be through the influencers they follow, products they purchase online, or platform features they engage with. This momentum will continue to encourage businesses to adapt to consumer shifts in priorities, which is particularly important considering social media's ability to focus collective attention on specific issues within the public interest. Additionally, data confirming the strategic way influencers create content for visibility purposes has the potential to alert consumers to be hyper-critical of what they consume, particularly content with political or social messages, which is beneficial knowledge to society.

Finally, my research has various industry implications for stakeholders in the exposure economy. Knowing the demand for visibility is helpful for competing or emerging platforms that may align with EEM to tactically provide users access to the currency in a manner less hierarchically on their own social networking sites. While we have witnessed this recently through Instagram's offering an option for users to personalise their newsfeeds, I argue that until the algorithm offers creators egalitarian entry to visibility, my findings regarding exposure inequality will prevail. Thus, focusing attention on emergent but evolving algorithmic approaches may provide a starting point for platforms interested in adopting new "innovative, social media-based value (co)-creation tools and operation models" (Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016, p. 14).

Aspiring influencers who operate in this space can also benefit from this research through an increased understanding of the algorithmic landscape, the provision of current structures and exploration of how others within their industry are currently navigating them.

While there is pervasive awareness of social media success being tied to virality (Han et al., 2022), fewer studies are dedicated to the unequal access to such virality. My analysis may therefore be useful for creators who feel discouraged by investing their own time, resources, and labour into their content, only for it not to be seen or engaged with by audiences.

My study's implications can also be helpful in the digital marketing domain. My research endorses that marketers and influencer agencies should be cognisant that exposure is not the only variable important to achieving visibility, as other variables, such as engagement and authenticity, will ultimately determine its return. This finding insinuates that businesses should avoid utilising influencers purely for their large audiences and carefully consider the brand and audience alignment to achieve a successful collaboration. My research may thus be helpful to start-up agencies and brands seeking to further understand the processes that provide the most value and return on investment.

Perhaps most importantly, EEM and its demonstration of the exposure economy's structure, conduct, and performance can be applied as a utility in understanding social media more broadly and evaluating appropriate public policy responses. I sincerely hope that this paper contributes to much-needed, recent literature about the ever-changing social media landscape to assist in creating legislation within digital services, so that we can avail the benefits of Instagram and make it a more positive site for all stakeholders.

Sharing Limitations and Recommendations to Follow

Several internal and external limitations related to the current study suggest potentially valuable avenues for future research and thus, should be acknowledged. Despite my intention to provide an up-to-date summary of Instagram as it stands in 2022, the social media landscape is ever-changing, meaning I was internally met with various methodological deviations throughout my research period. This impacted my walk-through method’s aim to situate the Instagram platform within the context of the time of writing. As the Instagram app is not a

stabilised artefact, I found providing an overview in real-time an almost impossible task. I would therefore recommend future studies to conduct the walk-through numerous times throughout an app's update developments to account for its dynamic nature. I would also suggest further addressing any limitations associated with the walk-through method by closely combining it with other data sources. If networks and resources allowed, it would have been interesting to conduct interviews with platform developers and employees from Instagram to clarify their intentions for the platform and receive human insight into their perceptive as a stakeholder group to accompany the data derived from my walk-through method.

Another methodological limitation I faced was my survey sample being relatively small and specific in demographics. While I argue that the demographic I captured mirrors public data of the average Instagram user in Australia, particularly those that partake in influencer culture on Instagram, I recommend that future studies employ cross-cultural analysis to determine whether user practices and social media consumption habits play different roles in alternative cultures and locations. Similarly, although my research unveiled strategies utilised by influencers and agencies in negotiating their position in the social media economy, my sample was undeniably limited in scope and size. Thus, further research should delve deeper into the disparities between influencers within differing niche categories and interview a more significant number of agency professionals to gain more in-depth data and diverse perspectives on these stakeholder groups.

My research was also subject to external influences that resulted in a degree of limitations. The research collection period for this thesis was in 2020, the year the world shut down for Covid-19. This was in some ways beneficial for my study, as my research was developing during a historical period where digital services were more utilised and necessary for communication than ever before. However, I decided not to pivot this thesis to be about Instagram's intersection with Covid, particularly because the pandemic was already consuming

every other aspect of my online and offline world. The pandemic did albeit cause a shift in research approaches, making it entirely digital as I could no longer physically go to influencer events and showings for fieldnote purposes or conduct face-to-face interviews, which I believe limited the rapport I could build with my respondents, and thus potentially impacted data collection.

Furthermore, during the last month of research, Instagram began heavily prioritising video content through an update that further altered the newsfeed by introducing a vertical full screen to "bring video more front and centre" on the app (Jha, 2022, p. 1). If timing allowed, I would have investigated this change and delved deeper into specific video trends and their cultural significance. I, therefore, invite future studies to add to my content creation analysis by including an examination of this content shift and, an analysis of popular influencer video content, such as 'unboxings', 'get-ready-with-me (GRWM)' videos, and influencer 'day in the life' vlogs. This is important as these videos are rich sites for social and cultural analysis due to their inherently commercialised properties. I also advise future research to consider the increased labour influencers have undertaken due to video content becoming a new norm for collaborations and sponsored post deliverables, which I argue, involve far more creation practices than static images and thus warrant exploration.

Similarly, recent public discussions on regulating influencer advertising came into public discourse towards the end of this research and are continually shifting the cultural resources by which society utilises to understand social media practices. More research is thus necessary to examine how pressures for transparency and the requirement to disclose ads have complicated the ability of participants to "negotiate the demands of visibility and vulnerability", particularly when networked audiences "scrutinise their socially mediated projections of authenticity" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 6).

Finally, I would have embraced the opportunity to carefully explore the impact of TikTok on the Instagram economy, particularly in light of recent findings that users prefer the diversity of the TikTok algorithm and are also explicitly moving away from the curated, aesthetic nature of Instagram. I believe these tendencies have the potential for interesting discussions about the social media marketplace and the future of influencer culture more broadly. An overall comparison of the norms and trends of each video platform would be most beneficial for media and communications literature.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the utility of economic theories in exploring social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Therefore, I presented EEM to compare the operations and functions of the Instagram platform and its associated users, influencers, and agencies to the stakeholders within financial markets, namely retail institutions, consumers, brand manufacturers and distributors. This theoretical model aimed to contextualise how social media actors exist within a commodified landscape by underlining their interactions and exploring the commercial structures that confine them.

Key findings from this research revealed that when visibility is scarce, the value of exposure is inflated, resulting in content becoming manufactured for material profit rather than for symbolic, cultural enlightenment. As demonstrated by EEM, influencers pursue exposure on Instagram by gaining knowledge of algorithmic rules and formulating tactics to succeed on the app, leading to homogenous content created in accordance with trend culture, which subsequently impacts the supply chain. These findings remind us of social capital theory, as the success of influencers depends not only on their ability to master digital practices but also on the symbolic challenge of creating and maintaining legitimacy to sustain the networks that award their power. These conclusions are important because they allow us to be more critical of the practices that occur within Instagram marketplace. Notably, such criticality can expand

on political economy frameworks that re-orient understandings of the media landscape as a system that works together harmoniously to one that fundamentally converts socialising and creativity into revenue streams.

The path forward for social media strategy then involves a more in-depth study of the various features within the social media economy that lead to the inflation and subsequent demand for exposure. This can occur by continuing analysis of both current and new features within the Instagram application and situating the platform among its market competitors. I henceforth hope that my findings will encourage researchers to locate more missing pieces as we strive toward a completed puzzle of the social media economy, a system which has become fully integrated into the fabric of society (Conte, 2017).

To conclude, my thesis has increased attention to the economic nature of Instagram by presenting a theoretical model that can be applied to present and future social networking sites. This framework can be utilised as a resource for anyone seeking to understand how platforms, users, influencers, and agencies navigate the digital landscape. However, both the challenge and brilliance of the online world is that it is fast-paced and dynamic. Therefore, researchers must persistently re-examine theoretical concepts alongside the emergence of new technologies to understand the changing ways they reflect contemporary cultural values and, communicate the meanings that shape everyday practices. For this reason, I will continue to engage with applications like Instagram as sites of cultural and economic analysis, because such commitment generates valuable knowledge that has the power to improve our inevitable transactions with modern media.

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Appendix

Influencer Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

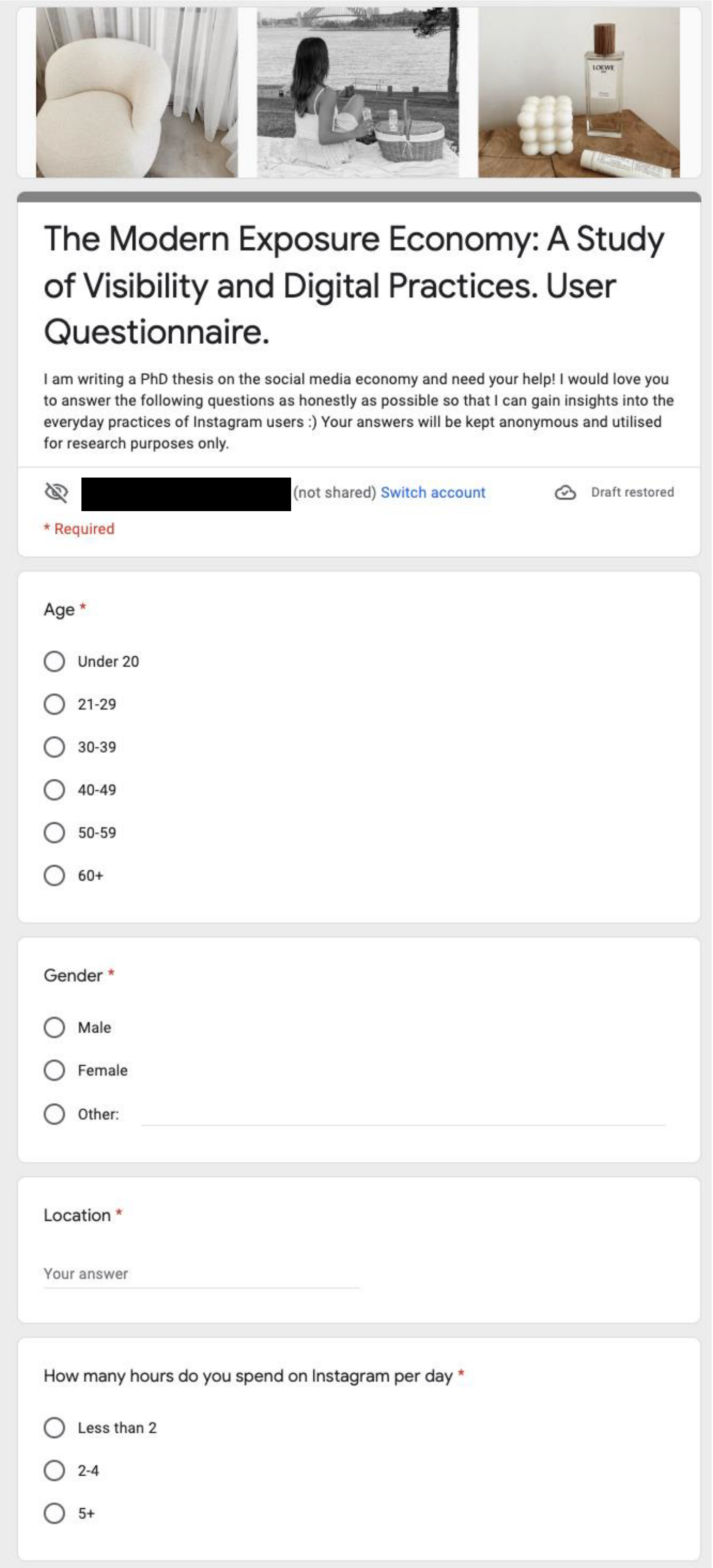
1. When did you start Instagram?
2. How often do you post?
3. What kind of content do you post?
4. Talk me through your content creation process?
5. Do you have a particular 'scheme' or feed theme that you try to stick to?
6. Can you pinpoint when your account started gaining attention?
7. What are the practices to put in place in the lead-up to this attention?
8. Talk me through the standard daily life of an influencer
9. Can you identify a particular collaboration or event that made you feel like you 'made it' as an influencer?
10. What is your process of deciding what brands to work with?
11. Do you make enough financial gains from Instagram to make it your full-time job?
12. What is the best and worst part of being an influencer?
13. Do you have my Influencer friends?
14. Do you notice you get more followers when you are tagged by influencers with a higher follower count?
15. Do you think the 'algorithm' affects how your content is seen by new or current audiences?
16. Do you ever feel pressured by the platform?
17. What is your most commonly asked question?
18. How do you handle your followers asking you for advice?
19. Do you feel qualified to attribute advice?
20. Any predictions for the future of the platform?

Agencies Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. In summary; how does your agency work?
2. Describe your job and the role Influencers play in it?
3. Do you see Influencer Marketing as more effective than traditional types of advertising? Why/why not?
4. Do you regularly work with Influencers as part of your job?
5. How do you decide which Influencers to work with?
6. How do you find new influencers to work with? What is the process?
7. What do you value most in an influencer?
8. Do you always pay influencers?
9. Do you prefer when an influencer creates curated or candid content for collaboration purposes?
10. In your experience, do Micro or Macro Influencers bring a greater ROI?
11. Have you noticed any particular trends on Instagram lately? If so, what?
12. How important is it for the influencer you work with to align with your brand or client?
13. Do you think PR events and showings are an important part of the industry? What do they achieve?
14. What deliverables do you most commonly ask from influencers?
15. Do you ask your Influencers to be transparent when they are engaging with a sponsored post?

16. How many followers do you consider enough to receive ROI in a collaboration?
17. How easy are influencers to work with generally?
18. What content do you find most effective when collaborating with an Influencer? For example, story posts talking about a brand or a more organic in-photo tag?
19. What niche do you think is the most lucrative?
20. In your educated opinion, what makes a good influencer?

Survey Question Preview



Click the description that suits you best: *

- [ ] I spend a large quantity of time on Instagram and engage with all of its features.
- [ ] I frequently scroll Instagram but do not really upload content or engage with other people's photos.
- [ ] I only go on Instagram when I have a specific need in mind, for instance, if I want to look up a brand
- [ ] I only have Instagram to keep up with friends or because I need it for work.
- [ ] Other:

What features do you use on Instagram (click all that apply. This can involve creating or just consuming content within the features) *

- [ ] Instragram Stories
- [ ] Instargam Reels
- [ ] IGTV
- [ ] Instagram Shop
- [ ] Instagram private messaging
- [ ] Uploading photos to feed
- [ ] Engaging with other user's content (e.g trhough likes, shares, comments)

Is your Instagram on Public or Private?

- ○ Public
- ○ Private

Explain this preference.

Your answer

What do you primarily use Instagram for (tick all that apply). *

- [ ] Communicating with friends
- [ ] To scroll through when bored
- [ ] For inspiration/education
- [ ] To stay up to date with what is trending and news
- [ ] As a creative space to create content
- [ ] To network
- [ ] To shop
- [ ] Other:

What kind of content do you upload? If none, why do you choose not to upload?

Your answer

Do you give any consideration to how your personal Instagram 'feed' looks? If so, how do you want it to appear?

Your answer

Do you appreciate when other content creators have 'aesthetic' feeds? Why/why not?

Your answer

If you do upload content, do you feel the need to take photos and videos to upload on social media every time you do something "instagram worthy"? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

What motivates you to upload this content?

Your answer

Do you edit your photos before uploading? *

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

If yes, what is your editing process?

Your answer

Do you use Instagram story filters? *

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

What do you think of face augmenting filters?

Your answer

Do you mind when Influencers use photo and story filters or do you prefer they keep content more 'real'? *

- ◯ Do not mind
- ◯ Yes - it looks nicer
- ◯ No - it is unnecessary
- ◯ Depends on the account

Who is your favourite public figure (influencer or celebrity) to follow on Instagram?

Your answer

What words come to mind when you hear the word 'Influencer'?

Your answer

What do you think 'Influencing' as a job?

	1	2	3	4	5	
They have it easy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	It is a difficult job

Have you ever purchased an item promoted by an influencer or celebrity on Instagram? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

If yes, what made you purchase it? Did it live up to what they promised?

Your answer

Do you think Influencers should be transparent when something is an ad? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ I do not mind as long as they genuinely use the product themselves.

Do you feel like you can trust influencers and what determines this trust? For example, does the influencer need to be qualified in the industry they are giving recommendations for?

Your answer

Are you more likely to listen to a product recommendation from an influencer over an ad you see in other traditional forms of media? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

If you see a photo on the newsfeed that captures your attention, do you always like it? *

- Yes
- No
- Depends on the creator

Do you regularly share content you see on Instagram to your friends? *

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

If so, what makes you share an image or video?

Your answer

Are you selective with who you follow on Instagram and what makes you follow someone?

Your answer

Has Instagram ever made you want to change something about yourself? Whether that be your appearance, relationship, career, style etc.

Your answer

Are you conscious of how many likes and followers you have? *

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- No but I would like more.

Do you upload photos at a specific time to garner more likes? (Be honest, this is anonymous remember). *

- Yes
- No

Would you like it if Instagram reinstalled the 'number of likes feature' or do you prefer not being able to see how many likes photos receive? *

- I would like to see how many likes other people's photos get
- I do not like to see how many likes other people's photos get
- I do not mind
- I want to see how many likes others get, but do not want others to see how many likes I get.

Did the removal of 'like' numbers change your posting habits in any way?

Your answer

Do you feel pressured to show only the good things in your life on Instagram? *

- Yes
- No

Does seeing an Influencer's perfect lifestyle make you feel less satisfied with your own? *

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

Would you say Instagram has a more positive or negative impact on your quality of life? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Positive

Have you ever participated in a forced digital detox? If so, why?

Your answer

Do you ever unfollow people? If so, what would make you unfollow someone?

Your answer

Have you ever been influenced to change a value, lifestyle choice or belief after seeing someone speak about it online? If so, what?

Your answer

How much does Instagram effect how satisfied you feel with your own life? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
It can make me feel extremely dissatisfied	○	○	○	○	○	It does not effect me at all