**Self-Image as a Micro Reality:**

**A Qualitative Content Analysis of Social Media Influencers and Adolescent Followers**

by

Jessica Consterdine

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Mary Myers, Committee Chair

**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to investigate content depicted by social media influencers and examine how its engagement aligns with the theoretical components of social comparison theory, providing an understanding of how adolescents view self-image. The parasocial relationships between social media influencers and adolescent followers on Instagram were investigated by exploring how the relationship dynamic is challenged with paid endorsements, envy by followers, and strategic communication. Incorporating content analysis with thematic analysis from the most popular social media influencers on Instagram, findings revealed a relationship between hashtag usage and the adolescent creation of self-image micro realities. The analysis demonstrated a strong correlation between social media influencer-follower engagement, hashtag use, and self-image micro realities. Guided by the social comparison theory, it was hypothesized that content from social media influencers would depict themes that contain appearance-focused content, are congruent with an unrealistic self-image for adolescents, and use metadata tags or hashtags that directly correlate to adolescent followers and self-body images. The research found that adolescent followers create self-image micro realities because of engaging content on Instagram.

*Keywords*: social media influencers, hashtags, self-image, micro realities, social comparison theory, media ecology theory

**Copyright Page**

## Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to my family and my late mother. Thank you to my family and loved ones who supported me through this challenging journey. Thank you to my husband, Marc, for believing in me and understanding my sacrifices to get to this point. I love you. To my babies, Aiden and Poppy, thank you for allowing me to be your mommy through these years of long nights and early mornings. Thank you for allowing me to read shorter bedtime stories and have longer hugs. You inspired this research. Thank you for always being my inspiration. Thank you to my mother who, while she did not live to see me bring my dream to fruition, was my light at the end of the tunnel. This is for you, Mommy. "I will love you forever. I will like you for always".

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Thank you to my mentor, prayer partner, and dissertation chair. Dr. Myers, your prayers and encouragement helped me persist in this journey. I cannot envision this moment without you. Thank you for knowing I could accomplish this, despite feeling overwhelmed and unsuccessful. You will never know how much your mentorship has helped to shape me into a better person and researcher.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Media ecology theory (MET)

Parasocial reality (PSR)

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

Social comparison theory (SCT)

Social media applications (SMAs)

Social media influencer (SMI)

Social media user (SMU)

User-generated content (UGC)

World Health Organization (WHO)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

The purpose of this study was to understand adolescents' views on body image in response to content from social media influencers (SMIs) on Instagram. Social media is used by 4.62 billion people, equating to more than half of the world. (DataReportal, 2021). Ongoing research relating to the popularity and usage of social media platforms has primarily focused on adult social media users. However, social media applications and their usage are prevalent among younger adults and, more specifically, adolescents (Pew Research, 2021). Adolescence is a critical stage in human development, categorized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as spanning the ages of 10 to 19 years old (Adolescent health, 2019). This definition of adolescence was used to guide this research.

Adolescents use Instagram, a photo-sharing application with editing capabilities, more than other social media platforms (Pew Research, 2021). According to a report by Statista (2020), Instagram is a leading social media platform for active user engagement. The number of Instagram users is expected to continue to increase, which may be attributed to multiple factors including the pandemic and evolutions of digital technology (Statistica, 2021). For example, the recent pandemic increased the usage of Instagram and, in the current post-pandemic landscape, its popularity has grown (Statistica, 2021). The pandemic increased the daily average social media usage among Americans from 54 to 65 minutes, which resulted from global isolation and the desire among users to spread health information relating to COVID-19 (Statista, 2021). During the pandemic, isolation increased social media usage across all age groups (Statista, 2021). Generation Z users, categorized as being between 9 and 24 years and who include

adolescents as defined in this research, were reported to have spent 53 minutes per day on Instagram alone in 2021 (Suciu, 2021).

Digital technology, such as smartphones, has also contributed to the increase in social media usage and media consumption. For example, there has been an increase in media consumption by more than 460% from 2011 to 2020 because of mobile phones (Suciu, 2021). These trends may correlate to how easily accessible social media platforms like Instagram are on mobile devices, such as mobile phones and tablets. This accessibility, paired with algorithms and set factors that determine what users will see based on previous interactions with the social media platform, have been demonstrated as contributing factors that are increasing Instagram's usage (McLachlan, 2021).

This evidence presents new questions about the ways adolescents are influenced by Instagram and how user-generated content (UGC) might translate to social media users. With the rising popularity of Instagram among adolescents, it was essential to investigate what is being communicated through the content of SMIs to adolescents about important topics, such as self-evaluation and body image. This study aimed to take the first step in understanding their views on body image in response to SMI content on Instagram.

## Background

According to scholars, technology has been influencing communication long before the Internet and social media came into being (Fang, 1997). A well-known example is the electric telegraph, which was invented in 1746 by Jean-Antoine. The telegraph provided a new way for communication within society, including receiving news, exchanging information, and connecting people (Standage, 2008). In 1885, patrons would visit their local general stores to send messages, receive important news or world affairs, and send money across great distances

(Standage, 2008). Two centuries later, the electric telegraph evolved into online chatting platforms and extended the public reach of communication even further. The introduction of these platforms sparked the attraction of real-time communication with others worldwide (Maryville University, 2021). For example, America Online was an online chatting platform that allowed people to communicate around the world in 1992 (CNN, 2012). Soon after, blogging sites developed where people were able to establish themselves as opinion leaders who held influence over a group of individuals. Through this digital form of communication, those who shared similar interests were able to connect and develop networks where they exchanged personal experiences with one another. These blogging sites quickly became the foundation of social media platforms as they are today, where the same concept of connecting with people in multiple locations is at their core. Social media technology has since vastly contributed to changing the way society communicates. For example, users have the ability to communicate with influencers, celebrities, and public figures through social media tagging, mentions, likes, and comments. The significant impact of these changes on society have led to social media being considered as part of what Irving Fang (1997) called an information revolution, similar to that of the electric telegraph.

Irving Fang (1997) discussed human communication changes and their profound impact on society, categorizing them into six information revolutions: writing, printing, mass media, entertainment, toolshed or home. He illustrated the significant transitions of communication technology, which have led to how we communicate today. Evaluating the trajectory of communication technology in the future, Fang predicted that advertisements would eventually be directed to the ideal demographics for each product. This statement was a foreshadowing of strategic marketing and communications, which have been accelerated by social media.

Long before Fang (1997) devised information revolutions, Jacques Ellul (1964) understood that strategic communication transformations occur due to the mass media's audience control. His view was that humans depend on technique or the ego, which form a dependency and reduces autonomy (Ellul, 1964). Technique is more accurately defined as consciousness and less as invasive technology (Holford & Saives, 2013). These transitions from dependence on technique can be attributed to the human ability to discover and satisfy curiosity naturally without technique. Ellul explained the perils of allowing technique to take ownership of the human ability to question and learn organically. Since targeted advertising is a sub-category of strategic media, it is justified to say that Ellul understood the modern-day transformation to center around capitalism and economic gain (Ellul, 1964).

Ellul (1964) believed that the transformations of strategic communication occur because of the reduced interaction between humans in daily life situations due to technology. Describing technology with human characteristics and the human counterpart's ability to rule, he predicted that dependency on technology would be demonstrated by frequent use of social media networks, overconsumption seen by followers of SMIs, and the reduction of in-person human interaction. This would lead to three complications, which he highlighted as (1) the need for more imagination due to the ease of technology, (2) the constant desire to want more than needed, and (3) reduced in-person human interaction (Ellul, 1964). He discussed, at length, the perils of an overconsumption of technology and diminished human imagination (Tal & Gordon, 2016). While it can be misconstrued that he was condemning technological advances altogether, Ellul was simply warning against the human desire to discover effortless ways to consume resources continuously (Tal & Gordon, 2016).

In addition to the impact of technology, Ellul (1964) also addressed the idea of revolution and society's need for it (Tal & Gordon, 2016). To him, revolution was a reference to humanity's emotional state of mind and its ability to change. Often viewed as a pessimistic view from Ellul, the point he made was not that revolution is impossible because of technique but due to the inability of the human mind to emit personal change within current society. In other words, the technique, or technology, will not promote a revolution.

While Ellul (1964) was clear about his concern for society's dependency on technique, he was also aware of the need to understand the influence of communication within society and its capacity to affect character and behavior. This may be seen among social media platforms, such as Instagram, which have gained a wide reputation for their ease in editing photos and sharing images. Most notably, their most active participants have become adolescents (Moreno & Koff, 2015). With the convenience of digital devices like smartphones, smartwatches, and tablets, it is now easier to take advantage of these features and stay connected through social media content (Pew Research, 2021).

**The Rise of SMIs**

As with the electric telegraph, digital devices have assisted social media in making it easier for people to connect and communicate. Connecting and communicating through social media platforms has given rise to everyday celebrities and online SMIs. There are three categories of SMIs: mega-influencers, macro-influencers, and micro-influencers (Conde & Casais, 2023). First, a mega-influencer is a SMI who has over one million social media users (i.e. followers) who follow their account. They have considerable influence, as brands are willing to pay them significant amounts of money (e.g. $1 million per post) for marketing exposure (Conde & Casais, 2023). Second, a macro-influencer has anywhere from 100,000 to one million

followers. These SMIs have usually gained notoriety from social media itself (Conde & Casais, 2023). Lastly, a micro-influencer is a SMI with a following of 1,000 to 100,000 users. Their content commonly focuses on a specific niche such as yoga, traveling, or home improvements (Conde & Casais, 2023).

As SMIs share their life and opinions on social media platforms, they become opinion leaders to a wide audience of followers. An opinion leader is someone who can influence a group of connected individuals. Social media users follow them because their opinions, lived experiences, and content are perceived as relevant and of interest to their own. In order to follow a SMI, social media users must subscribe to their profile. This subscription provides users with current and personal updates about the SMI, giving them access to the SMI's life with their family, relationships with friends, career, and daily moods (Letite & Baptista, 2021). The desire among users to share commonalities with the influencers they follow further solidifies the popularity of SMIs, establishing a parasocial relationship (PSR). PSRs are a single-sided relationship formed with media personalities" (Leite & Baptista, 2021).

The appeal for SMIs is also rooted in the perception that they are ordinary people who have achieved fame easily or in an untraditional manner (Khamis et al., 2016). According to Khamis et al. (2016), this status dynamic not only challenges the notion of the traditional celebrities, but also what content and who would be viewed as famous among adolescent users. SMIs have introduced inventive ways (e.g. storytelling) to help businesses attract their target audience (Hughes et al., 2019). Many businesses are beginning to understand the value of SMIs in facilitating engagement with their target markets (Booth & Matic, 2011). However, the credibility of SMIs is causing concern due to the rising engagement of adolescent followers and their response to SMI content. (Leite & Baptista, 2021).

SMIs communicate through user-generated content (UGC), which is content created by customers and posted on social media in the form of an image, video, or textual statement referencing a specific brand (Mayrhofer et al., 2019). For example, SMIs often post content recommending a specific purchase, place to visit, or clothing item to wear. UGC is viewed by the SMI's followers as an authentic opinion relating to the brand being marketed, which helps to establish brand loyalty and authenticity for the SMI. This is one illustration of how SMIs hold power and influence through digital communication.

SMIs use the power of positive emotion to communicate effectively, leading to more interactions (Borleis et al., 2018). A case study by Borleis et al. (2018) analyzed social media posts involving food industry brands. Their retrospective research used a mixed methods approach and conducted content analysis from the social media platforms of Facebook and Instagram (Borleis et al., 2018). Six of the most engaging posts were chosen, which marketed ten popular lifestyle brands, food industry brands, and health promotion organizations. Young female users who experienced a positive emotion while viewing the SMI content were found to be more likely to engage with the post positively. The SMI used the power of communication to strategically engage with their audience.

The power of SMIs' influence is associated with their ability to connect with their user audience through self-branding. Celebrity influencers gain credibility outside of social media through their real-life and public personas. SMIs build connections with their online followers through the power of social media influence. For example, anti-vaccination SMIs gained influence during the 2019 pandemic, persuading their followers to share unresearched opinions of the COVID-19 vaccine (McCann, 2022). Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) confirmed that two-thirds of anti-vaccination propaganda was being generated by just

12 influencers (McCann, 2022). While source credibility is verified using a four-dimensional check of expertise, trustworthiness, source attractiveness, and perceived similarity, the power of SMI influence can overshadow these measures. Adolescent followers are especially vulnerable to this overshadowing of credibility (Lou & Kim, 2019).

**Adolescents**

The human development cycle consists of five stages including infancy, early childhood, late childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (NCBI, 2022). As this research focused on adolescent users and their role in parasocial relationships with SMIs, it is important to understand the adolescent development cycle. During adolescence, young people deal with many developmental changes. The most commonly associated change during adolescence is puberty, where the body undergoes physical changes as children transition into adulthood (NCBI, 2022). During this time, adolescents are more susceptible to the influence of others and often mimic adult appearances as they themselves settle into an older identity. Lin et al. (2019) explained that the adolescent brain is considered reactive in the cognitive areas. Therefore, they may be more susceptible to the impact of endorsements in social media posts. A report by Statistica (2021) found that the prolific and daily use of social media among adolescent users exposes them regularly to advertisements and endorsements from SMIs. While adult users are able to distinguish factual advertisements from those that are merely opinion, it can be difficult for adolescent users to decipher information correctly (Porter, 2019).

O'Brien et al. (2021) demonstrated that many consumers trust and are influenced by health information content on social media, especially as it relates to procedures that deal with physical appearance. Focusing on the increased popularity of endorsed non-surgical procedures by SMIs on Instagram, their study revealed that users trust SMIs to provide them with physician

referrals and other important health-related information. In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the Advertising Regulatory Board ruled that social media accounts with 30,000 followers or more must be categorized as celebrity accounts (Porter, 2019). This policy means SMIs in the U.K. are required to adhere to advertising regulations for their product endorsements. As more policies are established for SMIs, the interpretation among adolescent users of what is a paid endorsement or an opinion requires further distinction. A solution that could be beneficial to help adolescent users understand the context of SMIs' content is social media literacy (SML) training, which educates users on how to understand and decipher the legitimacy of content on social media (Lou & Kim, 2019; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

**Micro Realities**

A reality is defined as "the state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined" (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2022). A micro reality has yet to be defined by scholars in the context of communication, the context of social media, and the context of parasocial phenomena or the creation of a social media relationship (Stever, 2013). For the purposes of this research, a micro reality was defined as a small demonstration of reality that is constructed from SMI content that leads followers to false perceptions of things as they are. Micro realities are formed when followers believe in sharing the same values and opinions of the SMIs they follow. This may even be argued as being an aspect of parasocial phenomena, beginning first with a social media interaction (PSI) and eventually turning into a relationship (PSR).

PSR is the foundational building block for creating a micro reality in this context. Micro realities seem to form because followers desire to receive admiration for either their views (e.g. political perceptions among adult users) or their perfectionism (e.g. flawless beauty standards).

When these micro realities form, followers create an alternate reality that mimics the opinions, physical appearance, or values of the SMIs that they follow.

Due to the cognitive challenges relating to their human development cycle as well as the cultural changes brought on by the pandemic, adolescent followers may create micro realities based on self-evaluation and comparison with SMI content. Self-evaluation is the act of followers comparing themselves to the content created by the SMIs they follow. Justifications for self-evaluation among adolescent followers include the desire for self-improvement (upward comparisons) and the desire to maintain one's appearance (downward comparison) (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Self-evaluation on social media platforms like Instagram has been more directly related to a poorer self-image than traditional media and in-person interactions (Fardouly et al., 2017). The Western standard of beauty was first established in print magazines and television, which depicted tiny waists, large breasts, and thin figures as the ideal body image. However, now through mass media and SMI content, adolescents view this content (e.g. selfies and body comparisons) regularly on platforms like Instagram (McComb & Mills, 2021). This is cause for concern, as the social media content communicated by influencers mimics reality. In this way, SMI content on Instagram can potentially promote the adolescent creation of micro realities through namesake hashtags.

There has been extensive research exploring the relationship between self-evaluation and social media. A study conducted by Fardouly et al. (2017) found that female users self-evaluate and compare themselves when presented with profile pictures and selfies (e.g. pictures taken by a person) on social media platforms. Male users, on the other hand, have been typically associated with full-body comparisons of muscle definition and strength (Tiggemann & Hargreaves, 2005).

The research of Hogue and Mills (2019) supports the link between viewing Instagram images and experiencing negative self-evaluation. They used the appearance comparison to determine the intercessor between an idealized body portrayal and the conclusion of negative self-evaluation. Similarly, Salomon & Brown (2018) concluded that, regardless of gender, social media places pressure on users to imitate what is being viewed in the content and this leads to a pattern of body surveillance.

Limited research relates to the content from SMIs that may contribute to the creation of micro realities (McComb & Mills, 2021). What's more, there is no current research that indicates the effects of micro realities on adolescent Instagram users. However, research has shown how Facebook SMIs influence micro realities among adult users. Rossini et al. (2020) analyzed how the 2016 American presidential election catalyzed micro realities that formed on the popular social media platform of Facebook. Adult users followed the official pages of the celebrity presidential candidates to find information about shared beliefs in politics and personal values (Rossini et al., 2020). Expressions of differences in opinion among users were met with uncivil attacks towards each other, mimicking the presidential or celebrity influencer's behavior (Rossini et al., 2020). These micro realities led to changes in how the adult users viewed perspectives, beliefs, and consumer purchase behaviors that were different from their own (e.g. Make America Great Again merchandise increases in women's white pantsuits) (Teather, 2016). Just as the outcomes of micro realities among adult users have been reported as mimicking behavior, this study asserted that adolescent users similarly exhibit mimicking behavior and create micro realities.

## Problem Statement

The problem is that SMI content on Instagram can potentially promote the adolescent creation of micro realities through their engagement with social media (i.e. PSI). Considering how prevalent micro reality formation appeared to be in adult Facebook users over the age of 21 during the 2016 American presidential election, it is a logical assertion that adolescent Instagram users may be creating micro realities through namesake hashtags as they interact with and consume SMI content (i.e. PSI). Adolescence is a period of human development when self-identity is developing. Adolescents are more impressionable and vulnerable during this stage, as their brains are considered more reactive in the cognitive regions. In this way, adolescent followers may create micro realities out of SMI content that appear to show unrealistic body images. This is achieved through engagement with namesake hashtags, which are hashtags followed by a name (e.g. #JessicaConsterdine). Possible outcomes of these micro realities on adolescent users include experiences of perfectionism, body dysmorphia, and mimicking..

The impacts of social media on adolescents are a subject of growing and ongoing research (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). Lou and Kim (2019, p 2) investigated the PSR "as an important psychological mechanism that explains the effect of influencers on adolescents' materialistic views and purchase intentions". Their study concluded that the PSR led to the negative implications for adolescents, such as cultivating materialistic views and purchase behavior. Focusing on engagement with SMI content that contributes to the adolescent creation of micro realities, however, their research set the framework for considering factors that help to explain the appeal of SMIs to adolescents and left a gap in the literature for future research to consider.

Additional studies have shown that adolescent users experience self-evaluation and a poorer self-image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Although previous research studies have used

quantitative analyses to identify the extent of social networking and its impact on female body image, there has not been enough research to show the long term effects of SMI content (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).Future research has an opportunity to explore these concepts more fully and as they relate to adolescent users. O'Brien et al. (2021) designed a study of the top SMIs who create content regarding non-surgical cosmetic procedures. The data encouraged board-certified dermatologists to use social media to provide accurate information to users about non-surgical cosmetic procedures. This study provided a standardized dataset that analyzed popular SMIs on Instagram using marketing algorithms (O'Brien et al., 2021). The researchers stated that their aim was to encourage the dermatologists to continue using their expertise to combat misinformation by explaining the risks of non-surgical procedures.

This study applied similar objectives as O'Brien et al. (2021), as it aimed to encourage social media literacy by analyzing the impact of SMI content engagement among adolescents and their subsequent creation of micro realities. Considering the increasing usage of Instagram, this study addressed the research gap concerning adolescents and the impact of their engagement with SMI content. Therefore, the specific problem addressed by this study was limited research on the impact of content engagement among adolescent followers using namesake hashtags from SMI content.

### Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover whether adolescent followers create micro realities from SMI content on Instagram. As adolescence is an integral stage of human development, a secondary goal of this study was to reveal the related impact of micro realities on important human development factors including adolescents' opinion of self, body dissatisfaction, and mimicking behaviors. To achieve these goals, the researcher collected

Instagram data for 30 days, specifically hashtag data, from SMI content according to its engagement with adolescent followers. The data was thematically analyzed through the theoretical lenses of SCT and MET.

Hashtags are a crucial tool for SMIs as they engage with their audiences. A hashtag is a search function within social media platforms, which starts with a pound symbol and is followed by keywords and phrases. They allow Instagram users to find content related to the selected keywords and phrases, such as SMI products and popular cultural references. Additionally, they allow SMIs to represent their social media accounts and reach more followers by using attention-grabbing keywords and phrases. A study by Sun Kim and Non (2022) explained that the impact of SMIs can be tracked using engagement and reach indicators. Engagement can be understood as the sum of likes, comments, and saved content. Notably, engagement explains how followers interact with SMI content. As for reach, this can be explained as several unique followers that have visited the SMI's platform. Hashtag and comments data was collected through Instagram's search engine, Hype Auditor's SMI analysis, and Hoot Suite's SMI and audience analysis.

To understand the SMIs specific to the research, the study collected hashtag data used on the SMI's Instagram profile. Ten SMI accounts were chosen and the last 30 days of their hashtags were collected  (Sun et al., 2022).  Content analysis was conducted on the data to identify themes. Traditional instruments were not required for this study because the research focused solely on analyzing available Instagram content. Research procedures are discussed further in Chapter Three.

## Significance of Study

Research on SMI content in the context  of academic and practical applications is essential. First, by examining a possible PSR between a SMI's Instagram content and its

adolescent followers, this study aims to fill an existing gap in academic literature. Scholars have not thoroughly addressed the issue of micro realities being created from SMIs' social media content, although previous studies have analyzed the content of top SMIs and the PSR between them and their adolescent followers (Lou & Kim, 2019). This study is foundational to the study of micro realities, as it has provided insights into adolescent social media usage and the developmental influence it has on this young population.

Second, this research offers insights about how SMIs' content affects its users and followers. These insights are essential to the communication field, adding to the academic literature of strategic communication, public relations, and marketing. Next, previous research has not provided an analysis of how namesake hashtags from SMIs on Instagram are related to the creation of micro realities. This study recognized how namesake hashtags are being used, offering insights for how they may be used in the future. While it has been concluded that SMIs can impact their reviewers based on an established relationship, previous scholars have only aimed to identify the factors within the engagement that contributes to micro realities (Hogue & Mills, 2019). Additionally, while it has been demonstrated that social media places pressure on users to imitate content and this leads to a pattern of body surveillance, the engagement within the content has not been researched (Salomon & Brown, 2018). This study examined factors that impact adolescent users, which directly expanded the academic understanding of the power of social media within the context of strategic media.

This research is also significant for practical applications. These findings support the need for social media literacy among adolescents to aid in deciphering engagement factors within SMI content. These insights can be incorporated into the social media literacy curriculum of high schools and middle schools to encourage positive body image perceptions among

adolescents with the understanding of evolving media exposure among adolescents (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). This is significant, as media exposure is rapidly evolving. In addition, strategic communicators, public relations, and marketing practitioners can use these insights about namesake hashtags when they search for popular products and SMIs.

## Research Questions

The following five research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How are adolescent followers of Instagram SMI content creating micro realities?

RQ2: How are SMIs using hashtags to promote their posts to a larger audience?

RQ3: How is hashtag usage or re-sharing by SMIs promoting follower engagement?

RQ4: How are SMIs promoting self-image to their adolescent followers?

RQ5: How is the creation of micro realities by adolescents promoted by hashtags?

## Definition of Terms

This study of SMI content and its PSR with adolescent followers on Instagram required an understanding of many terms. The following definitions provide an understanding of how these terms were relevant to the study.

*Adolescent:Human between ages10 to 19. (WHO.int, 2019).*

*Body dysmorphia*: A mental condition whena person is concerned with flaws in their appearance. NHS, 2021).

*Body surveillance*: The explanations for self-evaluation include the desire for self-improvement (upward comparisons) and the desire to maintain one's appearance (downward comparison) (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

*Fitspiration*: A social media term used on Instagram that means fitness inspiration. (Prichard et al., 2020).

*Hashtags:* A hash symbol (#) followed by a word. (Merriham-Webster, 2023).

*Instafame*: Fame gained from popularity on Instagram (Marwick, 2015).

*Meso-celebrity*: An Instagram influencer with 10,000 to 1 million followers (Khamis et al., 2016).

*Micro-celebrity*: An Instagram influencer with less than 10,000 followers (Khamis et al., 2016).

*Mimicking*: An unconscious imitation of behaviors (Chartrand & Van Baaren 2009).

*Nonverbal communication*: Communication without visuals or content images (Park & Lee, 2021).

*Nucleus Accumbens or NAcc*: The hub of the brain reaction responsible for the social rewards that adolescents associate with social media likes and positive comments (Sherman et al., 2017).

*Opinion leadership*: When social media users influence the opinions of other users within a social media platform (Song et al., 2017).

*Perfectionism*: The aim for flawless appearance managed by critical self-evaluations (Stoeber, 2011, p. 128).

*Self-evaluation*: Comparisons among social media users when presented with profile pictures and selfies on social media platforms (Fardouly et al., 2015).

*Social media*: Shared content that promotes social networking online (Khamis et al., 2016).

*Social media influencers*: Self-branding individuals that display their life and opinions on social media platforms (Khamis et al., 2016).

*Social media literacy*: the ability to understand social media content (Lou & Kim, 2019; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

**Assumptions**

Framed by SCT, this study assumed that hashtags within SMI content lead adolescents to engage with content related to body image. The researcher assumed that this SMI content encourages SMU behaviors related to mimicking, product purchases, and the creation of micro realities. The phenomenon of upward comparison was assumed to be the outcome of these behaviors among adolescent followers on Instagram. Based on the findings from previous QCAs exploring the influence of Instagram SMIs on adolescent followers, it was expected that recreations of SMI content by adolescent followers would be an outcome of their PSR (Cohen et al., 2019; Wiederhold, 2018). More specifically, the hashtag usage for image content among the top SMIs was expected to influence male and female users between the ages of 10 and 19. Image content was expected to consist predominantly of perfectionism-based factors, featuring fit bodies, perfect makeup, and well-made clothing. SMIs were assumed to display image content that influences adolescents' creation of micro realities by providing ideas for recreation. This nonverbal perfectionism content was assumed to encourage adolescents to self-evaluate body image.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This research aimed to add to existing literature in multiple ways by beginning to understand the influence of parasocial phenomena with regard to the possible creation of micro realities by adolescent followers of SMIs content on Instagram. While the transition from PSIs to PSRs is illustrated in existing literature, there is a need for further investigation into PSRs between SMIs and adolescent followers. This research represents a foundational step in examining this relationship and its effects on adolescent body satisfaction. Chapter Two provides a foundational literature review of SMI UGC and the effects that PSRs can have on adolescent followers, which includes the creation of micro realities based on self-comparison.

**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Overview**

Familiarity with existing research literature is necessary to understand the role that SMI content plays in influencing adolescents' views on body image. This chapter provides a relevant overview of this literature. First, the theoretical framework of this study is presented. Second, a history of social communication and social media relationships is reviewed. Next, opinion leadership and communication models are discussed. Finally, literature addressing adolescent views on body image and micro realities is presented.

**Theoretical Framework**

This content analysis was rooted in the socio-psychological tradition. As this study aimed to explore the relationship between nonverbal SMI content and adolescent micro reality creation, the cybernetics tradition was chosen because it focuses on communication within a system. To achieve this, the social comparison theory (SCT) and media ecology theory (MET) were chosen to guide the content analysis. The following sections describe these theories in more detail.

**Social Comparison Theory**

The first theory used in this research to understand the relationship between adolescents, social media, and SMI content was Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory (SCT). SCT explains the desire for humans to improve their abilities through self-evaluations, which lead to a negative consequence (Festinger, 1954). In other words, it explores the human need to compare oneself to others. In this study, SCT allowed the researcher to discuss adolescent users' experiences following SMIs on Instagram and to explain the adolescent reasoning for self-evaluation and comparison (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Scholars have used SCT to explain the phenomenon of social media influence, specifically in relation to the impact of mass media exposure on beauty standards and body image perceptions (Choi, 2020; Ogden et al., 2011; Grabe et al., 2008). Choi (2020) used SCT to investigate social comparison within fashion blogging, concluding that the theory could extend to adolescents and social media content. Bonifield and Cole (2008) similarly concluded that because SCT has roots in social psychology, it can be used to explain impulsive comparisons within a social media environment.

SCT also provides a research perspective of why an adolescent would use self-evaluation. Social media content such as profile pictures, selfies, and full-body images illustrating muscle definition and strength have been reported to encourage comparisons among female and male users (Fardouly et al. 2015; Tiggemann & Hargreaves, 2005). In a study about SMI content on Instagram, Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) used SCT to demonstrate how body surveillance, in the form of selfies and body comparison, is the response. Follower's explanations for self-evaluation included the desire for self-improvement (upward comparisons) and the desire to maintain one's appearance (downward comparison) (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Salomon and Brown (2018) confirmed these findings in their study, which concluded that social media presents pressure to imitate what is viewed on social media platforms from both genders, leading to a pattern of body surveillance.

Rudd and Lennon (1994) found that young adults exposed to fashion advertising compare themselves with the nonverbal content being communicated and experience a different level of self-esteem. Their study concluded that young adults use comparisons, which lead to perceptions of inadequacy in regards to their body image. This conclusion was reached by the levels of content engagement among the participants. While Rudd and Lennon's findings were initially

applied to fashion advertising, scholars have similarly extended them to social media contexts and have concluded that social media presents several opportunities for social comparison (Choi, 2020). Still, as Choi (2020) stated, there is a gap within the research using SCT within digital media. Collectively, this evidence confirmed the appropriate application of SCT for this study, which focused on adolescent engagement with SMI content on Instagram and allowed the researcher to discuss what adolescent followers experience. The findings contributed to the existing research and provided further knowledge of SMIs' nonverbal content and the effects of this communication on adolescents.

**Media Ecology Theory**

The second theory used to guide this study was Media Ecology Theory (MET), first developed by Marshall McLuhan in 1962 (Wilson, R., & Shifflett, M., 2021). MET explains the impact that technology and communication have on society and culture. For this reason, it was chosen as an analytical tool and provided a second credible approach to analyzing the data. MET allowed the researcher to show that social media influence can impact perception including, understanding, and value (Postman, 2013). The researcher was able to determine the influence of SMIs on adolescent followers and establish that digital communication continues to influence cultures, potentially leading to the creation of micro realities.

Similar research by Morena and Koff (2015) used MET to investigate media theories and the Facebook influence model. Their study used concept mapping, which is a five-step method that includes preparation, brainstorming, sorting and ranking, analysis, and interpretation. Concept mapping is beneficial, as it allows for a methodology to surpass a qualitative analysis by providing a model based on statistical data. Morena and Koff applied these methods to conceptualize the influence on Facebook. Their model was based on the most enthusiastic social

media users, young adults, and the experiences of these Facebook stakeholders. College students were used for the sampling, with 169 statements obtained and placed within 6 to 22 groups. The final map illustrated 13 groups, which represented certain areas of influence found on Facebook. Morena and Koff's summary of the critical findings characterized features from Facebook that were significant to the behavior observed. Their study specifies the comprehensive foundation for communication theory development to advise the study on the impact of technology and communication on society.

## Related Literature

### History of Social Communication

Irving Fang (1997) discussed human communication changes and categorized these changes into six information revolutions. He illustrated the significant transitions information has undergone, leading to how we communicate today. In his predictions for the future, Fang (1997) stated that advertisements would be directed to ideal demographics for products, a precursor to strategic marketing and communication. Ellul (1964) provided background to society's predicted dependency on technology through the frequent use of social media networks, overconsumption of media evidenced by followers of SMIs, and the reduction of in-person human interaction. Two aspects of his views that should be reconsidered in this historical moment are technique and the notion of a revolution. Technique is more accurately defined as consciousness and less as invasive technology (Holford & Saives, 2013). Ellul described technology as having human characteristics and the ability to rule the human counterpart. He discussed the perils of overconsumption and diminished human imagination (Tal & Gordon, 2016). However, this can be misconstrued that Ellul is condemning technological advances altogether. Instead, Ellul warned against the human desire to discover effortless ways to consume resources continuously.

While Ellul was clear with his concern for the dependency on technique, he was also aware of the need to understand the influence of communication within society and its capacity to affect character and behavior.

**Social Media Influencers**

SMIs have been recognized as important liaisons because of the relationships they develop with adolescent followers (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They are perceived as storytellers within a digital space, presenting content that is directly received by adolescent followers as a form of communication. Desiree Schmuck (2021) stated that the ability of adolescents to follow by the availability of mobile devices. SMIs provide frequent updates of content to maintain engagement with their adolescent audience, leading to constant interactions that turn into PSRs (Schmuck, 2021). These relationships develop due to frequent social media exposure, where a social media user (SMU) forms a one-sided relationship of closeness with a SMI (Leite & Baptista, 2021). Interactions on social media applications (SMAs) can be misinterpreted by SMUs because as they directly receive personal details from the SMI, the illusion of a genuine relationship is reinforced (Chung & Cho, 2017).

**Opinion Leadership**

The PSR between SMIs and adolescent followers on social media is based on opinion leadership. Opinion leaders, like SMIs, influence others within their environment (Enke & Borchers, 2019). To understand how the content from SMIs contributes to adolescents' creation of micro realities, the concept of opinion leadership must be referenced because opinion leaders maintain similar connections with their followers. Research conducted by Casaló et al. (2018) defined the relationship between SMIs and their followers and identified significant antecedents and consequences associated with opinion leaders.

Participants for their study included 808 followers of a fashion-focus Instagram SMI (Casaló et al., 2018). The Instagram account was selected based on factors including an increasing number of followers, a focus on fashion, an increased popularity with the print media, and accessibility. Questionnaires were given to the participants to share how they perceived the opinion leadership from the SMIs. Questions discussed the uniqueness of the SMI's account and the participant's likelihood to follow the influencer's advice. Casaló et al. used Partial Least Square (PLS) as the estimation procedure, followed by SmartPLS as the data analysis software. Their findings confirmed that the originality and uniqueness of social media posts are critical components to determining an opinion leader.

Influencers have also been reported to impact the intentions of followers. For example, SMIs who recommend an opinion leader to their followers end up increasing their own popularity. This increased popularity has led to further validations (Song et al., 2017). The Song et al., 2017 study contributed to the study of opinion leaders, where their findings confirmed that a follower's relationship with an opinion leader is strengthened if the follower believes their personalities are similar. However, as this research did not examine factors resulting from content presented by SMIs, future research has an opportunity to contribute to this area.

A study examining SMI content by Khamis et al. (2016) used a qualitative research design to examine case studies of popular SMIs in order to understand self-branding and opinion leadership. The research setting was in Australia and focused on food SMIs. While data was not directly collected, the information provided by the case studies was scrutinized by Khamis et al. with comparison. Their findings concluded that the SMIs became famous due to the perceptions of their audience who viewed them as ordinary people giving honest details of their personal experiences. Interestingly, their fame was not due to their research and knowledge. This evidence

contributes to the study of SMIs' influence concerning opinion leadership and how their popularity can overshadow expertise in their chosen field of interest. According to Khamis et al., "the absence of industry-endorsed qualifications did not impede these women's social media ascent; it probably made them more relatable and endearing to their fans" due to their persona of normality and ability to lead a group within their digital environment (p. 3). This present study aimed to use a similar methodology by analyzing content from SMIs on Instagram to understand whether engagement contributes to the problem of adolescents' creation of micro realities.

 Identifying opinion leadership in virtual communities can aid in identifying factors within SMI content that leads to self-evaluation. Self- identification places the responsibility on participants to perform self-evaluations. Zhang and Dong (2009) demonstrated this in their research study, which aimed to determine the use of the social media networks analysis method after recognizing the effects of opinion leaders in virtual communities. With a study sample of 20 participants, they first used traditional observation methods to identify top opinion leaders who were active with their followers within Instagram. Second, data about hashtag usage and SMIs' engagement with followers was gathered. Lastly, Zhang and Dong analyzed the Instagram data using the UCINET 6.0 software. Their research questions aimed to understand (1) the main influences of opinion leaders on individuals' decisions within the system and (2) how to identify opinion leaders in virtual communities. Their findings concluded that virtual communities will have an opinion leader that others follow based on the personal convictions of the leader. This evidence indicates that the phenomenon of opinion leadership in virtual communities can determine effective SMI content for adolescent SMUs.

 While identifying opinion leadership within an online setting helps contribute to studying SMI content, the personality factors of SMIs must be considered. Clarifying the creation of a

SMI can provide crucial information on how they can influence adolescents' self-evaluations regarding body image. Song et al. (2017) examined the personality characteristics of opinion leaders on social media. The personality traits studied included openness, exhibitionism, and relationship competency. Song et al. studied the traits' effect on the propensity of opinion leadership and its behavior. Their key findings concluded that the propensity of opinion leadership was significantly impacted by openness, where participants with a higher level of openness were most likely to have a reliability status and were frequently asked for information in a social media setting (Song et al., 2017). This trait of an opinion leader transpires as reliable within social media, providing the opportunity to strengthen the PSR with followers.

One aspect of opinion leadership relevant to adolescent followers is the idea of perceived coolness. Warren & Campbell (2014) conducted an experimental approach to define the concept of coolness (impressive) and investigate its relationship with self-identification. As opinion leadership is the foundation of SMI content, establishing why an adolescent would develop a PSR must consider factors like coolness as well as the number of followers that contribute to the SMI's perceived popularity and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017; Warren & Campbell, 2014). A study conducted by Veirman et al. (2017) aimed to understand the impact the number of followers has on SMIs' perceived popularity. Their study involved 117 female Instagram users (i.e. followers of SMIs) with a mean age of 29. Veirman et al. concluded that while many followers showed the influencer's popularity and coolness, that does not automatically position the SMIs as opinion leaders. In addition, the findings revealed that female SMUs have a negative opinion of influencers with very few followers on Instagram. This insight could potentially change the perceived credibility of SMIs and influence how adolescent followers view their

content. This present study considered perceived credibility as a factor that could decide what content an adolescent SMU would consider, contributing to their micro reality creation.

**Parasocial Relationships**

The concept of PSRs was initially developed as a social psychological phenomenon (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956) and was later used in communication research (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Lou and Kim (2019) conducted research on adolescents' PSRs with SMIs, aiming to develop a conceptual model that explained the appeal of SMIs to adolescents. They administered online surveys to 500 adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 using the survey platform, Qualtrics. Participants were required to answer screening questions to ensure they were of the correct age, and those who were younger were helped by their parents. Parents were given clear instructions to not complete the survey on their adolescent's behalf. While completing the survey, participants were asked to name their favorite SMIs. Giving the influencer's name, the survey then specifically named the influencer throughout the remainder of the survey, personalizing it for each participant and encouraging more direct and accurate results. Findings of Lou and Kim's research showed a positive correlation between the PSR with adolescent followers and the SMI's content, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. This relationship was also found to determine the adolescents' materialistic intentions and purchase behaviors.

The intention behind Lou and Kim's (2019) research was to understand SMIs' influence on adolescent consumers and their purchase behavior. A positive correlation between the SMIs' content and the purchase behavior of the adolescent participants was demonstrated. Future research has the opportunity to further explore the critical factors determining a SMI's appeal to their adolescent followers. This present study achieved this by exploring how the engagement from SMI content contributes to adolescents' micro reality creation.

**Flow Models of Communication**

Social media content from opinion leaders is filtered to others, who have first-hand knowledge. Therefore, personal opinions are also delivered with the information. To understand the mass media paradigm shift, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) developed the two-step flow model, which revealed that audiences are not homogenous and therefore do not engage with media uniformly. They stated that because followers are from varying social groups and demographics, being part of varied groups adds to their decision-making and interpretation of the information being communicated by the opinion leader. According to the two-step model, which was first introduced in 1948, opinion leaders among media help to determine the views of their followers (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). As SMIs are opinion leaders who can influence others on social media platforms, the information shared with their followers similarly shapes their views.

In 2012, Thorson and Wells extended the two-step model in order to address modern information flow. The curated flows was developed and included four flows: strategically, automatically, personally, and socially. First, strategically curated flow relates to information from opinion leaders to followers. Second, automatically curated flow is information from a search engine (e.g. Google) or algorithm (e.g. social advertising). Next, personally curated flow is information chosen by the person. Finally, socially curated flow is when the information is influenced by the social network of the person. Thorson and Wells' research provided a contemporary understanding of the earlier flow of communication model by Lazarsfeld (1995), which previously focused on the information being filtered from the opinion leader and did not account for the environment in which the communication is given.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Communication relays information from sender to receiver through signals. As Wilson (1979) explains, communication is when the sender's performance influences the receiver's behavior. Therefore, communication between SMIs (e.g. the senders) and adolescents (e.g. the receivers) can influence adolescents' decisions. Content from SMIs on Instagram is a form of nonverbal communication since information is sent and received through nonverbal signals. *Nonverbal communication* is communication without visuals or content images (Park & Lee, 2021). Existing literature has only partially addressed nonverbal communication from SMIs' content. Therefore, this present study contributed to the academic knowledge base of nonverbal communication regarding its contribution to adolescents' views about their body image and aimed to determine if SMIs use the content on social media (i.e. Instagram) to send intentional, nonverbal communication to their adolescent followers.

Park and Lee (2021) affirmed that nonverbal communication has the potential of playing a significant role in intentional communication compared to verbal cues. According to Burgoon et al. (1996), nonverbal communication is used frequently within a social environment (e.g. social media platforms) and can be understood as intentional. Lo (2008) confirmed this finding, concluding that nonverbal communication uses cues to convey an emotional message. Upon receiving emotional messages from SMIs, adolescent followers interpret the nonverbal communication as genuine (Lo, 2008). In this way, emotional messages communicated through nonverbal cues further strengthen the PSR between adolescent users and the SMIs they follow (Lo, 2008).

The physical appearance of adolescents can also contribute to nonverbal components within the content shared by SMIs (Park & Lee, 2021). According to the what is good is beautiful  hypothesis developed by Dion et al. (1972), humans associate positive occurrences,

such as credibility, with attractive people. Scholars have concluded that physical attractiveness predicts the credibility of nonverbal communication (Toscano et al., 2016; McCroskey, 1982). A sender who is perceived as physically attractive will be equally perceived as credible as they communicate through nonverbal cues (Dumitresco, 2016). Consequently, the perceived physical attractiveness of SMIs contributes to the credibility and authority of ideal body image for adolescents.

**Adolescent Views of Body Image**

Adolescence is a stage within the human development cycle between late childhood and adulthood (World Health Organization, 2019). WHO (2019) identifies adolescence as the stage where one's self-identity develops. Adolescents deal with puberty changes and mimic adult appearances. In addition, they are more susceptible to being influenced by others (World Health Organization, 2019). Smartphones have contributed to the increase in social media usage and media consumption. According to McLachlan (2021), there was an increase in media consumption by more than 460% between 2011 and 2020 due to mobile phones. This increase may correlate to how easily accessible social media platforms (i.e. Instagram) are on mobile devices. This accessibility, paired with algorithms and set factors that determine what users will see based on previous interactions with the social media platform, are contributing factors of social media usage (McLachlan, 2021). More importantly, they have implications for how adolescents perceive their body image.

Adolescents' views on body image can be influenced by engagement from SMIs' content. The use of social media can provide a reward sensation for an adolescent whenever a body image picture is liked. The Nucleus accumbens, or NAcc, is the hub of this brain reaction and is responsible for social rewards, helping adolescents associate social media likes and positive

comments with rewards (Sherman et al., 2017). The more likes a SMI has on a picture, the more likely their adolescent followers will self-evaluate and mimic the content to receive social rewards themselves. According to Sherman et al. (2017), adolescents' brains experience heightened sensitivity when given a reward. Research by Khamis et al. (2016) concluded that SMIs significantly impact the lifestyle choices of adolescents, and exposure to perfect appearances leads to body dissatisfaction.

Tamplin et al. (2018) investigated the impact of repeated exposure to perfect appearances and how this often leads to body dissatisfaction. They hypothesized that understanding from other media (e.g. mainstream commercials) combats the harmful exposure to social media influence. A summary of their key findings concluded that male and female SMUs were negatively affected when presented with perfect body images on social media. More importantly, only the female participants experienced a moderate negative effect due to commercial social media literacy (i.e. understanding reality from subjective reality on social media). This present study addressed the negative impact that following SMIs can have on adolescents and filled a gap in the literature by addressing content that contributes to factors regarding body image and mimicking perfectionism.

The desire to mimic SMIs was addressed by Ki and Kim (2019). Their study intended to identify the mechanism used by SMIs to persuade consumers to use the brands they marketed. Ki and Kim's findings indicated that SMIs who displayed expert content (i.e. opinion leadership) were positively related to responses from SMUs who desired to mimic them. Sharing content with an ideal body image provides an image for adolescent followers to mimic. However, the desire to mimic SMIs with an ideal body image has occasionally been linked to feelings of envy among SMUs.

A South Korea study conducted by Chae (2017) aimed to identify envy from 1,064 young female SMUs towards the SMIs they followed. The research concluded that young women with low self-esteem and high self-consciousness were more prone to feelings of envy toward SMIs. Chae's study used "a topic usually adopted in cultural or media studies (i.e. influencers) and thereby extended the scope of social comparison theory, which analyzed the phenomenon of envy from female social media users for SMIs" (p. 249). Since SMIs are self-promoting individuals who display luxurious lifestyles, this could be a living standard that ordinary SMUs desire. The present study further explored the adverse effects of comparison to SMIs on adolescent SMUs and the factors contributing to micro realities.

**Micro Realities**

As previously discussed, this study defined micro realities as small indications of reality that are constructed from SMI content which lead to false perceptions of reality. As social media content communicated by SMIs mimics reality, adolescent followers of the content create micro realities. While no current research indicates the effects of micro realities on adolescents using Instagram, research has shown how SMIs on Facebook influence the creation of micro realities among adult users (Rossini et al., 2020).

Research about SMI content and its impact on adolescents is on the rise, relating to the effects of social media on adolescents (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). Studies have shown that adolescent users experience self-evaluation and a poorer self-image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). However, there is a tangible gap in the research concerning SMIs' Instagram content and adolescents' creation of micro realities based on engagement. Although previous research studies have explored the impact of social networking and how this can impact body image perceptions among female users, there has not been research exploring how the impact of SMIs' nonverbal

perfectionism content leads to the creation of micro realities by their followers (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

## Summary

This chapter reviewed existing literature on strategic media research and social media usage among SMIs and adolescent SMUs. The theoretical relevancy of SCT and MET to this study was presented. Next, several gaps and opportunities for new research were identified, including investigations into the usage of namesake hashtags from SMI content and the adolescent creation of micro realities. The credibility and influence of SMIs among SMUs was reviewed, which justified the aim of this study. The nature of PSRs and how they contribute to the creation of micro realities was also discussed. Chapter Three showcases the methodology that framed this research.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

**Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to uncover whether adolescents are creating micro realities from viewing SMI content on Instagram and whether they (i.e. the micro realities) are related to the usage of hashtags contributing to adolescent self-image perceptions. Instagram is a photo-sharing social media platform that 71% of American adults use on a regular basis (Statistica, 2021). This usage is climbing, with current rates being reported to about a half-hour each day (Statistica, 2021). Due to the rising usage of social media for academic, professional, and social purposes mandated by current society and technological advances, it is critical to investigate how image-based apps like Instagram are potentially promoting micro realities through SMI content showing unrealistic body images. In response to the increased usage of Instagram, this QCA aimed to explore nonverbal SMI content factors (e.g. namesake hashtags, engagement, PSRs) and determine whether they contribute to the creation of a micro reality by adolescent followers.

This chapter provides a description of the study's methodology. First, the qualitative paradigm of the research is explained. Second, the method and design of the study are reviewed. Next, the processes for data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations are presented. Lastly, four validation strategies for the research are provided.

**Qualitative Paradigm**

This study chose a qualitative paradigm to understand nonverbal SMI content on Instagram that is contributing to adolescent micro realities. This methodology was chosen because it allowed the researcher to understand the views and perceptions of Instagram SMIs and their adolescent followers (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research focuses on the behaviors of

research participants regarding a particular topic, as opposed to quantitative research which aims to enumerate a topic and connect it with numerical data (Creswell, 2012). As this study aimed to understand the behavior of micro reality creation and the PSR between Instagram SMIs and their adolescent followers, a qualitative paradigm was determined as more appropriate for the study.

## Research Design

This study thematically analyzed visual content and namesake hashtags from 10 SMIs on Instagram (Bryman, 2012; Cole, 1988). Similar to the research of Zhang and Dong (2009), multiple followers were notated to identify these top ten opinion leaders who are influencing adolescent SMUs on Instagram. Although similar analyses have been conducted in the past, this study focused on the role of hashtag usage in promoting adolescent follower engagement with SMIs on Instagram. Specifically, the analysis explored recreated SMI posts by adolescent followers.

### Research Questions

The following five research questions guided this content analysis:

RQ1: How are adolescent followers of Instagram SMI content creating micro realities?

RQ2: How are SMIs using hashtags to promote their posts to a larger audience?

**RQ3: How is hashtag usage or re-sharing by SMIs promoting follower engagement?**

RQ4: How are SMIs promoting self-image to their adolescent followers?

RQ5: How is the creation of micro realities by adolescents promoted by hashtags?

### Setting

The research setting of this study was online, as the data was collected in the form of publicly accessible Instagram content. This design was unobtrusive and did not involve any interactions between the researcher, SMIs, or adolescent followers. Therefore, permission to use

the data in this study was not required, as it involved publicly accessible content on Instagram. In addition, this design allowed for diverse representation among the data including variations in gender, socioeconomic background, and geographic location. The rationale for this setting was that it afforded the researcher with an opportunity to authentically analyze SMI content and its potential implications for adolescent followers.

<div align="center">Data **Selection and Collection**</div>

Data was collected from the Instagram profiles of 10 SMIs in the form of hashtag usage, demographics, and engagement rates. Traditional collection instruments were not required for this study because of the data's publicly accessible nature. First, the researcher used three tools to identify the top ten Instagram SMIs, which included Hype Auditor's SMI analysis tool, Hoot Suite's SMI and audience analysis tool, and Instagram's search engine. Hype Auditor is an AI Instagram analytics and discovery tool that provides insights about SMIs, such as demographic information of their audience (e.g. gender, age, household income) and authenticity ratings between SMIs and followers. In addition, this tool can reveal the frequency at which a particular demographic engages with SMI content. Hype auditors can analyze Instagram accounts using 35 in-depth metrics, one of which identifies the top hashtags used by SMIs within the past 30 days. For these reasons, Hype Auditor's data crawling algorithm was first used to identify the top ten non-celebrity SMIs on Instagram.

This list was then cross-referenced with Hootsuite's list of top SMIs on Instagram using its SMI and audience analysis tool. Created by Ryan Holmes in 2008, Hootsuite is a reputable social media management platform. As an analytical tool, it identifies SMIs through factors including engagement rate (e.g. the total number of a SMI's followers), brand status, and post

frequency. The researcher used these functions to create a second list of the top SMIs on Instagram, cross-referencing it with Hype Auditor's list.

**Figure 1**

*10 Most Popular Non-Celebrity SMIs on Instagram*

## Most Popular Social Media Influencers

| Influencer | Country | Number of Followers | Average Age of Followers | Known For  Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amanda Cerny | American | 23.3 M | 25-34 | Fitness/Lifestyle |
| Cameron Dallas | American | 25.4 M | 18-24 | Lifestyle |
| Charli D'Amelio | American | 48.3 M | 18-24 | Social Media Personality |
| Chiara Ferragni | Italian | 28.7 M | 25-34 | Lifestyle |
| Huda (Beauty) Kattan | American | 52 M | 25-34 | Beauty |
| Khaby Lame | Senegalese | 79.3 M | 25-34 | Humor |
| LeLe Pons | American | 50.9 M | 18-24 | Humor |
| Mr. Beast - Jimmy Donaldson | American | 23.7 M | 18-24 | Stuntman |
| Sommer Ray | American | 26.2 M | 25-34 | Fitness |
| Zach King | American | 24.7 M | 25-34 | Humor |

With this information, the researcher was then able to credibly identify the top 10 SMIs on Instagram and their audience demographics (see Figure 1) This process took place between January 26, 2023 to February 25, 2023 from a private office, using a private browser to avoid targeted responses based on cookies. Between 30-90 posts were collected  from each SMI account and later analysis, and engagement rates were identified by looking at the comments section and likes of each post.The data was stored in a secure Excel spreadsheet.  Next, the researcher used Hype Auditor's tool to collect hashtag data on the most recent hashtags used by

each SMI account within the past 30 days (Sun et al., 2022). The following sections discuss the demographic and hashtag data collected for each SMI account analyzed in this study.

**Amanda Cerny**

Amanda Cerny is an Indian social media influencer with over 20 million followers. Her audience has an average household income estimated between $0 and $5,000 annually and whose interests include cinema machinery and technology, luxury, modeling, and fashion. Cerny's Instagram account has a high engagement rate of 3.52% compared to other Instagram profiles with over one million followers. According to Hype Auditor (2023), her engagement rate is demonstrated by an average of 357,898 likes and 3,000 comments per post. Her followers are primarily between the ages of 25 and 34, with the majority being male (73.5%). However, over 50% of her posts are about beauty and fashion. Among her male followers, only 4% are adolescents ranging between the ages of 13 and 17. Additionally, 22% of her male followers are between the ages of 18 and 24. Regarding her female followers, only 9% are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Hype Auditor, 2023). Her estimated audience reach is between 814,000 and 2.4 million followers per post, with her stories on Instagram reaching between 520,000 and 1.6 million followers per story. Hashtag data collection revealed #centerfoldfounder, #Cernyfit, and #Florida as the top three hashtags that Cerny's Instagram profile used within the last 30 days. The thematic analysis of these hashtags and their connection to mimicking behavior among Cerny's adolescent followers is discussed in a later section. Lastly, safety analysis from Hype Auditor showed that Cerny's Instagram has zero out of the nine content patterns which include alcohol, toxic, religious, negative sentiments, offensive, political, crime-related, adult, and pranks.

**Cameron Dallas**

Cameron Dallas is an Instagram influencer with over 25 million followers. He has an average engagement rate of 0.23% compared to other Instagram accounts with over one million followers. His audience represents an average household income of $10,000 to $25,000 annually, with interests including cinema modeling, music, art, fashion, and lifestyle. They range from 18 to 24 years old, where most of his followers are female (62%) and only 12% are adolescents ranging between the ages of 13 and 17 (Hype Auditor, 2023). Dallas' estimated reach is between 760 thousand to 2.3 million followers per post on Instagram. His stories reach 173 thousand to 518 thousand on average, and his posts typically receive 57.3 thousand likes and 276 comments. Hype Auditor did not collect any hashtag data used by Dallas within the last 30 days.

**Charli D'Amelio**

Charli D'Amelio is an American Instagram influencer with over 48 million followers (Hype Auditor, 2023). She has a good engagement rate of 1.2% compared to other social media influencers with one million followers or more (Hype Auditor, 2023). Her audience's interests include cinema and actors modeling, lifestyle art, music, and fashion. Their average household income is estimated between $10,000 and $25,000 per year. The majority of her followers (81%) are female, with an average age falling between 18 and 24. This demographic makes up 46% of her audience. The remainder of her followers are adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17, where 17.4% are male and 28% are female. Her estimated reach is 1.8 million to 5.3 million per post. Her stories reach an audience of 694 thousand to 2.1 million, and her posts receive on average 590.8 thousand likes and 3 thousand comments. Hype Auditor's hashtag metric revealed #wethetourist as the top hashtag used by D'Amelio's Instagram account within the past 30 days. D'Amelio's Instagram account is considered brand safe, having zero of the nine previously mentioned negative content patterns.

**Chiara Ferragni**

Chiara Ferragni is an Italian social media influencer with 28.7 million followers, most of whom are female represent 73% of her audience (Hype Auditor, 2023). Her audience's average household income is between $10,000 and $25,000 per year, and whose interest is in luxury cinema actors, modeling, fashion, music, and lifestyle content. Followers between 18 and 24 years old make up 30% of her audience, with 6% being male and 24% being female. The largest demographic of followers are between the ages of 25 and 34, which make up 43% of her audience. Her engagement rate is considered high compared to other SMI Instagram accounts, with over 1 million followers at 3.5%, according to Hype Auditor (2023). The estimated reach of Ferragni's Instagram stories is 1.8 million to 5.3 million. In addition, she reaches 652,000 to two million on average for each Instagram post. On average, this is demonstrated by one million likes and 7.1 million comments per post. Her brand is considered safe, with zero negative content patterns found.

**Huda Kattan**

Huda Kattan is an American social media influencer with 52 million followers. She is known for being a makeup artist, using her Instagram account to promote her makeup company brand. Her engagement rate is considered average by Hype Auditor at .02% compared to other Instagram accounts with one million followers or more. Her audience's interests include luxury, beauty, and fashion content, with an average household income ranging between $0 and $5,000 per year. They are mostly female SMUs, making up 78% of Kattan's audience (Hype Auditor, 2023). Collectively, her followers are between the ages of 18 and 24, which make up 42% of her total audience. Regarding Instagram stories, her estimated reach is between 683 thousand and 2.1 million per post. In addition, she is estimated to reach 342 thousand to one million followers with

her content, demonstrated by an average of 12.5 thousand likes of 288 comments per post. Hype Auditor's hashtag metric reported #lovefest, #fauxfilter, #silkbombspicy, #hudabeauty, #repost, #launching9August, #silkbombicy, #KaylaIlovefest, #hudabeautylipcontour, and #legitlashes as ten recent hashtags used by Kattan's account within the last 30 days. Her account is considered safe, having zero of the nine negative content patterns found.

**Khaby Lame**

Khaby Lame is an Italian social media influencer with 79.9 million followers. He is reported by Hype Auditor as having a good engagement rate of 1.82% compared to other SMIs with followers of one million or more. Lame's audience is primarily interested in technology, cinema, computers, and gadget content. On average, they have a household income between $0 and $5,000 per year. Most of his followers are males, among whom 7% are adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 (Hype Auditor, 2023). Collectively, adolescent followers make up about a quarter of his audience (between 25% to 34.7%). Young adults, between the ages of 18 and 24, make up 32% of his audience, where 19% are male and 14% are female. His estimated reach is between 4.3 million and 12.9 million per post, where an Instagram story reaches 1.3 million to 3.7 million. His engagement per post is 1.4 million likes, with an average of 8,800 comments per post. Hype Auditor's hashtag metric revealed #learnfromKhaby, #learnwithmeta, #metapartner, #ad, and #learnwithInstagram as the top five hashtags used by Lame's account in the last 30 days. His Instagram account was reported as being safe, with zero of the nine negative content patterns were found.

**Lele Pons**

Lele Pons is a Venezuelan social media influencer with 50.7 million followers, of whom the majority are young adults between 18 and 24, 67% are female, and 13% are adolescents

between the ages of 13 and 17. Among her adolescent followers, 4% are male and 7% are female (Hype Auditor, 2023). Among her young adult followers, 12% are male and 28% are female. Most of her audience's interest lies in cinema, luxury, modeling, fashion, music, and art content. Additionally, their average household income is between $0 to $5,000 per year. Pons is considered to have a good engagement rate of 2.23% compared to other SMI Instagram accounts with one million followers or more. Her average estimated reach is between 2.6 million and 7.7 million per post. For each Instagram story, her reach is 841,000 to 2.5 million per story. Her engagement per post receives an average of 1.1 million likes and 5,900 comments. Hype Auditor has also considered this brand safe based on the nine negative content patterns.

**Mr. Beast**

Mr. Beast is an American social media influencer with 22.9 million followers. He has a 4.5% engagement rate, which is considered high compared to other social media influencers with one million or more followers. His audience consists primarily of male followers (72%) and between the ages of 18 and 24. Among the young adults, 27% are male and 12% are female. Additionally, 21% of his followers are adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17, where 15% of his adolescent followers are male and 6% are female. His audience's average annual household income is between $25,000 and $50,000, with interests in content about technology, computers, gadgets, as well as cinema and actors. Mr. Beast's estimated reach is between 1.9 million and 5.8 million per post and 635 thousand to 1.9 million per story. His engagement averages one million likes per post and six-point 8 thousand comments per post. According to Hype Auditor, Mr. Beast has a safe social media profile, with zero of the nine negative content patterns.

**Sommer Ray**

Sommer Ray is an American social media influencer with 26.3 million followers, most of whom are interested in luxury, sports, cinema, actors, and technology content. According to Hype Auditor, Ray has a reasonable engagement rate of 2.25% compared to other social media accounts (including Instagram) who have one million or more followers. As for demographics, her audience is primarily male (80%), 37% are young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 (among whom 31% are male and 6% are female), and 13% are adolescent followers between the ages of 13 and 17 (among whom 10% are male and 3% are female). Additionally, Ray's audience is characterized by an average household income of $25,000 to $50,000 per year. Her estimated reach per post for an Instagram story is 660,000 to two million. Her estimated reach is between 439 thousand and 1.3 million. Ray's profile is considered safe, with zero negative content patterns found.

**Zach King**

Zach King is an American social media influencer on Instagram with 24.7 million followers, whose interest is primarily in cinema, computers, luxury, and technology content. According to Hype Auditor, Zach King has a good engagement rate of 1.32% compared to other social media influencer accounts with one million followers or more. Regarding demographics, his followers are primarily male (67%) and young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 (44%), 30% are adolescents and young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 (among whom 18% are male and 12% are female), less than 10% are adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 (among whom 5% are male), and 36.9% have an average household income of $0 to $5,000 per year. King's estimated reach per Instagram story is 1.2 million to 3.7 million. He receives between 311 thousand and 932 thousand engagements per post, which include an average of 326.2 thousand

likes and 987 comments. Lastly, his account is considered safe, as his content has zero of the nine negative content patterns.

**Data Beyond the Research Scope**

Data collected from three of the 10 SMIs fell beyond the research scope of this study and was therefore excluded. As previously discussed, the criteria for this content analysis included still images posted within the last 30 days from the study's start date. Exclusion criteria involved the time frame for posted content (i.e. within the last 30 days) as well as the type of content posted by the SMIs (e.g. videos, textual information presented as an image). First, posts collected from Khaby Lame's profile were excluded because he only posted video content within the last 30 days. As this research was limited to still images of the SMIs themselves, Lame's content did not meet the eligibility requirements. Second, hashtag data from Mr. Beast's profile could not be used because, at the time of data collection, he had not used any hashtags within the last 30 days to promote his Instagram posts. Therefore, the researcher could not determine whether hashtag usage increases his engagement or leads to the creation of micro realities among his followers. Lastly, posts collected from Zach King's profile fell beyond the scope of this study because, similar to Lame and Mr. Beast, his content within the last 30 days included videos and zero hashtag usage.

<div align="center">Qualitative Content Analysis</div>

Analysis of the collected SMI content took a thematic approach, which involved organizing the still images, hashtags, and comments from the 30 day period into categories using Delve software (Bryman, 2012; Cole, 1988). Thirty thousand images, hashtags, and comments weree analyzed. This approach was inspired by a similar study conducted by Cohen et al. (2019). Framed by the SCT and MET, this thematic analysis allowed the researcher to explore active

engagement between the ten identified Instagram SMIs and their adolescent followers (De Vries et al., 2012).

**Data Analysis Software Tools**

The content analysis was an evolving process of finding, grouping and refining themes. To aid in this process, the software tools of Delve and Hype Auditor were used. According to scholars, computer-aided data analysis is beneficial because it can result in accuracy and transparency (Woods et al., 2016; Souza et al., 2015). Delve is an online and collaborative analysis tool that helps to organize qualitative data, generating efficient and accurate insights. Delve's analysis interface allowed for accuracy in merging codes, which worked well with this study's evolving data (delvetool.com, 2023). Second, Hype Auditor's software aided in the analysis of follower demographics. The tool allowed the researcher to explore repeat SMI followers and the time spent conducting engagement activities (e.g. liking content posted by a SMI, commenting on content, recreating content posted by SMIs). Collectively, these tools aided the analysis of this study's data, which included thirty thousand visual images, hashtags, and comments.

**Thematic Analysis**

Data was manually coded to identify themes according to engagement, perfectionism, and sexuality. Previous studies have demonstrated manual coding as a credible technique (Ho, 2017). As previously discussed, the data coded in this research included visual images of the SMI, hashtag usage, and engagement metrics (i.e. comments from followers). Nonverbal content (i.e. visual images) was analyzed using SCT, while the perfectionism scale analyzed mimicking behaviors among adolescent followers. Collectively, 13 themes were identified among the content, revealing the relationship between hashtag usage and follower engagement.

Content indicating engagement featured follower likes and comments on the selected

social media posts. To determine relevant engagement among comments, the researcher omitted

those belonging to official Instagram profiles sporting a blue check, as these are typically

celebrities and well-known SMUs, and scrolled down to the first comment from a SMU without

an official Instagram account. This allowed the researcher to determine that the comment was

posted by a frequently engaged follower of the SMI.

Content indicating perfectionism featured straight teeth, white teeth, blemish-free skin,

muscular definition, designer clothing (as indicated by hashtags or links on the image), and

hairstyles. These standards of perfectionism were culturally-based and coded according to

Boepple et al.'s (2016) content analysis of body image, where a five-point Likert scale was used

to measure perfectionism features. A rating of one indicated zero perfection, while a rating of

five indicated total perfection. Content indicating sexuality featured nudity, lingerie, an exposed

chest, and intimate clothing (e.g. an image of a SMI in her underwear). Visual images depicting

human subjects were only coded if the individual captured was the SMI of the account. Content

that met this criteria was coded according to factors such as the SMI's body image and

demographics. Content featuring guest posts from other SMIs, cartoon imagery, videos, and

textual content used as visual images were excluded from the coding process.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this study included truthful analysis and the reporting of the

social media content. The decision to use publicly accessible SMI content in order to understand

micro realties allowed the researcher to collect and analyze the data without having to interact

with the SMIs and their followers. In this way, the research was unobtrusive and ethically

considerate (Stern, 2004). Permission to use visual images collected from the SMI profiles was

not necessary, as this content was previously made accessible to the public. According to Instagram (2023), this content is public and is therefore considered lawfully obtained under Instagram's copyright laws. That being said, to protect the privacy of followers, their names and other personal identifying information was cleaned by the researcher.

<center>**Strategies of Validation**</center>

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that qualitative research use at least two validation strategies. The strategies of the study used: data triangulation, dependability, transferability, and bias disclosure.

## Data Triangulation

This QCA demonstrated credibility through data triangulation. This validation strategy uses various approaches to strengthen the credibility of the research (Jentoft & Olsen, 2017; Mathison, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The two theories of SCT and MET framed the analysis to better understand the data. Data was represented by varying demographics including differences in gender and ethnicity  among SMI followers. This diversity allowed the researcher to analyze the content from multiple perspectives. In addition, credibility was established by identifying the top 10 SMIs on Instagram through Hype Auditor and Hootsuite's analysis tools. These two sources generated SMI lists, which the researcher was able to compare in order to accurately identify the influencer sample of this study.

## Dependability

The findings of this QCA are neutral. The content was genuine and free from bias, as it was collected from publicly accessible SMI accounts on Instagram. To ensure accuracy during the data collection, an audit trail was maintained using Delve (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Dependability was achieved using Delve software to code your data.

**Transferability**

Transferability is a validation strategy, and the insights from the study can transfer to other areas of communication and media studies. By examining a possible relationship between SMI content on Instagram and adolescent followers, this study aimed to fill an existing research gap with insights that can extend to other fields.

**Disclosure of Bias**

The researcher's role in this study was to analyze the interactions between SMIs on Instagram and their adolescent followers, determining the potential influence of this PSR on the adolescent creation of micro realities. As a mother to young children, the researcher recognizes her bias towards perceiving social media as having a negative impact on children. This bias was navigated by the unobtrusive research design of this study, which allowed for zero interactions between the researcher, SMIs, and followers. In addition, the researcher has an Instagram profile. However, her personal SMU status had no bearing on the content analyzed in this study.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This chapter provided a description of the study's methodology. First, the qualitative paradigm of the research was explained. Second, the method and design of the study were reviewed. Next, the processes for data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations were presented. Lastly, four validation strategies for the research were outlined. Chapter Four presents the findings of this qualitative study.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

The aim of this study was to analyze the content of ten non-celebrity SMIs on Instagram, determining their influence and PSR with adolescent followers. Visual images, namesake hashtags, and comments were collected from the ten selected SMI profiles, as well as from the profiles of their adolescent followers to identify mimicking behavior and the possible creation of micro realities. The following five research questions guided this analysis:

RQ1: How are adolescent followers of Instagram SMI content creating micro realities?

RQ2: How are SMIs using hashtags to promote their posts to a larger audience?

RQ3: How is hashtag usage or re-sharing by SMIs promoting follower engagement?

RQ4: How are SMIs promoting self-image to their adolescent followers?

RQ5: How is the creation of micro realities by adolescents promoted by hashtags?

This chapter presents the main findings of this qualitative study. Thematic analysis of the SMI content revealed 13 themes, which include: (1) *Criticism from Follower*, (2) *Similar Posts by Followers*, (3) *Concern from Follower*, (4) *Direct Engagement with Follower*, (5) *Follower is an Adolescent,* (6) *Fan Page Created*, (7) *Pictures Taken with Friends, Others, and Family*, (8) *Vulnerability*, (9) *Selfies*, (10) *Sexualized Photos*, (11) *Self-Promotion*, (12) *Product Advertising*, and (13) *Social Responsibility*. These findings demonstrated a positive correlation between hashtag usage, increased follower engagement, and the creation of micro realities by adolescent followers of SMIs on Instagram. Chapter Five presents a discussion of these findings and their implications.

## Findings

Delve software was used to analyze similarities among the data. Delve aided the analysis process by analyzing the hashtags collected.

### Thematic Analysis

A inductive approach (a likely premise from limited observations) guided the thematic analysis. This process revealed 13 themes including (1) *Criticism from Follower*, (2), *Similar Posts by Followers*, (3) *Concern from Follower*, (4), *Direct Engagement with Follower*, (5) *Follower is an Adolescent,* (6) *Fan Page Created*, (7) *Pictures Taken with Friends, Others, and Family*, (8) *Vulnerability*, (9) *Selfies*, (10) *Sexualized Photos*, (11) *Self-Promotion*, (12) *Product Advertising*, and (13) *Social Responsibility (*see Table 1). The following section provides a breakdown of each of these themes.

**Table 1** *Most Prominent Themes Characterizing the SMI-Follower PSR on Instagram*



Average of N of transcript excerpts assigned
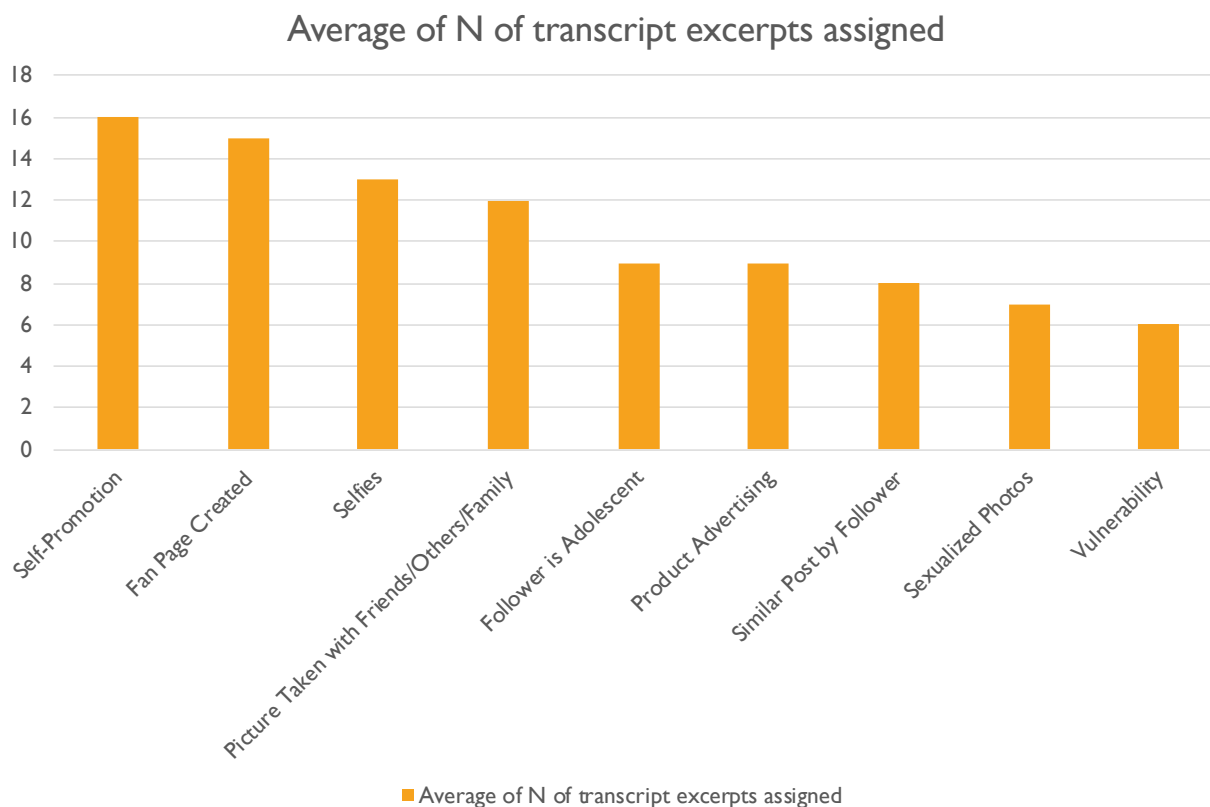
**Criticism From Follower.** Two hashtags were used to promote content posted by Charlie D'Amelio's profile, which included #wethetourist and #FW23. The latter hashtag was a reference to the 2023 Fashion Week. The first commenter of this post, which was a visual image of D'Amelio and a grey dress, engaged with the SMI by writing, "no hate, I thought it was cute and that it is, then I suddenly thought pillowcase". Upon clicking on the SMU's profile, the account was private. On a post using the namesake hashtag #GiuseppeZanotti, the first comment analyzed was from a female follower. The post was translated and appeared to reprimand the conventional ideal of women needing to be thin. Upon clicking on the SMU's profile, the account was also private. The researcher was therefore unable to determine whether there was any mimicking behavior from this SMU's profile in regards to the advertisement for Intimissimi. The first unofficial comment was translated from Italian. Despite the translation, clarification as to what the SMU was trying to say was still needed. However, it had to do with advertising underwear, stating that Chiara Fergani should not be judged according to a profile that is different from hers. This follower's profile presented less perfectionism content (e.g. less posed pictures). For the Benetton hashtag, the first unofficial comment was from a private profile and was unrelated to the post. The researcher was unable to determine whether there was any mimicking behavior in the advertisement for Louis Vuitton.

**Similar Posts by Followers.** Namesake hashtags were used to identify similar posts that increased follower engagement. Analyzing the top post of a follower using the namesake hashtag, #HudaBeauty, a picture was posted showing the follower and their makeup. Having tagged Huda Beauty in the post, it was unclear whether this was for acknowledgement of a makeup tutorial created by the SMI or whether this was an example of mimicking behavior.

However, when visiting Huda Beauty's profile, there was a similar-looking image of the eye makeup (see Figure 2). The most popular Huda Beauty hashtag used on Instagram in the last 30 days was #lovefest, whose top post by a follower was a still image of makeup. This association with Huda Beauty and one of her followers either shows Huda Beauty products or displays these products in the same way as Huda Kattan.

**Figure 2**

*Increased Engagement through #HudaBeauty*
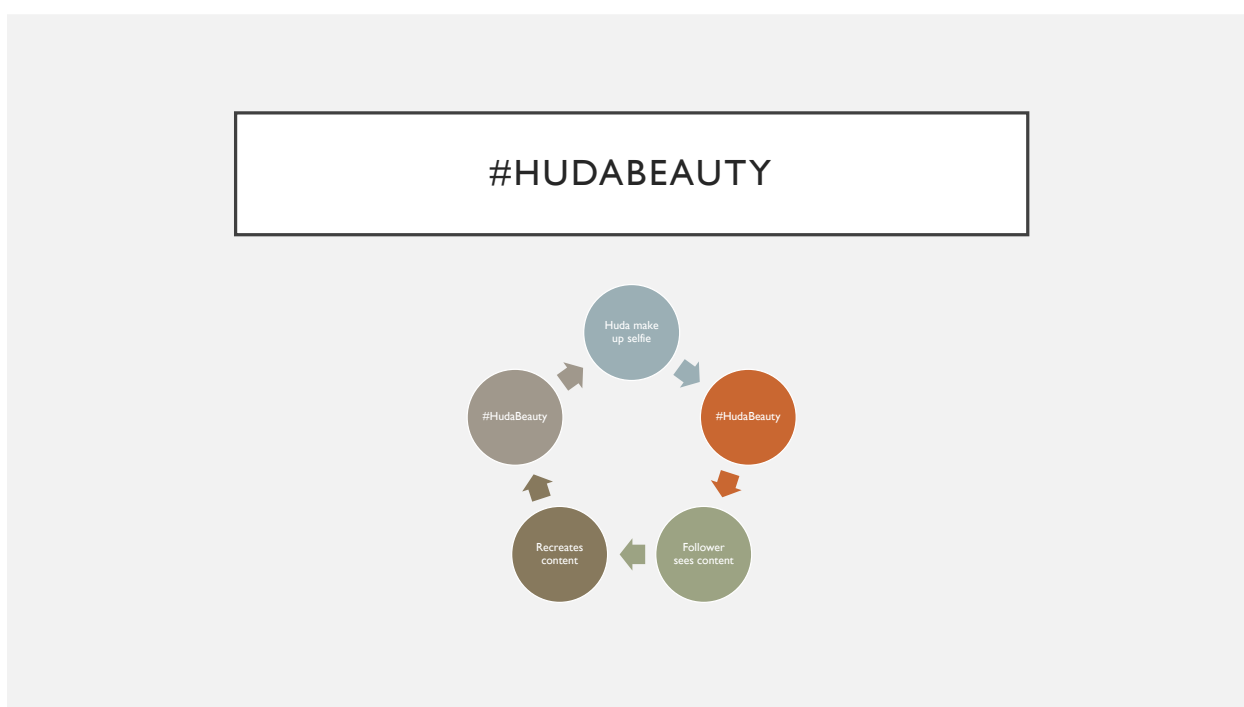


Two hashtags used by Charlie D'Amelio in the last 30 days were #wethetourist and #socialtouristcofounder. In her post, D'Amelio promoted a fashion line and tagged her fashion brand. A follower engaged with her post by commenting, "live laugh love social tourists". Upon clicking on the SMU's profile, it appeared to be a fan page for D'Amelio, where her posts, reviews, and videos are reposted from the original account. While this did not indicate any

mimicking behavior from the follower, it did demonstrate another dedicated fan page to D'Amelio that was not her official page.

The namesake hashtag for Chiara Ferragni, #ChiaraFerragni, was used by a follower who posted a picture of a side-by-side comparison of themself with Ferragni. The post also contained a second hashtag for the model. According to Hype Auditor's data tool, Ferragni's profile did not use hashtags to promote content within the timeframe of this study. An advertisement connected to Fergani had a follower engage with a comment supporting Fergani and her body type. Upon clicking on the follower's profile, they listed their age as 26. This profile was different from Fergani's clothing style. However, there was similarity among this post and the posts of their family.

**Concern From Follower.** One hashtag was used by Cameron Dallas within the last 30 days, which was #beyourownboss. A similar post was found by a follower of Dallas, mimicking his behavior by wearing a baseball cap and standing on the coast in front of water. The first engagement analyzed on this post was from a follower who commented, "hope you're OK man with a <3". Upon clicking on this SMU's profile, the account was private and was therefore unclear in regards to determining whether there was any mimicking behavior of Dallas by the SMU.

A post by SMI Chiara Fergani using the hashtag, #Benetton, led the researcher to a unrelated comment that was posted by a private SMU profile. Given this, the researcher was unable to determine whether there was any mimicking behavior in this advertisement for Louis Vuitton. Another follower stated, "all I am saying is that seeing faith live like this yesterday devastated me. Social media certainly does not reflect real life, and Chiara probably suffers too, but I do not know how bitter it is". Visiting this SMU's Instagram profile revealed that their

content style is distinctly different from Fergani's profile. This was made apparent through the SMU's posted images, which were less posed and less self-promoting. In addition, the SMU's content involved more still images of locations.

**Direct Engagement with Follower.** Huda Beauty used the following hashtags in a post to stop sanctions on Syrians – #Syria, #SOS, #earthquake, #saveSyria, #hopesyria, and #syrup. A following post by Sheer Beauty used the hashtag, #vogueArabia, as a continuation of Huda's opinions about Syria, the earthquake, and Turkey. The first engagement with this post was from a follower who commented, "your heart is beautiful you've always been compassionate, and it speaks volumes". This comment was then engaged with by Huda herself, who replied, "thank you, my love". Visiting this SMU's profile, which has over 100,000 followers, revealed that their content is very similar to the content on Huda Beauty's profile, which focuses on makeup and selfies. However, this SMU's content did not meet the criteria for mimicking behavior in this study because the follower's posts were not similar to Huda Beauty's..

**Follower is an Adolescent.** Khaby Lame is best known for his sarcastic approach to apparent solutions. His signature smirk was mimicked in the top posts that used his hashtag, #learnedfromKhaby (see Figure 3). Interestingly, inputting this hashtag into Instagram's search engine yields Justin Bieber and Drake fan pages. There were no other top posts associated with Khaby or the #learnfromKhaby hashtag. As he only posted videos, Lame's content fell beyond the scope of this study. That being said, it is worth that the usage of his namesake hashtag revealed that Lame has an adolescent follower who mimics his infamous smirk while displaying a plate.

**Figure 3**

*Micro Reality Creation from #KhabyLame*
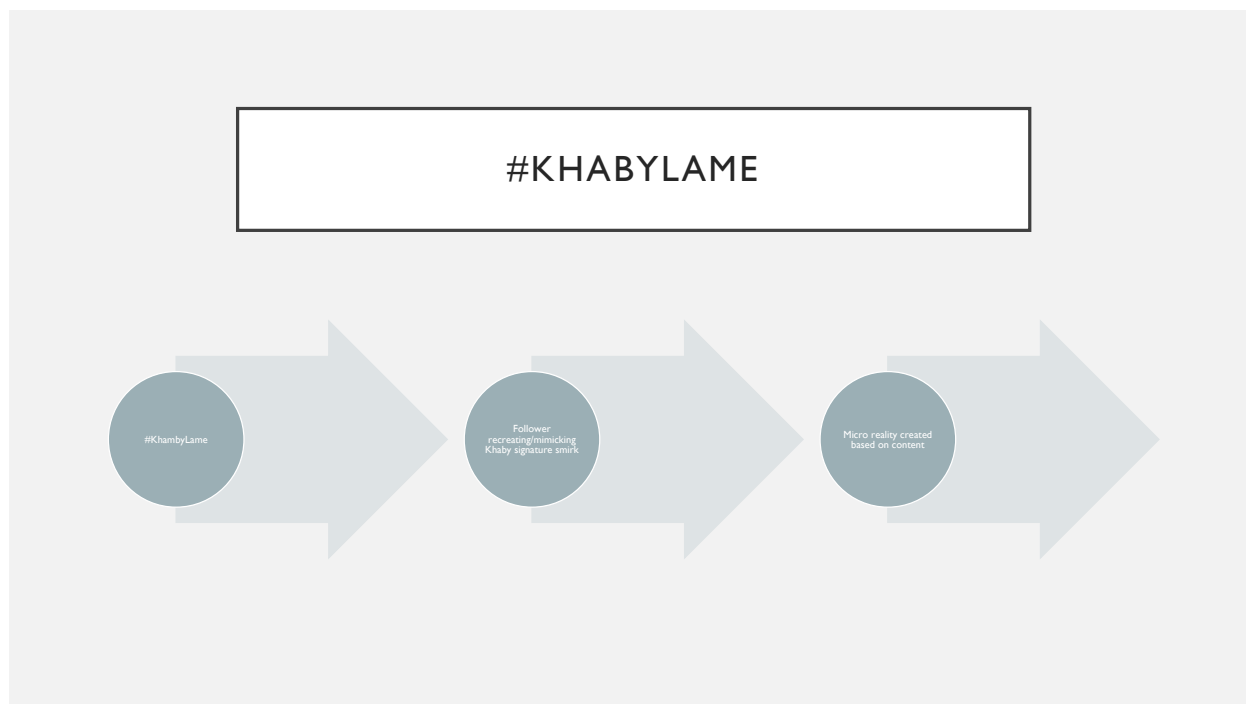


Analyzing the top post of a follower using the namesake hashtag, #hudabeauty, a picture was posted showing the follower and their makeup. Having tagged Huda Beauty in the post, it was unclear whether this was for acknowledgement of a makeup tutorial created by the SMI or whether this was an example of mimicking behavior. However, when visiting Huda Beauty's profile, there was a similar-looking image of the eye makeup. The most popular Huda Beauty hashtag used on Instagram in the last 30 days was #lovefest, whose top post by a follower was a still image of makeup. The other hashtags include #Hudabeauty, #Hudabeautyshop, and #Hudabeautyfam. This association with Huda Beauty and one of her followers either shows Huda Beauty products or displays these products in the same way as Huda Kattan. As for Cameron Dallas, a similar post was found by one of his followers (however cannot be

determined if an adolescent) mimicking a photo of him by wearing a baseball cap in an exotic-looking location.

**Fan Page Created.** This theme was identified among six of the 10 SMI profiles. First, Content using the namesake hashtag, #CharlieD'Amelio, was only engaged with by fan page profiles. In other words, D'Amelio's images were re-shared on fan pages. Content using D'Amelio's popular hashtag, #wethetourist, revealed the top engagement from followers of D'Amelio using the associated hashtags #wethetourists and #socialtourist.

Upon further investigation, D'Amelio uses the social tourist account to promote a fashion brand. This was demonstrated by D'Amelio's use of the hashtag, #socialtouristcofounder, which declares her status as a cofounder of the brand. A follower engaged with one her posts using this hashtag by commenting, "live laugh love social tourists". Upon clicking on the SMU's profile, it appeared to be a fan page for D'Amelio, where her posts, reviews, and videos are reposted from the original account. While this did not indicate any mimicking behavior from the follower, it did demonstrate another dedicated fan page to D'Amelio that was not her official page.

An additional hashtag used by D'Amelio to promote content was #FW23, which referenced the 2023 Fashion Week. The first commenter of this post, which was a visual image of D'Amelio and a grey dress, engaged with the SMI by writing, "no hate, I thought it was cute and that it is, then I suddenly thought pillowcase". Upon clicking on the SMU's profile, the account was private. For this reason, it was not possible to determine whether there was any mimicking behavior from this follower.

Second, content using the namesake hashtag, #ZachKing, revealed multiple posts associated with fan pages or videos that could be similar to King's content or content belonging to female SMUs using the hashtag. According to Hype Auditor, King last used hashtags to

promote his post in the last 30 days. However, King's posts within the timeframe of this study only included video and therefore could not be included in this study.

Third, content using the hashtag, #sommerRay was only associated with fan pages and/or other celebrities. According to Hype Auditor, Sommer Ray did not use any hashtags to promote her content within the last 30 days. Reviewing her profile, there do not appear to be any hashtags used within the last month. Therefore, this study was unable to determine whether her hashtag usage promotes engagement with her audience and/or leads to the creation of micro realities.

Next, content using the namesake hashtag, #Mrbeast, was associated with a couple of fan pages. Hype Auditor revealed that Mr. Beast did not use any hashtags to promote posts within the timeframe of this study. After reviewing his Instagram profile, there was not any evidence for hashtag usage among his content. Once again, this research was unable to determine whether hashtag usage increases the engagement of his followers or leads to the creation of micro realities.

Posts using the namesake hashtag #leleponds, revealed that there was no connection to micro reality creation. Followers using the hashtag, #rings, revealed Pons fan pages. Similar to Mr. Beast and Sommer Ray's profiles, Hype Auditor identified Lele Pons' profile as having no hashtag usage within the last 30 days. Therefore, this research could not determine whether hashtag usage increases her engagement with followers. This finding was found to be the same among Khaby Lame's profile, where the hashtag #learnedfromKhaby revealed a link to Justin Bieber and Drake fan pages.

Amanda Cerny's namesake hashtag was connected to still images of her and various fan pages. Unfortunately its usage did not reveal any evidence for mimicking behaviors. Her use of the hashtag, #Cernyfit, loaded several profiles of other SMI and celebrities on Instagram. For

example, the top post identified in this study using #Cernyfit was a picture of the soccer star, Christian Rinaldo.

**Pictures Taken with Friends, Others, and Family.** This theme was identified in the content of all 10 SMIs, who posted photos taken with their friends, family, or other people. Occasional posts were unclear about the identities of the other people. However, Chiara Ferragni captioned the people in her posts who were not necessarily her friends or family members. Her content included images with her children, as well as with people at events. While Khaby Lame's content fell beyond the scope of this study, analyzing the grid view of his Instagram profile revealed images of him taken with celebrities. The grid view of Cameron Dallas's Instagram is similar, featuring images of him with others on his travels.

**Vulnerability.** The analysis revealed two examples of vulnerability among content from Cameron Dallas and Huda Kattan. One hashtag used by Cameron Dallas was #beyourownboss. The first engagement analyzed on this post was from a follower who commented, "hope you're OK man with a <3". This interaction demonstrated vulnerability. Notably, Khaby uses the hashtag, #notoracism, in his Instagram bio. Using Instagram's search tool, this hashtag loads positive posts of anti-racism campaigns.

Huda Beauty's hashtag usage is another example. She used the following hashtags in a post to stop sanctions on Syrians – #Syria, #SOS, #earthquake, #saveSyria, #hopesyria, and #syrup. A following post by Sheer Beauty used the hashtag, #vogueArabia, as a continuation of Huda's opinions about Syria, the earthquake, and Turkey. The first engagement with this post was from a follower who commented, "your heart is beautiful you've always been compassionate, and it speaks volumes". This comment was then engaged with by Huda herself, who replied, "thank you, my love".

**Selfies.** This theme was defined as pictures that are taken by a person of themself. Selfies were found to be featured on all ten of the SMI profiles analyzed in this study. Interestingly, selfies of the male SMIs often displayed a smile or grin, while selfies of the female SMIs displayed a smirk or a neutral facial cue. In addition, it was observed that the female SMIs' selfies were often taken at an angle.

**Sexualized Photos.** The analysis revealed several examples of this theme. First, Chiara Ferragni's Instagram features numerous sexualized photos. Within the timeframe of this study, she promoted a lingerie brand through sexualized content using two hashtags, which were #chiaraloves and #intimissimi. In a second post promoting Intimissimi, the lingerie brand, she used the two hashtags #adv and #intimissimi. Ferragni also promoted Fashion Week with sexualized content, using the two hashtags #GiuseppeZanotti and #adv. In response to this content, a female follower criticized the conventional ideal of women needing to be thin. This interaction showed a difference in perspectives about sexualization. In response to another promotional post for #falconeri, a follower engaged by criticizing Ferganni's outfit. Upon clicking on the follower's profile, the content is distinct from Ferganni's style and appears to belong to an older user.

Content posted by Lele Pons and Sommer Ray was also classified under this theme. Pons posts sexualized photos of herself within a humorous context. This study analyzed photos of the SMI wearing bikinis, where her bottom is exposed, as well as a bridal lingerie set in which she is shown celebrating her upcoming nuptials. Regarding Sommer Ray, most of her Instagram grid depicts pictures of her in sexually suggestive photos. Each photo displays her in a sexual pose, which exposes her adolescent audience to sexualization in the context of body image.

Two additional examples of sexualized photos include content from Amanda Cerny and Cameron Dallas. Cerny, known for being a fitness SMI, has posted similar sexualized content. This study analyzed a sexualized photo of her in which she posed naked with bananas positioned at her breasts. The photo is part of a series, where Cerny posed naked in multiple positions around a grocery store. In contrast, a topless photo of Cameron Dallas located in a tropical setting was posted three times within the 30-day research timeframe of this study. Although these three images do not show Dallas in sexually suggestive poses similar to those discussed above, they do show him without clothing and were therefore organized under this theme.

**Self-promotion.** In Cameron Dallas's posts from the last 30 days, only one hashtag was used #beyourownboss. Lame demonstrated self-promotion through his usage of the hashtag #learnedfromKhaby. Inputting this hashtag into Instagram's search engine, however fan pages for Justin Bieber and Drake were loaded instead.

Self-promotion was identified among Charli D'Amelio's content through the hashtags #socialtouristcofounder, #wethetourist, and #socialtourist. D'Amelio cofounded the fashion line, Social Tourist, and was therefore using these hashtags to promote her personal brand. In another example, self-promotion was identified through an image of her wearing a grey dress, captioned with the hashtag #FW23. In this case, D'Amelio promoted her self-image and attendance at the 2023 Fashion Week. A follower engaged with her post by commenting, "no hate, I thought it was cute and that it is, then I suddenly thought pillowcase". This SMU's profile was private, so any mimicking behavior from this follower could not be verified.

Self-promotion was identified among Amanda Cerny's content through the hashtags #AmandaCernyXglomer and #ad. In this example, Cerny collaborated with a brand called Glomera in order to promote her personal jewelry collection for Valentine's Day. She posted the

content on February 3rd. A follower engaged with her, commenting on the post with the hashtag #teamCerny. There were not any mimicking pictures using the namesake hashtag for Cerny.

Finally, this theme was identified among Huda Kattan's content, which primarily focuses on her beauty tutorials and products from her makeup brand (i.e. Huda Beauty). Her followers were found to use the hashtag, #hudabeauty, to tag Kattan in their posts of similar eye makeup content. Kattan used the hashtag, #schoolof, to promote her Master class and to demonstrate an appreciation for her students.

**Product Advertising.** This theme was identified among several SMI posts analyzed in this study. As previously mentioned, Amanda Cerny collaborated with a brand called Glomera to promote her jewelry collection for Valentine's Day. Her post, which used the hashtags #AmandaCernyXglomer and #ad, functioned as both self-promoting and product advertising content. Similarly, Huda Kattan's content self-promotes and advertises her brand, Huda Beauty, along with its makeup products with the hashtags #lovefest, #Hudabeauty, #Hudabeautyshop, and #Hudabeautyfam.

Most of Chiara Ferragni's content analyzed in this study fell within this theme. Her posts primarily made use of the hashtag, #adv, which signifies product advertisements. The first post analyzed was an advertisement for the brand behind her outfit, which was Falconry. Additional posts made use of the hashtags, #chiaraloves and #intimissimi, to advertise a lingerie brand. A third example from Ferragni were advertisements for Louis Vuitton jewelry and bags, using the hashtags #adv, #LVvault, and #suppliedbyLouisVuitton. In one of these posts, Ferragni is featured with a Louis Vuitton bag. Finally, Ferragni advertised products for the brands of GHD, Lancome, Nespresso, Benetton, and Gussieppi using the following hashtags: #ghdduetstyle, #lancome, #makeup, #Benetton, and #zanotaGussieppi.

**Social Responsibility.** One example of social responsibility was Khaby's use of the hashtag, #notoracism, in his Instagram bio. This hashtag is connected to several anti-racism campaigns. Another example of this theme was Huda Beauty's use of the hashtags #Syria, #SOS, #earthquake, #saveSyria, #hopesyria, and #syrup. Kattan's posts described her passion to stop sanctions on Syrians. She similarly used the hashtag, #vogueArabia, to extend her advocacy of earthquake relief and Turkey. A follower engaged with her by commenting, "your heart is beautiful you've always been compassionate, and it speaks volumes". Kattan replied to the follower, "thank you, my love".

## Summary

This chapter presented the main findings of this qualitative study. Content analysis of 10 SMI profiles on Instagram revealed 13 themes, which included *Criticism from Follower*, *Similar Posts by Followers*, *Concern from Follower*, *Direct Engagement with Follower*, *Follower is an Adolescent*, *Fan Page Created*, *Pictures Taken with Friends, Others, and Family*, *Vulnerability*, *Selfies*, *Sexualized Photos*, *Self-Promotion*, *Product Advertising*, and *Social Responsibility*. Chapter Five presents a discussion of these thematic findings and their implications.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

## Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the PSR between SMIs and their adolescent followers using hashtags. This chapter discusses the findings of the analysis. First, the findings are summarized. Second, the research questions are addressed. Next, insights from the 13 themes are discussed. The chapter concludes with a review of the research implications, limitations, and recommendations for the future.

## Summary of Findings

This qualitative study aimed to understand the PSR between SMIs and their adolescent followers based on factors such as hashtag usage and the creation of micro realities. Data was collected from 10 SMI profiles on Instagram and included hashtag usage, still images, and engagement metrics (i.e. comments). A thematic content analysis was conducted, aided by Delve and Hype Auditor software tools and influenced by SCT and MET. Findings revealed 13 themes, demonstrating a positive correlation between hashtag usage, increased follower engagement, and the creation of micro realities based on the recreation of posts by adolescents.

## Research Questions

This research was exploratory in nature, aimed at understanding whether adolescent followers of SMIs on Instagram create micro realities as a result of exposure to the perfectionism content. This understanding was hinged on identifying whether key human developmental

factors, specifically mimicking behaviors among adolescent SMUs, may be affecting the creation

of micro realities. The following five research questions were addressed through a thematic

content analysis:

RQ1: How are adolescent followers of Instagram SMI content creating micro realities?

RQ2: How are SMIs using hashtags to promote their posts to a larger audience?

RQ3: How is hashtag usage or re-sharing by SMIs promoting follower engagement?

RQ4: How are SMIs promoting self-image to their adolescent followers?

RQ5: How is the creation of micro realities by adolescents promoted by hashtags?

The analysis explored factors that can contribute to engagement between SMIs and their

adolescent followers, including hashtag usage and its role in mimicking behaviors (e.g. the re-

sharing of original SMI posts by an adolescent follower). Findings were validated through data

triangulation, transferability, dependability, and disclosure of bias strategies. Through this

thematic analysis, a new understanding of the PSR between SMIs and their adolescent followers
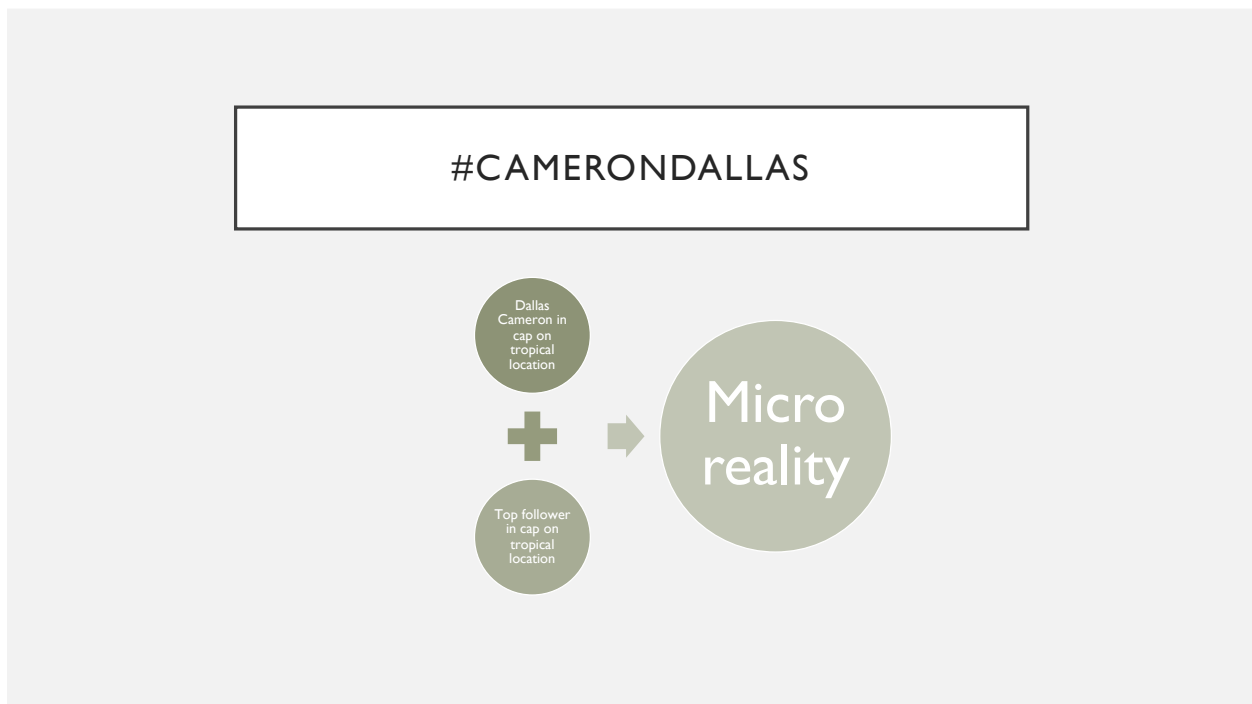
was revealed.

**RQ1: How are adolescent followers of Instagram SMI content creating micro**

**realities?** This analysis did not provide enough substantial evidence to support the claim that

adolescent followers are creating micro realities through recreated SMI posts. However, the data

provided evidence for the creation of micro realities based on the PSR between SMIs and their

adolescent followers. This was demonstrated through three of this study's themes, including

*Direct Engagement with Follower, Concern from Follower*, and *Vulnerability*.

Followers in this study recreated still images of SMIs and copied hashtag usage in their

posts. For example, an adolescent follower of SMI Khaby Lame, described as being 11 years old,

recreated his signature smirk in her image and promoted the post using his namesake hashtag.

Similar data collected from followers of Huda Kattan demonstrated evidence of photo

recreations, where the images were similar according to the makeup technique, poses, and style

(i.e. selfies). Data collected from Cameron Dallas' profile provides further confirmation, where a

follower recreated a photo to look like one that was previously posted by Dallas. Both photos

illustrated the human subject wearing a baseball cap and standing in front of a large body of

water (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Micro Reality Creation from #CameronDallas*



**RQ2: How are SMIs using hashtags to promote their posts to a larger audience?**

This analysis did not indicate whether hashtag usage by SMIs promoted their content to a larger

audience. The data revealed two categories of SMI hashtag usage, which included personal (i.e.

self-image) and product (i.e. brand advertising) promotions. The data also demonstrated that

SMIs use hashtags to promote social responsibility awareness to their audience.

**RQ3: How is hashtag usage or re-sharing by SMIs promoting follower engagement?**

This thematic analysis determined that hashtags used by SMIs do promote follower engagement

and the re-sharing of information. For example, SMI Huda Kattan used hashtags to raise social

responsibility awareness among her followers regarding the Turkey earthquake. As a result, her

followers used the same hashtag, expressing concern for the tragedy. A second example was

demonstrated by SMI Charli D'Amelio, who used the hashtag, #socialtourist, to engage with a

specific demographic of her audience and promote her fashion brand. As these followers within

her audience are known as social tourists, this hashtag quickly associated them with her fashion

brand and further promoted their engagement with her content. A third example of hashtag usage

promoting engagement was demonstrated by SMI Khaby Lame, who included the socially

responsible hashtag, #notoracism, in his profile's bio. The analysis demonstrated that this

hashtag is popular among the celebrity circle of SMIs, engaged by followers who are passionate

about raising awareness through anti-racism campaigns.

**RQ4: How are SMIs promoting self-image to their adolescent followers?** Based on

the number of sexualized photos used by the SMIs in the 30 days of observation, the findings

demonstrated that the body images were from both male and female SMIs. Chiara Ferragni

posted sexualized images of herself and used specific hashtags to promote her self-image

including #Intimissimi, #ChiaraLovesIntimissimi, and #ChiaraLovesCalzedonia. The content of

Lele Pons, Cameron Dallas, Amanda Cerny, and Charli D'Amelio similarly promoted their self-

images.

**RQ5: How is the creation of micro realities by adolescents promoted by hashtags?** This study analyzed the top non-celebrity or non-verified account for each post that was collected within the 30-day research timeframe. Many of these follower accounts were found to be private, which made it difficult for the researcher to confirm whether there is a connection between adolescent micro realty creation and hashtag usage. The analysis did not indicate or reveal this relationship. That being said, findings did demonstrate that hashtag usage increases engagement between SMIs and their followers.

## Discussion

Analyzing the nonverbal content of non-celebrity SMIs and their adolescent followers revealed the nature and impact of their PSR. This analysis identified 13 themes, which included *Criticism from Follower*, *Similar Posts by Followers*, *Concern from Follower*, *Direct Engagement with Follower*, *Follower is an Adolescent, Fan Page Created*, *Pictures Taken with Friends, Others, and Family*, *Vulnerability*, *Selfies*, *Sexualized Photos*, *Self-Promotion*, *Product Advertising*, and *Social Responsibility*. Collectively, these themes shed light on the ways adolescent SMUs are being influenced by Instagram, specifically in regards to body image perceptions and the creation of micro realities.

**Figure 5**

*Self-Image as a Micro Reality*

DISCUSSION

Social Comparison Theory - SCT

Self Image as a Micro Reality

Media Ecology Theory - MET
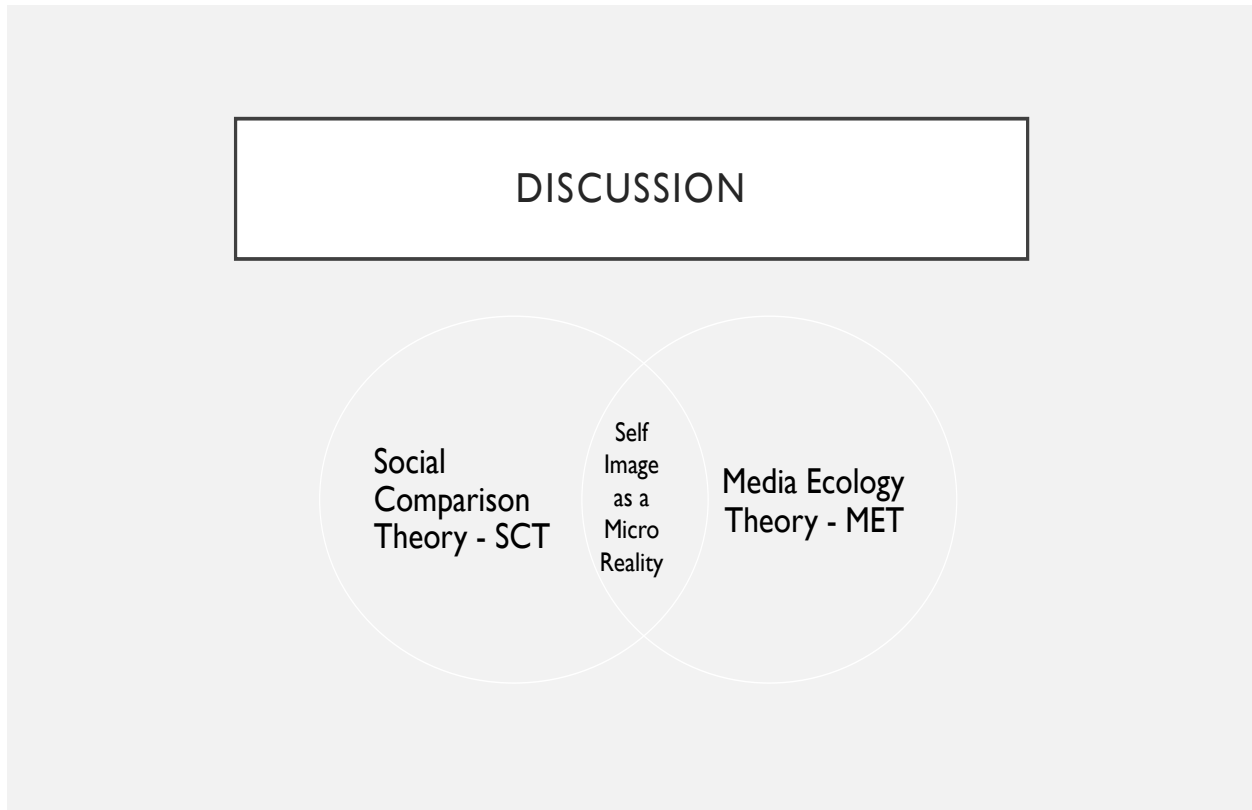
SMIs are creating a subculture and adolescent followers are reflecting that culture. This study demonstrated there is an existing ecosystem on Instagram, which is constantly changing. **The application of MET revealed the influence of SMI content on shaping the perceptions of social responsibility among followers. Findings also concluded SMI content leads to self-comparison, which was demonstrated in this study by post recreations and envious comments. A third finding from the analysis is the connection between sexualized photos and humor, although it was not concluded that this content is mimicked by adolescent followers.**

## Implications

The purpose of this analysis was to understand the PSR between SMIs and their adolescent followers using hashtags. The analysis shed light on the contribution namesake

hashtags make on PSR with SMIs . The findings revealed theoretical and practical implications for future scholars to consider PSR based on hastags.

**Theoretical**

This study applies the theoretical frameworks of MET and SCT to strategic media research. MET is a framework that explains the impact that technology and communication have on society, where media can define and shape culture. In this study, MET was applied as an analytical tool and demonstrated that Instagram's influence can impact "human perception, feeling, understanding, and value" for followers. Determining the influence of SMI content on adolescent followers established that digital communication through social media is continuing to influence culture, potentially leading to the creation of micro realities. Findings concluded that SMI posts contribute to followers' perceptions of social responsibility.

A foundation for why adolescent followers conduct self-evaluation was provided by the SCT framework. Referencing a finding from Fardouly et al. (2015), self-evaluations (i.e. comparisons) occur within female users when they are exposed to profile pictures and selfies on social media platforms. Among male users, they are triggered by content that shows full-body angles of muscle definition and strength (Tiggemann & Hargreaves, 2005). This study extended these findings in its investigation of follower engagement with the non-celebrity SMI content on Instagram. The content was found to evoke self-evaluation, including self-improvement (upward comparisons) and the desire to maintain one's appearance (downward comparison) (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). According to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), there are theoretical components of positive body image that can determine the nonverbal communication within the content. The research indicated that SMIs contribute to comparison behavior among followers.

This was confirmed by followers' recreation of selfies as well as mimicked Instagram grid styles. That being said, this analysis was unable to isolate this mimicking behavior to only adolescent followers due to missing follower information.

**Practical**

The findings of this study build upon opinion leadership research, contributing a new understanding of how the influence and popularity of SMIs can overshadow others' expertise in their chosen fields of interest. In their earlier exploration of this overshadowing, Khamis et al. (2016) remarked, "the absence of industry-endorsed qualifications did not impede these women's social media ascent; it probably made them more relatable and endearing to their fans" due to their persona of normality and ability to lead a group within their digital environment. This analysis used a similar methodology by analyzing content from SMIs to understand whether the usage of namesake hashtags contributes to micro reality creation among adolescents. Identifying opinion leadership in virtual communities can reveal factors among SMI content that contribute to self-evaluation. Recognizing the impact of opinion leaders in virtual communities, a study was conducted by Zhang and Dong (2009) to determine the use of the social media networks analysis method. Their findings were corroborated by this study, which confirmed that non-celebrity SMIs on Instagram are opinion leaders who influence an audience that includes adolescent followers.

## Delimitations and Limitations

This content analysis experienced five limitations. First, this study was not able to analyze private Instagram profiles of followers who had engaged with SMI content. This privacy limited the researcher's ability to further understand the follower's engagement and body image perceptions. Second, private Instagram profiles also limited the researcher's ability to identify

possible mimicking behavior among follower content. While the study's aim was to understand

the creation of micro realities based on multiple factors, including mimicking behavior and the

PSR between SMIs and adolescent followers, the privacy of several profiles may limited or

skewed the analysis by excluding relevant adolescent profiles from the data collection. Next, this

study did not use questionnaires for adolescent followers. While the use of questionnaires would

have enhanced the understanding of micro reality creation by adolescents SMUs, this study was

limited to publicly accessible Instagram content and therefore did not focus on gathering

firsthand accounts from a specific pool of participants. Questionnaires would have also enabled

the researcher to explore the Frost Multidimensional perfectionism scale further. Unfortunately,

without the use of live participants, this study could not further explore how the perfectionism

scale related to the creation of micro realities.

A fourth limitation of this analysis was its focus on adolescent followers. This study was

limited to this demographic because of time constraints associated with the IRB process. Lastly,

this study was limited by its 30-day time frame for data collection. This limitation presented

problems for the research because, while the data that was collected proved to be useful in

answering the research questions, several of the selected SMIs did not post daily on their

Instagram profiles. This limitation negatively impacted the researcher's understanding of how

their content influences adolescent followers.

Delimiting factors of this study included the five research questions, factors of influence,

theoretical framework, and the selected sample of adolescent followers. There were other

demographics the researcher considered to explore. Specifically, Generation Z is a formidable

generation that is associated with social media presence. Known for growing up in an age of

social media and technology, Generation Z uses the platforms of Instagram and TikTok with

ease to search for potential product purchases (Pew Research Center, 2023). Future research should explore this demographic further, in addition to investigating customer purchase intentions and influencer credibility. These insights would provide a deeper understanding about how brands establish relationships with SMIs as marketing mediums.

<p align="center">**Future Research Recommendations**</p>

Future research should explore social media literacy, the follower phenomenon of envy, and the role of nonverbal communication in shaping body image perceptions. Social media literacy is the ability of SMUs to use virtual communication platforms responsibly, which can include being able to evaluate the content of social media advertising as well as recognize the use of advertisements to influence customer purchasing behaviors. Research by Tamplin et al. (2018) investigated the impact of repeated exposure to perfectionism content and how it leads to body dissatisfaction. They hypothesized that literacy from other media, such as mainstream commercials, would combat the negative exposure to social media content. The study focused on alcohol-related images. There were 187 female participants with a median age of 24 and 187 male participants with a median age of 22 (Tamplin et al., 2018). The participants viewed alcohol-related social media images that were gender-matched for the investigation. Key findings showed that both male and female participants experienced a negative impact when presented with perfect body images on social media. However, only the female participants experienced a moderate negative impact due to their level of commercial social media literacy (Tamplin et al., 2018). Therefore, literacy was proven to aid in the prevention of body dissatisfaction caused by viewing perfect SMI images. Future research should address the positive impact of social media literacy, which may prove to decrease the negative impact of other areas of concern, such as purchase behavior and envy.

**Envy**

Future research should consider exploring the phenomenon of envy among followers of SMIs on Instagram and other social media platforms. A study conducted by Chae (2017) analyzed the phenomenon of envy among 1,064 female SMUs, which they held towards the SMIs they followed. The study analyzed the exposure to SMI content, follower personalities, and frequency of self-evaluation (i.e. comparison). Findings demonstrated that young female SMUs, with low self-esteem and high self-consciousness, are more prone to feelings of envy toward the SMIs they follow. While this study explored envious comments in the context of self-evaluations, future research has the opportunity to explore this phenomenon in depth. For example, research could explore the adverse effects of young female SMUs conducting self-evaluations with a microcelebrity.

**Nonverbal Communication**

Future research should explore whether nonverbal communication from SMI content contributes to adolescents' views on body image. Communication is the means of relaying information from sender to receiver through signals research. Wilson (1979) determined that communication is when the sender's performance influences the receiver's behavior. Intentional nonverbal communication fosters the PSR for SMIs and their adolescent followers (Burgoon et al., 1996). Nonverbal communication has also been demonstrated to use cues, which strengthen the PSR between SMIs and adolescent followers through the nonverbal content of idealized physical appearance. This research studied the receiver's behavior (i.e. the adolescent followers) based on the nonverbal communication sent from the sender (i.e. the SMIs). Future research could explore how nonverbal cues are connected to the association of SMI credibility with their attractiveness. This would be an application of the "what is good is beautiful" hypothesis, which

was developed by Dion et al. (1972). The physical attractiveness of the SMI could determine the

eagerness of adolescent followers to mimic behavior within the image. The physical

attractiveness of SMIs could also contribute to body image perceptions among adolescents

SMUs.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to understand the PSR between SMIs and their adolescent

followers based on factors such as hashtag usage and the creation of micro realities. Data was

collected from 10 SMI profiles on Instagram and included hashtag usage, still images, and

engagement metrics (i.e. comments). Framed by SCT and MET, a thematic content analysis was

conducted, using the data analysis software tools of Delve and Hype Auditor. This process

revealed 13 themes, which demonstrate a positive correlation between hashtag usage, increased

follower engagement, and the creation of micro realities based on the recreation of posts by

adolescents.  These findings benefit future research, because they offer a new understanding

about the use of namesake hastags.

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