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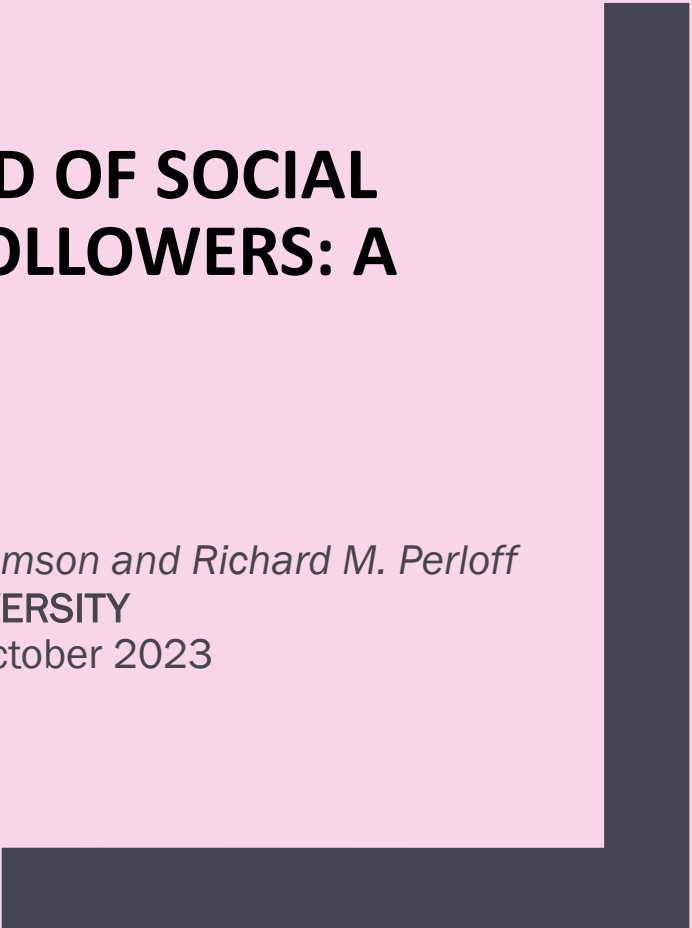
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PROBING THE COMMUNICATION WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR AVID FOLLOWERS: A TWO-PAPER PANEL

By Filippa Frogner, Aurora Harris, Julia Lastic, Sophia Farrar, Stephanie Williamson and Richard M. Perloff

SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION, CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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OUR GOAL



To understand more about the nature of social influencers' appeals, and the ways that young women derive meaning from interacting with people they will likely never meet in face-to-face life.



Why? More than half of Gen Z women who are active on social media follow social media influencers or content creators, and half of these confess that they have bought a product after reading an influencer's post.



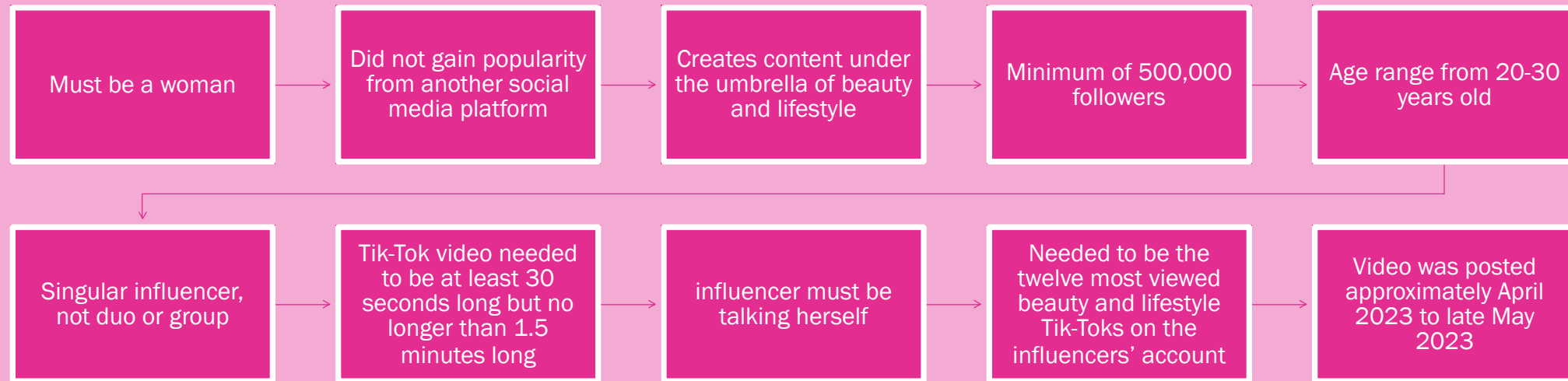
How? We try to examine, through a broad qualitative analysis, the issues that animate followers and how they personally react to controversies involving influencers who occupy a large role in their lives.

STUDY ONE OVERVIEW: INSIDE THE INFLUENCER'S WORLD

- **We try to answer:**
 - 1) Exactly what are the attributes of social media influencers that are apt to be perceived as compelling to followers?
 - 2) Specifically, what are the ways that influencers try to strike up a parasocial bond with followers?
- **How?** Through a detailed content analysis, documenting the particular attributes that leading beauty and lifestyle social media influencers emphasize.

STUDY ONE METHODOLOGY

The research team developed a clear criteria to determine which influencers we would select, and which videos would be content analyzed. **The list of criteria included:**



Coder reliability: 92 percent

FINAL LIST OF INFLUENCERS ANALYZED

■ Based on those who met our criteria:

1) Meredith Duxbury (18.1M followers)

2) Mikayla Nogueira (14.7M followers)

3) Miyaeva Renae (6.8M followers)

4) Alix Earle (5.2M followers)

5) Haley Baylee (4.3M followers)

6) Monet Mcmichael (3.4M followers)

7) Kensnation (1.6M followers)

8) Matilda Djerf (1.4M followers)

9) Darcy McQueeny (1.4M followers)

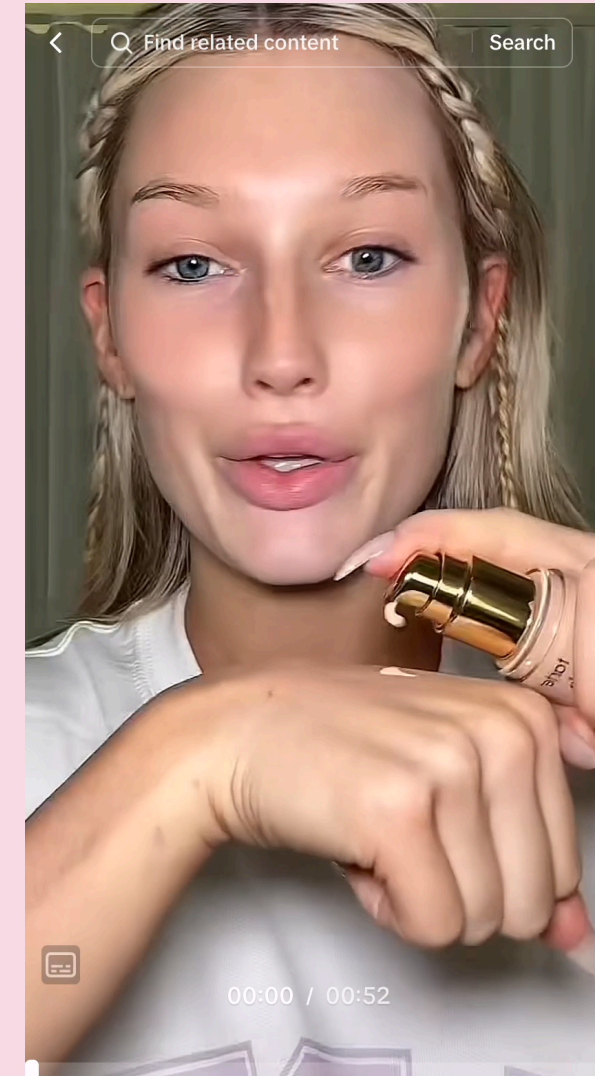
10) Becca Moore (1.2M followers)

1. Talks to the followers directly using “You guys”.	X
2. Uses the word “you” to refer to followers.	X
3. Classifies products with high praise.	X
4. Expresses a positive self-feeling once done applying makeup or getting dressed.	
5. Displays confidence.	X
6. Comes off as authentic (Comes off as genuine and is not simply playing a role).	X
7. Comes off as relatable ((The person describes a part of their life/shares emotions or feelings/shares an experience that the viewer can appreciate and see themselves or other girls doing at some point in their life or right now).	X
8. Comes off as exuberant or vivacious (high energy).	X
9. Acknowledges physical personal flaws.	X
10. Uses swear words.	
11. Promotes own Instagram/other social media.	
12. Uses explicit or implicit recommendation of products.	X
13. Uses humor deliberately through words/language.	X

14. Uses dancing/movement.	
15. Talks while applying products/getting dressed/doing her hair.	X
16. Sings or has a song on while applying makeup/getting dressed.	
17. Tells a story.	
18. Makes a story about something she has done that is very special or engaging or positively unique.	
19. Describes high end/desirable places she’s going to.	
20. Talks about family/friends/significant other/pet (Can mention other people or use the word “we”).	
21. Uses words to dramatize.	
22. Boyfriend/male figures visible in the video.	
23. Pet/animal visible in the video	
24. Visits/shows other places she’s going to in the video like for example beach clubs, restaurants etc.	
25. Deals in a functional/happy psychological way with tough life events/baggage.	
26. Shows her whole outfit.	
27. Displays herself in a clearly affluent or well-to-do environment.	

Note: Questions 18-21 only apply if a story was told.

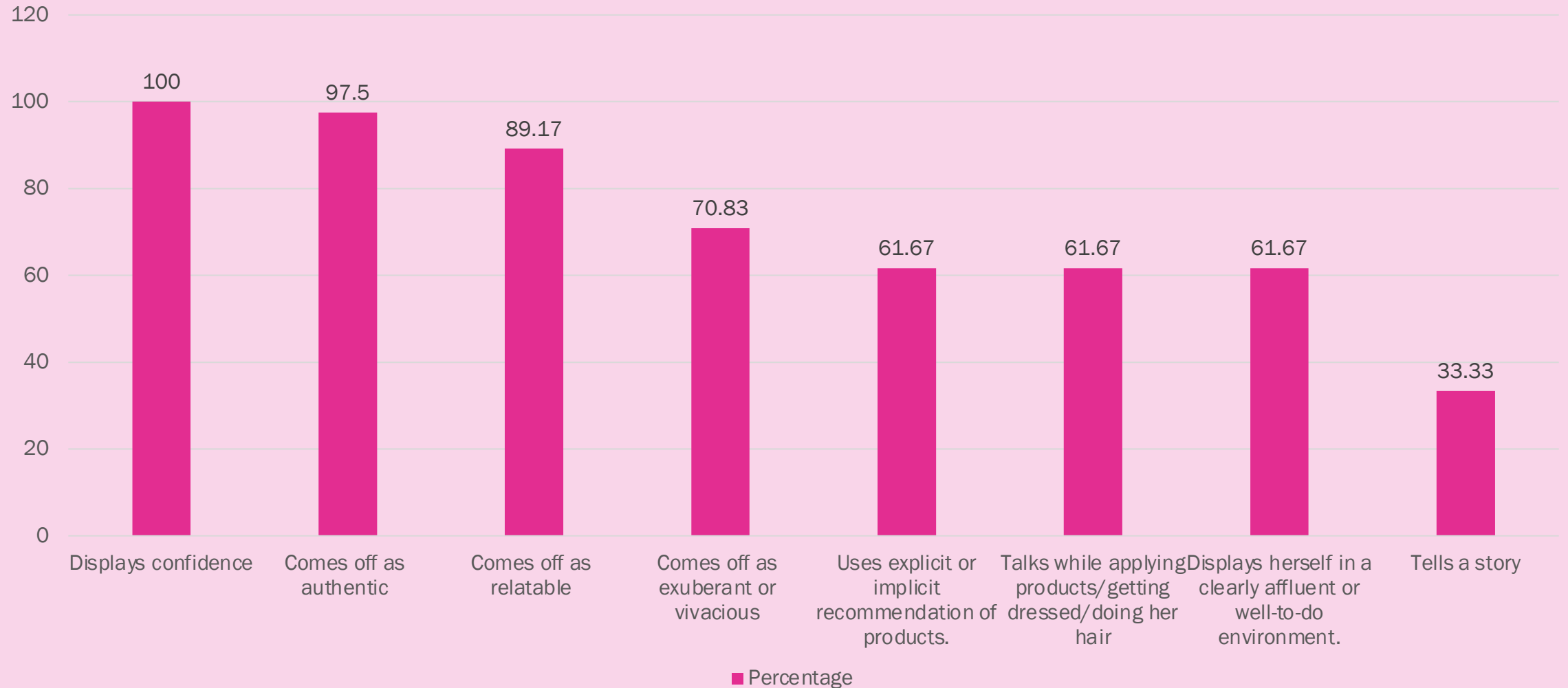
Video example @meredithduxbury: “GRWM Dinner in Turks” - Posted 4/26 - 21.7 M views



<https://www.tiktok.com/@meredithduxbury/video/7226379755262594346?q=GRWM%20Dinner%20in%20Turks&t=1696543083821>

STUDY ONE CODING RESULTS: MOST SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Table 1: Content analysis of social media TikTok influencers' communication appeals



STUDY ONE DISCUSSION

- Our content analysis suggested three specific strategies influencers employ to attract and engage followers:
 - 1) **Engagement Techniques:** Beyond traditional methods like directly addressing their followers. For instance, they often talk while applying products, getting dressed, or doing their hair.
 - 2) **Idealized Self-Presentation:** Influencers prioritize presenting an idealized image to their audience, focusing on displaying confidence, affluent environments and desirable places.
 - 3) **Storytelling:** The finding suggests that mega-influencers who master the art of storytelling can effectively connect with their audience and potentially influence their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

STUDY TWO OVERVIEW: FROM ADMIRATION TO TURMOIL

- The content analysis in Study 1 documented some of the appeals that influencers use that are likely seen as credible and compelling to followers. **But how do followers react?**
- Because followers seem to form a strong para-social relationship with influencers, it is interesting to understand the online behavior of followers. What remarks and views do they share in comments and videos? By looking at followers' reactions to controversies involving influencers --an issue that has not been examined in research before – we gain insight into gratifications that drive young women to the world of social media influencers.

STUDY TWO METHODOLOGY



To research what happens when the connection and identification with influencers becomes this strong, a broad qualitative study was conducted.



Specifically, we looked at how young girls personally react when influencers are involved in a controversy that is getting public attention on TikTok.



The methodology involved putting the usernames of ten influencers followed by the keyword's "scandal" or "controversy" into the TikTok search bar. This search directed the researchers to an "explore page" where more prominent influencers, frequently those entangled in multiple and larger-scale scandals, had a higher number of videos created about them.



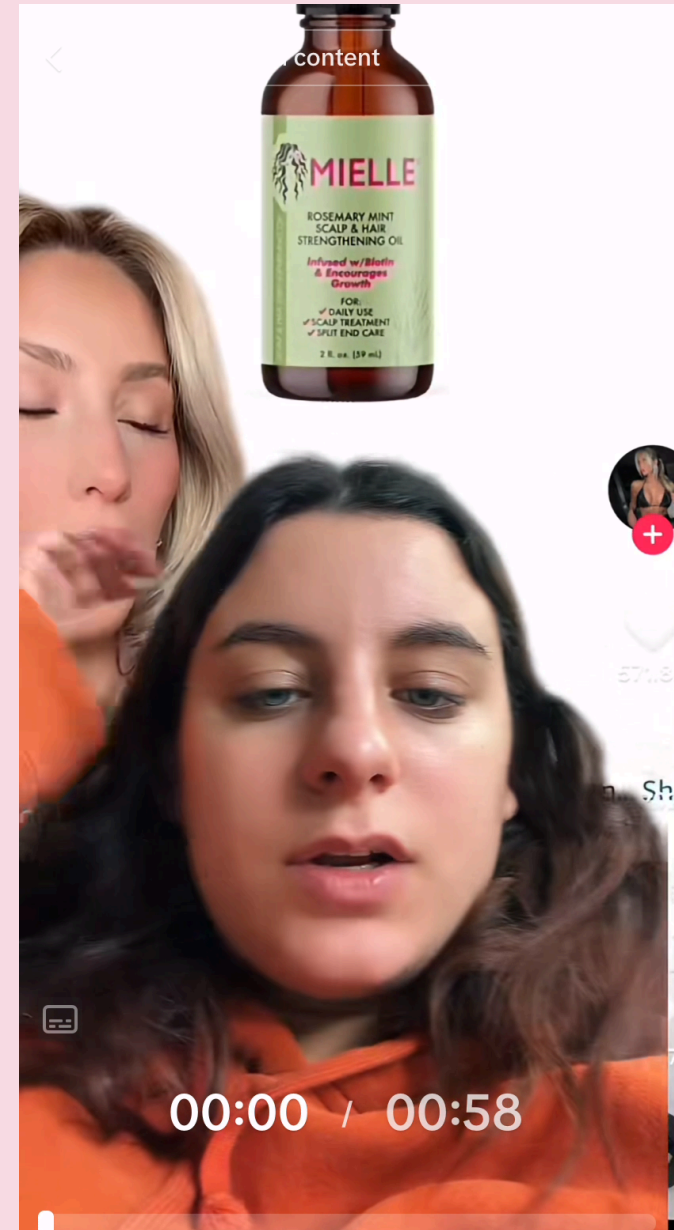
The researchers methodically selected the most significant scandal associated with each influencer and analyzed the most viewed videos that both criticized and supported them.

STUDY TWO “SCANDALS”

1. **@kensnation:** Left the exclusive music festival Coachella early.
2. **@darcymcqueeney:** The deep voice and no facial expressions in her videos.
3. **@miyaevarenae:** Amount of steps and products in her skin care routine.
4. **@haleybybayle:** “Eyebrow Gate”, where she faked shaving off her eyebrow.
5. **@meredithduxbury:** Made a negative review video of a foundation.
6. **@mikaylanogueira:** Had fake eyelashes when showing the end result in a paid mascara review.
7. **@alixearle:** Promoted a Black-owned hair oil.
8. **@matildadjerf:** Matilda’s and her brand’s values, impact and quality.
9. **@beccamoore:** Ben Shapiro called Becca a narcissist.
10. **@monetmichael:** Controversy involved boyfriend.

STUDY TWO EXAMPLE

- Summary of followers' positive and negative reactions provided in an Appendix.
- **Example:** Alix Earle controversy
Promoted a Black Owned hair oil (Mielle Hair Oil)



<https://www.tiktok.com/@notannareportsnews/video/7187853055822417194?r=1&t=8gGh58dQRov>

STUDY TWO RESULTS

- In the context of controversy, we speculate that followers' responses can be influenced by these psychological processes:

1) Positive Responses:

- a) *Justification and Defense*: Some followers may engage in positive comments or videos to justify and defend the influencer's actions.
- b) *Denial and Rationalization*: Followers might deny or rationalize the controversy to maintain their positive image of the influencer.

2) Negative Responses:

- a) *Dissonance Reduction*: Some followers may experience cognitive dissonance when faced with a controversy involving the influencer they admire.
- b) *Social Pressure and Moral Outrage*: When a controversy surfaces, followers may feel pressure from their social circles to take a stance.

STUDY TWO DISCUSSION

- What makes the followers feel the need to either support or criticize the influencers?
- **Parasocial relationships:** Individuals form connections with media figures, such as influencers, despite the lack of real-life interaction. These relationships are characterized by a sense of intimacy and familiarity, leading followers to perceive influencers as friends or companions that they either want to justify or defend, or hold accountable.
- **Cognitive dissonance:** Individuals experience psychological discomfort when they hold conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. To alleviate this discomfort, they seek to restore consistency, often by defending or justifying their existing beliefs or actions.

CONCLUSION

- **This study suggests** that in 2023, social media influencers are playing a psychologically significant role in the lives of young adult women.
- **One of the significant findings** concerns the high ratings of authenticity and relatability, indicating these may be key reasons why influencers attract so many followers and engagements.
- **Whatever the gratifications** these highly involved followers seek – our qualitative exploration of selected followers' reactions to controversies involving their favorite influencers suggests they become psychologically immersed in influencers' lives.
- **Future research** should try to sort out when these effects are psychologically adaptive and when they are not emotionally healthy for the young women who seem to pour their hearts and souls into these savvy, but relatable, young adult role models.