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# Influencer Celebrification: How Social Media Influencers Acquire Celebrity Capital

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The digital age has given rise to new pathways for everyday individuals to accrue media attention, which can be translated into promotional endeavors. Such sociocultural currency is referred to as celebrity capital, which can be exchanged within the field of advertising through celebrity endorsements. Traditional celebrities acquire celebrity capital through institutional intermediaries such as sport, television, music, and movies. Research is needed to understand the unique process by which social media influencers (SMIs) acquire celebrity capital. We draw on interviews with 40 global advertising industry practitioners and influencers to better understand how influencers acquire celebrity capital in a saturated media landscape. Extending previous work on celebrity capital and influencer advertising, this study conceptualizes a process which we term *influencer celebrification*. Influencer celebrification is the process by which SMIs acquire celebrity capital within an interconnected advertising ecosystem. Empirical findings identify three types of practices in the influencer celebrification process: generative practices; collaborative practices; and evaluative practices. This study identifies the role of advertising practitioners in the influencer celebrification process and offers implications for advertising theory and practice.

Charli D'Amelio is the face of a new generation of Internet fame. At the age of 15, she has amassed more than 40 million followers on TikTok and nearly 12 million followers on Instagram. Her mediagenic favor was later legitimized through a signed contract with United Talent Agency, a leading role in a 2020 Super Bowl commercial with Sabra hummus, a branded cold brew drink ("The Charli") sold exclusively at Dunkin', and a reality television series starring her family (Saad 2020). D'Amelio is a commodifiable juggernaut: commercially famous for being Internet famous. This type of social media stardom is indicative of influencer culture. The digital age has given rise to new pathways for everyday individuals to accrue media attention, which can then be translated into promotional endeavors, namely in the domain of celebrity endorsements.

Such sociocultural currency is referred to as celebrity capital (Driessens 2013; Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). Celebrity capital is exchanged within the field (Bourdieu 1986) of celebrity endorsement; it is "understood as accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations" (Driessens 2013, p. 17). For example, well-known celebrities exchange celebrity capital for endorsement deals (i.e., economic capital) and access to exclusive events (i.e., social capital; Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). Previous work examines the impact of celebrity endorsements on firm performance (Derdenger, Li, and Srinivasan 2018; Elberse and Verleun 2012), arguing that those celebrities who have considerable media visibility possess higher degrees of celebrity capital (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019).

Research on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements (Thomas and Fowler 2016) focuses primarily on celebrities who have garnered celebrity capital through institutional intermediaries such as sports, television, music, and movies (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). In contrast, social media influencers (SMIs) gain popularity without such institutional intermediaries (Gräve 2017); they are famous online for becoming famous online (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

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This makes influencers distinct from traditional celebrities in the celebrity capital life cycle, a framework developed by Carrillat and Ilicic (2019) to capture "the fluctuation of endorsers' effectiveness over their careers." Traditional celebrity fame is tethered to personal achievements (e.g., sports, entertainment) independent of endorsement activities, whereas influencer fame is interwoven with endorsement activities (e.g., haul videos, product reviews; Harnish and Bridges 2016). But how do SMIs acquire celebrity capital in the first place, and what role do advertising industry practitioners play in the process?

Previous research outlines what influencer advertising is (Campbell and Farrell 2020), how influencers engage in advertising disclosure practices (Evans, Hoy, and Childers 2018), and the impact of influencer authenticity in promotional content (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). We extend this stream of research by investigating the inner workings of influencer advertising at the acquisition stage of the celebrity capital life cycle. Indeed, Carrillat and Ilicic (2019) call on advertising scholars "to investigate the effectiveness of influencers as endorsers, identify potential stars to leverage, and examine the role of agents in managing and developing celebrity capital" (p. 64). Our study sits squarely in this domain seeking to better understand the process by which influencers acquire celebrity capital. To that end, we ask: What practices guide the acquisition of celebrity capital among SMIs, and what role do advertising practitioners play in these practices? More broadly, how has an increasingly interconnected media landscape shaped this process? To explore such questions, we turn to the conceptual lens of celebrification, which captures the production and reproduction of media visibility (Driessens 2013).

Extending previous work on celebrity capital and influencer advertising, our analysis articulates the process by which influencers acquire celebrity capital within an interconnected social media advertising ecosystem, which we term *influencer celebrification*. Our analysis offers a conceptual framework of influencer celebrification and the roles of advertising practitioners in this process. Empirical findings identify three types of practices in the influencer celebrification process: generative practices (i.e., attention labor and platform agnosticism); collaborative practices (i.e., audience portability and creative ideation); and evaluative practices (i.e., community-centric key performance indicators [KPIs] and content traversal). These are conceived of as iterative practices within the influencer celebrification process. Within the influencer celebrification process, advertising practitioners act as talent scouts, creative concierges, and impact analysts, respectively. Influencer celebrification represents a synergistic process of acquiring celebrity capital in which the overall effect across all practices is greater than the sum of individual effects of any of them; thus, findings highlight content- and community-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification.

This article is structured as follows. First, we begin with a review of relevant literature, theoretically grounding the study at the intersection of celebrity capital and influencer advertising and outlining the boundaries of celebrification in the digital age. Next, we outline our methodological approach, which includes 40 in-depth interviews with influencer advertising industry practitioners. Then, we present our conceptual model, as illustrated through the findings. Finally, we highlight implications for theory and practice, including opportunities for future research and policy considerations.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Influencer Advertising and the Celebrity Capital Life Cycle*

In the advertising industry, celebrities are both commodities and laborers—both messages and messengers. They appear in advertising campaigns to promote brand awareness by harnessing the power of their media visibility, name recognition, and personalities (Kelting and Rice 2013; Turner 2013). Early celebrities theorists argue that celebrities are not born; they are socially produced in dialectical relation with the audience (Dyer 1986; Gamson 1994; Marshall 2014). Among an audience, a celebrity can be understood as a "person who is known for his or her well-knownness" (Boorstin 1961, p. 57). Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) push this definition further by arguing it should be understood as an "economic condition rather than a singular 'stellar' individual"; that is, celebrity is "both product and productive" (p. 196). The productive value of a celebrity lies in the ability to attract widespread attention, thus, converting well-knownness into a type of sociocultural currency (Giles 2000) or celebrity capital. Driessens (2013) defines celebrity capital as "accumulated media visibility through recurring media representations or broadly as recognizability," which can be transferred across social fields (p. 18). The Bourdieu-derived concept of celebrity capital grounds our understanding of how celebrity can be converted into other forms of capital and resources (Stewart 2020). Thus, celebrity is a process

of cultural production, not merely an individual famous person (Hackley and Hackley 2015).

The concept of celebrity capital is a productive redefinition of celebrity to capture its conversion into an economic resource, most notably through celebrity endorsements (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Carrillat and Ilicic 2019; Erdogan 1999; Knoll and Matthes 2017; Stewart 2020). McCracken (1989) pioneered the definition of celebrity endorsers as "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (p. 310). Prior works establish the conceptual and functional boundaries of the modern celebrity endorser (i.e., what it is and what it is not); however, such definitions tend to privilege the celebrity endorser as an individual who has already attained widespread "public recognition" rather than examining how this recognition comes to exist or how celebrity capital is acquired.

The acquisition of celebrity capital is an important stage in the four-stage "celebrity capital life cycle": acquisition, consolidation, abrupt downfall/slow decline, and redemption/resurgence. As the authors note, most existing research lies in the domain of consolidation, the stage at which "the celebrity is at the pinnacle of fame and is widely recognizable due to widespread, recurrent media visibility" (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019, p. 64). Research on the consolidation stage of celebrity capital is useful in understanding celebrity endorsers who have attained high social and economic capital and media visibility; yet no existing research to date examines the acquisition of celebrity capital—a stage of particular importance for examining influencers (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019).

The acquisition stage of the celebrity capital life cycle "refers to a celebrity's limited yet growing media visibility and recognizability" (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019, p. 64). Influencers mirror traditional celebrities in that they have a "unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interest of target audiences" (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017, p. 1). However, traditional celebrity is bound by a highly controlled and curated media landscapes: television, cinema, print, and other media channels (DeCordova 2007; Dyer 1986; Rojek 2001). Social media ushered in a new era of celebrity in which everyday people could bypass the "traditional brokers of celebrity attention" (Marwick 2015, p. 139), giving rise to influencers.

Influencers work to "generate a form of 'celebrity' capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic 'personal brand' via social networks" (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016, p. 194). Carrillat and Ilicic (2019) call on advertising scholars "to investigate the effectiveness of influencers as endorsers, identify potential stars to leverage, and examine the role of agents in managing and developing celebrity capital" (p. 64). Our study fills this gap by examining how influencers acquire celebrity capital and by investigating the role of advertising practitioners in the process.

## Celebrification in the Digital Age

To theoretically guide our study, we employ the concept of celebrification, or the production and reproduction of celebrity (Rojek 2001; Gamson 1994; Couldry 2003; Turner 2013; Driessens 2013). In celebrity and media studies, Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) draw upon the "celebrification process" defined by Rojek (2001) to suggest "celebrification encompasses the mediated interplays and negotiations between celebrities/their management and various media platforms, media institutions and fans/followers" (p. 251). Celebrity capital can be gained and lost (e.g., "de-celebrification"; Mortensen and Kristensen 2020). As such, celebrification is a process, not a status (Jerslev 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016).

The traditional celebrification process was controlled by gatekeepers of media visibility, such as red carpets, paparazzi, and brands (e.g., advertising endorsement deals). Social media shifted these power dynamics. The new media landscape provides ample opportunities for attention, thus empowering everyday people to acquire celebrity capital. This empowerment results in a fiercely competitive attention economy as ordinary people seek to gain celebrity capital or be celebrified (Driessens 2013). Access, constructions of authenticity, and a consumable persona are characteristics of celebrification in the digital age as "we see the process of celebrification trickling down" (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Marwick and Boyd 2011, p. 141). Becoming "Internet famous" is not just a means to an end; for many, it is the end goal itself.

Fame, and by proxy celebrity capital, can be fleeting or even unwanted. For example, Chin (2021) conceptualizes involuntary celebrification as public faming, in which ordinary people become short-lived memes. But meme personalities are quite different from influencers as they fail to acquire meaningful celebrity capital to exchange as a currency for commercial means (e.g., endorsements). Celebrity is no longer a binary (e.g., one is or is not a celebrity); it is a continuum (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Much of the research to date focuses on how celebrification unfolds on a single platform, such as becoming

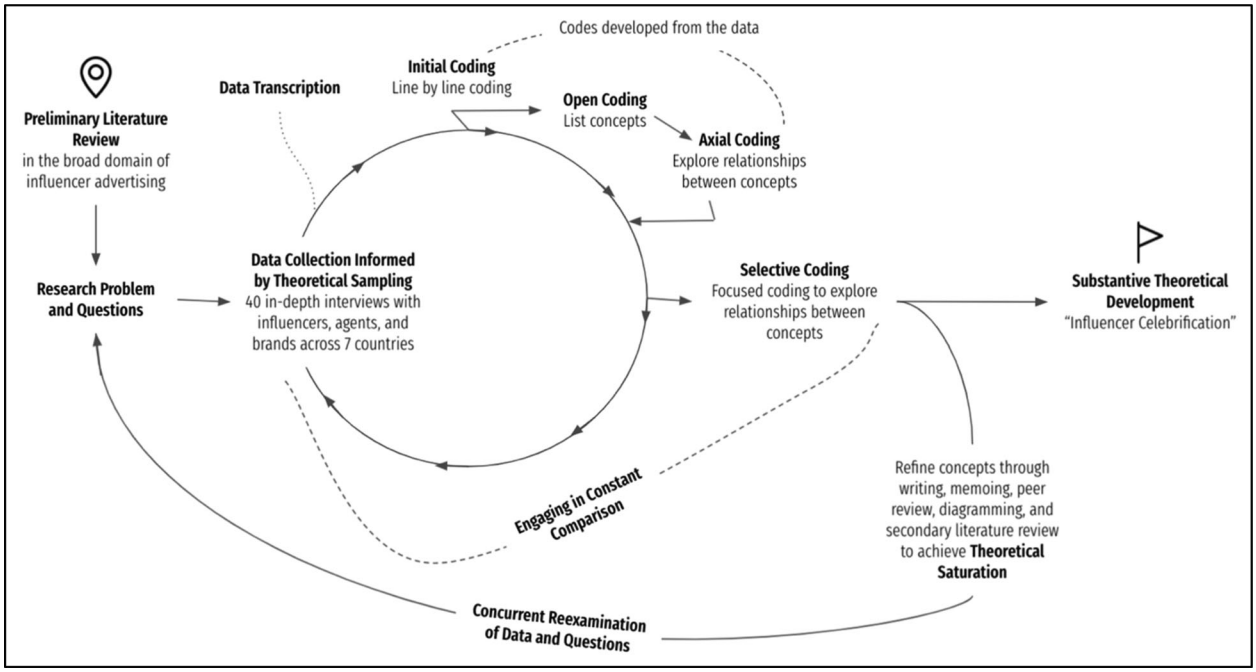


**Figure 1.** Grounded theory methodological approach.

"Instagram famous" (Marwick 2015), "YouTube famous" (Jerslev 2016), or "Twitter famous" (Olausson 2018); however, the digital pathways for celebrification are increasingly diverse and overlapping. Platforms themselves have emerged (e.g., TikTok), evolved (e.g., Facebook), and been eradicated (e.g., Vine); they have expanded from text-only blogs to more ephemeral, visual, and on-demand content production spaces. Influencers and advertising practitioners must navigate this complex digital landscape where social media platforms are both abundant and precarious and Internet fame is seemingly a few clicks away. People use social media to transform from microcelebrities to influencers or "highly branded social media stars" (Abidin 2018, p. 71). To that end, our study seeks to examine the process by which influencers acquire celebrity capital, which acts as a key currency being exchanged in the influencer advertising industry.

## Methodology

This study adopts a grounded theory approach to develop an extensive understanding of a given field of practice (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser 1992; Parker, Ang, and Koslow 2018). Consistent with prior advertising research (Goulding 2017), we draw upon in-depth interviews with influencers, the companies that pay them, and the intermediaries that broker the relationships. This constructivist grounded theory approach (Goulding 2017) mandates an interpretive (rather than objective) reflection of reality through theoretical analysis (Charmaz 2005). Through this iterative process of moving from an inductive analysis of our data to a deductive analysis of the extant literature, a conceptual framework of influencer celebrification emerged. Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the grounded theory methodology employed in the study.

### Data Collection

We conducted 40 in-depth interviews across seven cities: Cincinnati, London, Los Angeles, Paris, San Francisco, Toronto, and New York (see Table 1 for participant information). We interviewed five high-profile influencers; seven agents from three prominent talent agencies; five executives from three multinational brands; 17 practitioners from six global public relations and digital analytics agencies; and six other experts in the influencer industry (e.g., reporters). Given the exploratory nature of the research, our initial goal was to broadly understand influencer advertising strategies and practices. The sample was selected to provide diverse expert perspectives on this topic. However, as is often the case with qualitative research, research questions can emerge from the "empirical phenomena" (either specific contexts or types of behaviors; Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012, p. 17; Corbin and Strauss 1990). Thus, the research questions crystallized through iterative data collection and analysis, where interviewing provided a vehicle for theoretical sampling.

**Table 1.** In-depth interview participant information by industry category.

**Influencers ($N = 5$)**

| Location | Name | Influencer Name | Online Engagement (Number of Followers) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Facebook | Instagram | YouTube | Twitter | Pinterest | TikTok |
| Los Angeles | Blair Fowler | Juicy 007 | 252,000 | 398,000 | 1.7M | 515,400 | 21,300 | n/a |
| | Chriselle Lim | Chriselle | 751,000 | 1.3M | 748,000 | 43,700 | 36,800 | 2.4M |
| | Michelle Phan | Michelle Phan | 3.1M | 2M | 8.85M | 860,200 | 110,200 | 5.4M |
| | Keith* | | | | | | | |
| New York | Jessie* | A Studio* | 22,500 | 335,000 | n/a | 22,200 | 9,600 | n/a |

**Talent Agents ($N = 7$)**

| Location | Name/Title | Company* | Company Details |
|---|---|---|---|
| Los Angeles | Jacob,* CEO | United Talent Agency | A talent agency representing artists and other professionals in the entertainment industry; based in Beverly Hills, California; 900 employees, 300 of which are agents |
| | Chad,* head of corporate communications | | |
| | Graham,* digital agent | | |
| | Rachel,* chief strategy officer | Digital Brand Architects | An industry leader in the influencer management and marketing landscape, representing social media–oriented personalities, creators, and publishers; currently represent more than 150 of the most prominent social media influencers whom, in aggregate, have a reach of more than 200 million followers. |
| | Kristen,* chief strategy officer | | |
| New York | Kimberly,* cofounder and chief creative officer | | |
| | Yolanda,* founder and CEO | Style Coalition | The leading Influencer network in fashion, luxury, and cosmetics worldwide; company has built a network of the industry's top influencers while managing and producing campaigns for the world's most renowned brands. |

**Clients/Brands ($N = 5$)**

| Location | Name/title | Company* | Company details |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cincinnati, Ohio | Patrick,* director of corporate communications | Procter & Gamble | An American multinational consumer goods corporation |
| | Brian,* associate director of communications | | |
| London, England | Nathan,* senior vice president, corporate affairs | McDonald's | An American fast-food company |
| Paris, France | Mike,* vice president, analyst relations | LeDuque* | A European multinational company |
| | Chet,* chief marketing officer | | |

**Public Relations and Digital Analytics Agencies ($N = 17$)**

| Location | Name/Title | Company | Company Details |
|---|---|---|---|
| Los Angeles | Thomas,* chief revenue officer | LASIA* | A cross-platform branded media and entertainment business in Los Angeles, Shanghai, and Beijing; provides a direct link between Hollywood and Asian markets for celebrities, fans, and businesses, including television and online video programming, social media content creation and management, live events, data analysis, celebrity commercial activities, and film marketing |
| New York | Catie,* managing director, worldwide communications | Burson-Marsteller | A multinational public relations and communications firm headquartered in New York City |
| | Landon,* director, analytics products | | |
| | Cherie,* director, strategic planning | | |
| | Erik,* manager, digital analytics | | |
| | Deanna,* head of public relations | Brandwatch | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Alexander,* vice president of customer experience<br>Douglas,* director of marketing programs<br>Brenda,* account manager<br>Mark,* executive vice president<br>Stephanie,* project manager | | A digital consumer intelligence company with offices in Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Singapore, Paris, and Sydney |
| | Melanie,* director of strategic accounts and partnerships<br>Bradley,* vice president, global client services | Synthesio | A global social media monitoring and engagement company and a leader in social listening platforms |
| Paris, France | Armin,* chief marketing officer | Ici* | A European customer relationship management company that provides software for the management of public and institutional relations |
| San Francisco | Dixon,* executive vice president of sales<br>Zeb,* senior account executive | Sightseen* | An international social media analytics company specializing in influencer marketing programs |
| Toronto | Dillon,* chief technology officer | | |

**Industry Experts ($N = 6$)**

| Location | Name/Title | Company | Company Details |
|---|---|---|---|
| San Francisco | Judah,* head of marketing | Judgex* | A website and mobile app that uses social media analytics to rate its users according to online social influence |
| | Heather,* technology reporter | *The Financial Times* | An international daily newspaper printed in broadsheet and published digitally; focuses on business and economic current affairs |
| New York | Betsy,* executive director of creative services<br>Melinda,* executive director of marketing<br>Li-na,* senior marketing manager | *Vogue* ("Vogue Influencer Network") | An exclusive group of influential fashion and beauty enthusiasts hand-selected by *Vogue*; *Vogue* influencers are the first to know and share just-launched fashion and beauty collections, industry events, and exclusive product samples |
| | Cynthia,* founder and CEO | Step* | A personal styling e-commerce startup |

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity. All accompanying details are accurate.

We assembled a list of high-profile SMIs based on prominent rankings (e.g., Forbes Top Influencers), with followers ranging from 100,000 to more than 2 million. This sample was theoretically grounded given these influencers' experiences with acquiring celebrity capital and partnering with well-known consumer brands (e.g., Nike, Coca-Cola). We contacted influencers either by messaging them directly on social media or through their agents, resulting in a sample of five elite influencers (e.g., Michelle Phan, Blair Fowler). To capture the client side of influencer advertising and celebrification, we interviewed five executives from three premier consumer brands (e.g., Procter & Gamble, McDonald's). Simultaneously, we assembled a list of companies, talent agencies, public relation firms, and digital analytics agencies known for influencer advertising. The talent agencies were included in the sample if they had an influencer management department or equivalent and a history of representing influencers for a minimum of five years. For example, United Talent Agency developed a YouTube Management Division in 2006. We interviewed seven practitioners from three talent agencies (e.g., Digital Brand Architects, Style Coalition).

The public relations firms and digital analytics agencies included in the sample were selected based on the following criteria: an international presence, representation of high-profile brands, and experience with high-profile influencers. We interviewed 17 practitioners from six agencies (e.g., Brandwatch, Burson-Marsteller). Additional influencer industry experts were selected to provide a more holistic view of the influencer industry. A list of examples of influencers signed with these agencies and brands represented is available from the authors by request. We interviewed industry professionals across four companies, including mainstream media outlets (e.g., *The Financial Times*, *Vogue*) and novel digital startups.

Each semistructured interview (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) lasted between one and two hours and took place either in person or via Skype. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. We carefully compiled analytical field notes throughout the interviews to capture the interview setting and record observations, in line with Corbin and Strauss (1990). This process yielded more than 65 pages of handwritten notes and more than 275 pages of single-spaced pages of transcript text.

Interview guides were developed for each type of participant. Open-ended questions extended from the initial literature review and research problem. Our questions focused on the relationships influencers have with their audiences; how they maintain and grow those relationships; how they choose to work with certain brands over others; how brands and public relations firms see their roles in the industry; and how talent agencies discover and/or grow influencer talent. In line with the grounded theory approach, participants were probed (e.g., "Tell me more") to elicit richer insights and to fill narrative gaps (Hallberg 2006). This allowed for a more fluid conversation (Gibson and Brown 2009) and for clarification related to emergent theoretical concepts, as data analysis proceeded in parallel with data collection. Each participant signed a consent form and reviewed his or her interview transcript for accuracy. We did not receive any follow-up requests to edit transcripts. Participants were not compensated.

## Data Analysis

This qualitative study employs an iterative process of coding and recoding the data, in line with constant comparison in grounded theory (Creswell and Poth 2017). The first two authors analyzed the data following a process of initial, open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990). First, in initial coding, words, phrases, and large blocks of data were abstracted under conceptual headings. Next, we used open coding to identify similarities and differences by constantly comparing concepts with new data, which in turn led to new concepts. Then, we coded for relationships between emerging concepts, referred to as axial coding. Finally, core theoretical categories emerged via selective coding. Concepts initially identified continued to reappear in our data confirming their theoretical significance and the basis of our conceptual framework. Themes were constructed based on an identification of narrative repetitions, similarities, and differences (Bogdan and Taylor 1975). We examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized the data into distinct units of meaning (Parker, Ang, and Koslow 2018), which led to further conceptual refinement. Throughout the process, theoretical memos were compiled as written records of analysis. As we drafted early versions of the findings, we circled back to the original research questions, explored relevant literature, created illustrative diagrams, and solicited reviewer feedback. These activities contributed to theoretical saturation, guided by the data and grounded in concepts of celebrity capital, celebrification, and influencer advertising.

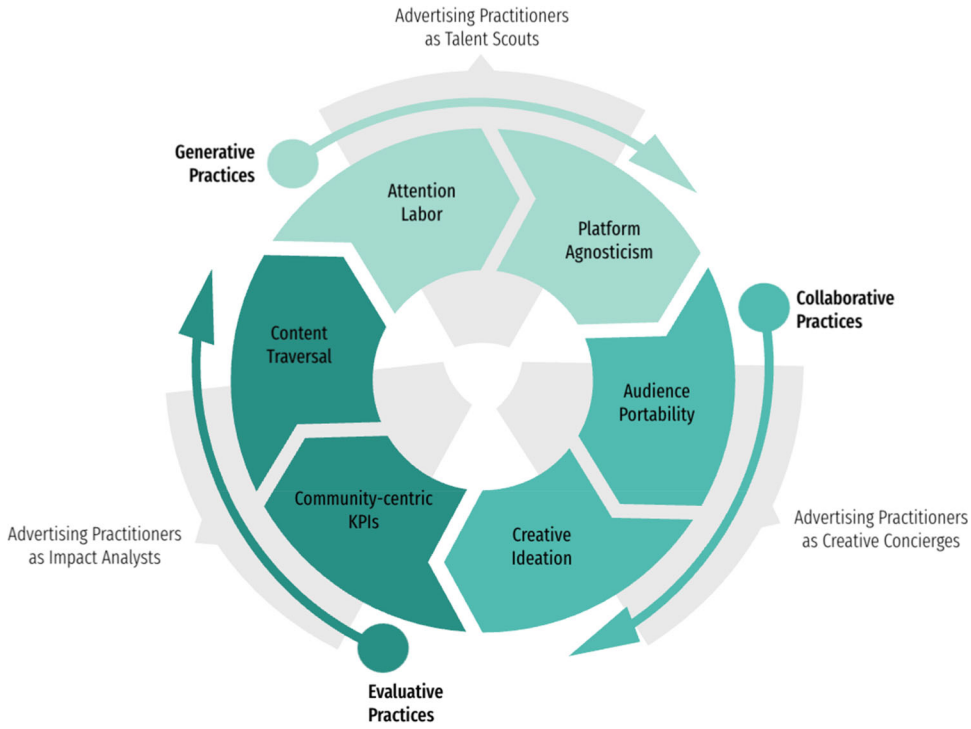


**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of the influencer celebrification process.

## Findings

Emergent from our findings is a process capturing how influencers acquire celebrity capital, which we term influencer celebrification. Influencer celebrification is defined as the process by which SMIs acquire celebrity capital within an interconnected social media advertising ecosystem. We identify three types of practices in the influencer celebrification process: generative practices, collaborative practices, and evaluative practices. These are conceived of as iterative practices within the influencer celebrification process. That is, influencer celebrification is not linear but rather represents overlapping and often concurrent practices by which influencers acquire celebrity capital. Our framework of influencer celebrification further highlights the role of advertising industry practitioners in propelling influencers to acquire celebrity capital. Collectively, the influencer celebrification process produces celebrity capital, which can be leveraged for commercial means through influencer advertising.

First, generative practices initiate an influencer's acquisition of celebrity capital. Influencers work tirelessly to build their following (i.e., attention labor) and develop niche content that can extend beyond a single platform (i.e., platform agnosticism). Here, advertising industry practitioners act as talent scouts in the influencer celebrification process, seeking the "next big thing" but recognizing that the acquisition of celebrity capital begins with the influencer.

Second, collaborative practices expand an influencer's acquisition of celebrity capital by deepening connections between influencers, fans, and advertising industry practitioners. Influencers enrich relationships with their fans across multiple platforms (i.e., audience portability) and collectively conceive of creative content with advertising industry practitioners and followers (i.e., creative ideation). Here, advertising industry practitioners act as creative concierges in the influencer celebrification process, leveraging unexpected opportunities for the influencer.

Third, evaluative practices legitimize an influencer's acquisition of celebrity capital by placing valuation on the worth and potential of an influencer to deliver meaningful promotional value for a brand. Influencers are appraised based on their ability to gain online community buy-in for a brand partner (i.e., community-centric KPIs) and evaluated by the reach of their content across porous social media borders (i.e., content traversal). Here, advertising industry practitioners act as impact analysts in the influencer celebrification process, assessing an influencer's relevance and potential for success.

Utilizing Figure 2 as an organizing visual framework, we describe how influencer celebrification unfolds, including iterative practices within the

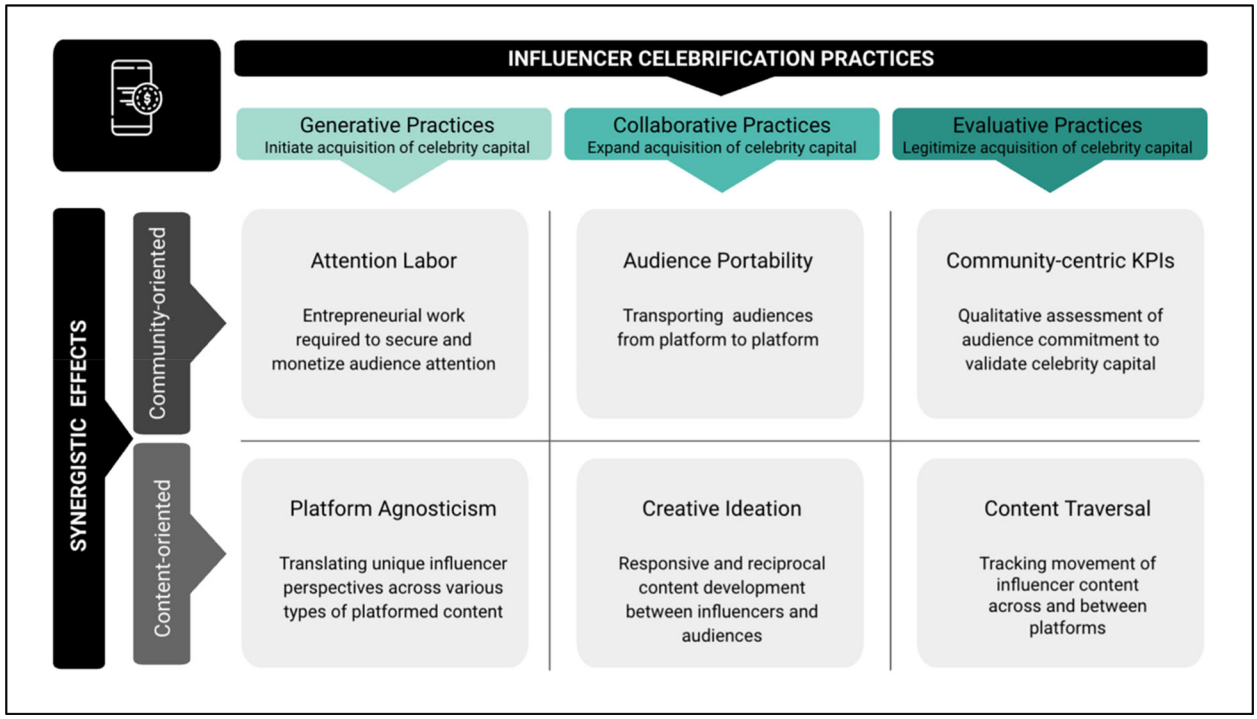


**Figure 3.** Definitional matrix of influencer celebrification practices and synergistic effects.

process and the role of advertising industry practitioners throughout the process. Influencer celebrification represents a synergistic process of acquiring celebrity capital in which the overall effect across all practices is greater than the sum of individual effects of any of them. In the iterative process of influencer celebrification, attention labor, audience portability, and community-oriented KPIs produce community-oriented synergistic effects, while platform agnosticism, creative ideation, and content traversal produce content-oriented synergistic effects. Figure 3 provides definitions for each concept emergent from the data, categorized within a matrix of influencer celebrification practices and synergistic effects. Here, we define and describe each practice within the influencer celebrification process, drawing on exemplary cases from the data.

## Generative Practices in the Influencer Celebrification Process

The influencer celebrification process begins with generative practices that initiate acquisition of celebrity capital. Findings reveal two generative influencer celebrification practices: attention labor and platform agnosticism. Advertising practitioners act as talent scouts, working not to "discover" influencer talent but rather to identify individuals who are becoming celebrified in their own right.

### Attention Labor

Influencers work tirelessly to attract the attention of viewers, build a loyal community, and thus acquire celebrity capital. Our data suggest this work constitutes attention labor, which we define as entrepreneurial work required to secure and monetize audience attention. Prior research suggests that "a critical approach to the attention economy must examine the way in which attention as (a) labor process, that is, as valorization activity, generates a surplus value that is then monetized and turned into profit" (Bueno 2016, p. 18). Attention labor conceptually captures the work involved as influencers compete for eyeballs in the attention economy (Nelson-Field 2020).

Attention labor is inherently tied to authenticity as a generative practice in influencer celebrification. Influencer Blair Fowler first earned a following on YouTube providing makeup tutorials and product reviews. As Fowler explains, the process is not always immediate. She says, "At the beginning I had two viewers. . . . Then it slowly just started. I think what happened was there was a really big want and need for these videos." Fowler, who often collaborates with her sister, suggests her attention labor is imbued with authenticity because of the slow growth toward earning audience trust:

> I remember the day I hit 100 subscribers and the day I hit 200 subscribers. It was very slow growing, but I

> think that that also helped. . . . I don't know if we would have been able to keep our authenticity the same way if there were just a few more viewers every day.

As Fowler indicates, the attention labor she invested in building a following acted as a tethering device for perceived authenticity. Her acquired celebrity capital became marked by authenticity because she earned her fame through hard work. Indeed, attention labor takes dedicated work. Many discount the amount of hours and level of effort that go into producing an influencer video, for example. As Fowler explains, she does it all on her own:

> Setting the lighting and camera takes me probably about 45 minutes. Getting camera-ready takes me two hours. . . . I've probably filmed about 45 minutes for a 10-minute video. Then importing it to the computer, editing it, adding music. . . . There's a lot that goes into it. If I was to put it all in one day, it would take me from the time I woke up till the time I went to sleep.

Influencers like Fowler demonstrate dedicated commitment to gaining attention in digital spaces: They write scripts, produce videos, take photographs, create copy, respond to fan comments, engage with fellow influencers, and more. As a generative practice in influencer celebrification, attention labor captures this work required to be an influencer and thus to acquire celebrity capital. Fowler's "do it yourself" approach to gaining attention further contributed to her perceived authenticity. As she acquired more celebrity capital, she was able to maintain this perceived authenticity, which is appealing to brands and agencies in executing influencer advertising campaigns (Childers, Lemon, and Hoy 2019). This reflects the entrepreneurial nature of attention labor and the potential to then monetize audience attention.

Attention labor characterizes the work needed to acquire celebrity capital; however, it is important to note, length of time is less of an indicator of success. Unlike Fowler's steady crawl to acquire celebrity capital, beauty influencer Michelle Phan's attention labor merges with a bit of viral luck:

> I really saw how YouTube was becoming the place to watch videos . . . it was very, very new at the time, and I didn't expect anyone to watch the video. . . . And within the first week the video had garnered over 40,000 views and hundreds of comments from people from all over, asking if I could do another makeup tutorial. And that was really the start of this journey.

For Phan, a key aspect of attention labor is being responsive to the few loyal followers she had at the beginning of her celebrity capital life cycle. The emotional investment in one's online community constitutes an important aspect of attention labor. It is not just about the content influencers produce; it is also about the emotional ties they build with their online followers. Thus, in acquiring celebrity capital, the technical aspects of influencer culture (e.g., producing content, filming) mesh with the emotional aspects (e.g., responding to fans, building bonds with followers). In this way, attention labor can be distinguished from other forms of influencer labor (e.g., fame labor, Mavroudis 2020; sexualized labor, Drenten et al. 2019; visibility labor, Abidin 2016). Attention labor describes the entrepreneurial nature of attracting a dedicated following with potential to valorize this work in ways that are monetizable; it is not about becoming famous as traditional celebrities might but rather about becoming attention-worthy and thus profit-worthy. For example, nano- or microinfluencers might not acquire fame akin to a traditional celebrity, but they may have immense celebrity capital among a unique niche group of consumers—their community. Thus, attention labor contributes to community-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification.

### *Platform Agnosticism*

Influencer celebrification requires the generative practice of platform agnosticism, defined as translating unique influencer perspectives across various types of platformed content. Yolanda, chief executive officer of Style Coalition, a leading influencer advertising network, discusses how the evolution of the social media advertising landscape necessitates platform agnosticism in the influencer celebrification process:

> Everyone started first with a blog, then Facebook, then Twitter, then Instagram, Pinterest. We have all these new platforms that have been added. But at the end of the day—a lot of the influencers that we work with now, they're really across all platforms.

Being categorized on a basis of social media platforms—such as "TikTok influencer" or "YouTube influencer"—limits an influencer's ability to acquire celebrity capital across platformed content. Our data suggest influencers become known primarily for the platformed content they create. Phan, one of the first commercially successful beauty influencers, first rose to prominence through YouTube and paved the way for future influencers (e.g., Bethany Mota, Zoella; Cunningham and Craig 2017). Phan uploaded her first makeup tutorial to YouTube in 2007. She

discusses how platform agnosticism was central to acquiring celebrity capital:

> In 2007, people weren't really sharing like they are today. . . . No one was really running a Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube account, although all those were still around back then. I understood the value of focusing on the content—content is king. Because for a platform to be popular—platforms come and go—content will always find a new home. So I decided to focus on developing really, really strong beauty life hacks, easy DIY videos, things that were very, very relatable to my followers.

Phan's experience as a pioneer in influencer advertising reflects knowledge of an ever-evolving media landscape. Being tethered to only one platform could mean a short-lived career for an influencer. Thus, as a generative practice in influencer celebrification, platform agnosticism centers the content rather than the social media channel itself. Michelle understands the importance of carving out a specific niche for herself through content creation, which could be translated and repackaged for various platforms. Acquiring celebrity capital in the digital age requires influencers to think more broadly, beyond a single platform, to curate their unique voices and perspectives. For Phan and others in our data, a key factor in influencer celebrification is maintaining consistency in topic or style of content, while being open to exploring new platforms as they emerge. As one participant states, "The scarce resource is content, quality content. There's so many channels and platforms" (Thomas, chief revenue officer, LASIA). Influencer celebrification relies on an acute ability to remain platform agnostic and a capability to adapt content quickly as platforms rise and fall. Untethering celebrity capital from a specific platformed content makes it more fluid to advertising efforts (e.g., celebrity endorsements) and other platforms. Thus, platform agnosticism contributes to content-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification.

### *Advertising Practitioners As Talent Scouts*

The role of advertising practitioners in generative influencer celebrification practices is that of a talent scout, but not in a traditional sense. Relative to traditional celebrities, influencers are not institutionally "discovered"; they build a following of their own accord. In his role as a digital agent, Graham finds most traditional celebrities seek their "big break." In contrast, SMIs "break themselves" by putting in the work to acquire celebrity capital across various platforms:

> Actors and writers are kind of in that stage where they want you to believe in them and maybe you get them their big break. We don't really do that for YouTube stars. They've got to already have proven themselves. For the last year, they've woken up and made a video every single week, and they've spent tons of time on Twitter and Facebook. . . . Nobody can break a YouTube star. They have to break themselves.

Graham categorically uses the term "YouTube star," which is platform specific, but he also acknowledges YouTube stardom is propelled by the attention labor influencers practice on other platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), thus reinforcing platform agnosticism. Influencer stardom lies primarily with the influencers themselves. SMIs are not churned out by a system of stardom; they earn celebrity capital through hard work and authentic connections across platforms. Celebrity capital can then be exchanged for promotional opportunities. Influencer Phan says her "big calling" came from Lancôme, a cosmetics company; but of note, Lancôme's interest in Phan emerged only after she had earned a substantial following. Phan says, "They were so impressed with my videos and how I did it all myself that they decided to bring me on as their first ever digital ambassador for Lancôme. That's how it all began." Phan's story of "how it all began" begins with a brand partnership—but in truth, the generative practices in influencer celebrification began long before the Lancôme partnership. Phan had to invest in building her own audience, her own views, and her own niche before a brand would take note. Thus, the role of the advertising professional in influencer celebrification is to seek influencers who have been self-celebrified.

Advertising practitioners might undermine the influencer celebrification process by inserting themselves too much, too early, as Betsy (director of creator services, *Vogue*) suggests:

> If somebody doesn't have a strong following on their own, just by virtue of the fact that they are someone in their peer group that people really look to for information, then they're really not of value to our advertisers. We certainly don't want to do anything to build up their following if it's just not warranted naturally.

Generative influencer celebrification practices allow influencers to acquire seemingly authentic celebrity capital, which positions them as viable brand partners. Advertising practitioners cannot bolster or break social media stars because such commercial interference in influencer stardom would fundamentally undermine their realness. An influencer's celebrity capital is most valuable without direct corporate intervention.

## Collaborative Practices in the Influencer Celebrification Process

The influencer celebrification process continues through collaborative practices which expand the acquisition of celebrity capital. Findings reveal two collaborative influencer celebrification practices: creative ideation and audience portability. Practitioners act as creative concierges, facilitating brand partnerships and commodifying influencers' celebrity capital across platforms.

### Audience Portability

Influencers, like traditional celebrities, are made famous through attention from fans. Without the fans and followers, influencers would not exist. A key collaborative practice in influencer celebrification is transporting audiences from platform to platform, which we term audience portability. Celebrity capital is acquired by transferring audiences across platforms (e.g., podcast, television, social media) and across unique brand partnerships (e.g., cobranded product lines). The relationship between the influencer and the audience drives audience portability.

Fans are willing to follow their favorite influencers into whatever ventures may arise, which contributes to the acquisition of celebrity capital. Jacob (chief executive officer, United Talent Agency) suggests the most effective influencers are able to transport audiences:

> They're good at creating content that is consistently engaging to their audience. . . . This is really about an audience that's hungry for what these people are doing and where the audience returns consistently. . . . If done right, you can take these YouTube stars and move them onto other platforms; their influence could exist outside of this online space, and they could pull their audience with them.

The value of an influencer lies in the influencer's committed audience and the audience's willingness to be transported across platforms and opportunities. In influencer celebrification, an influencer's number of followers may be less important than the portability and passion of those followers. For example, when Phan launched Ipsy, a beauty subscription service, audience portability was evident: Fans followed. This iteratively contributes to acquiring celebrity capital by expanding Phan's renown in the beauty space and opening new pathways to acquire celebrity capital. Audience portability contributes to community-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification. In the influencer celebrification process, audience portability does not constitute simply moving the same audience from media to media. The value of audience portability lies in broadening the scope of the community built around the influencer.

### Creative Ideation

Creative ideas extend from the work of influencers. In creating a niche persona, influencers engage in the collaborative practice of creative ideation, which privileges the influencer's unique perspective while also collaboratively seeking input from the audience. We define creative ideation as responsive and reciprocal content development between influencers and audiences. This practice of creative ideation mirrors a push-back against expertise in acquiring celebrity capital. Phan explains:

> It's a different generation now; it's no longer an editor setting the trends or recommending the products. Now it's a little bit of everyone; the community has such huge influence now.

Authority and expertise are cited as important factors in commodifying celebrity capital (Gunter 2014). Influencer culture represents a space where the value of an expert is called into question. Creative ideas emerge collaboratively between audience and influencer. Influencers may offer product recommendations, but they also solicit feedback and ideas from their audience. This two-way street is not novel in the digital advertising landscape (Lepkowska-White 2013); however, it holds important implications for influencer celebrification. Influencers gain celebrity capital by sharing creative ideation responsibilities with followers. The collaborative practice of creative ideation enables influencers to acquire more celebrity capital by, perhaps paradoxically, shifting attention to audience-driven content. Kristen, chief strategy officer of Digital Brand Architects, explains:

> The smartest influencers out there and the ones who really will have longevity are the ones who understand the relationship that they have with their audience. The minute you start to think, "I'm going to do what I want to do"— and not engage with your audience—you're done.

Kristen's perspective highlights the diffusion of creative ideation. Influencers do not have the privilege of disregarding audience perspectives in content creation, because influencers' celebrity capital relies on this responsive content. Traditional celebrities function in a system of brokers of celebrity capital where creative ideation occurs in a vacuum—in a music studio, on a closed set, backstage, and so on (Rojek 2001). In contrast, influencers operate in a system where creative ideation for content emerge collaboratively with fans

and other influencers (e.g., collabs), making more shareable and appealing content. Thus, creative ideation contributes to content-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification. In contrast to traditional perspectives of celebrity capital, influencers abandon a portion of creative authority to their fans and others. But this willingness to engage in collaborative creative ideation, in fact, contributes to the acquisition of celebrity capital.

### Advertising Practitioners As Creative Concierges

In collaborative influencer celebrification practices, advertising practitioners act as creative concierges for both the influencers and the brands, thus helping both to leverage celebrity capital in novel ways. Beyond a traditional account manager role, a creative concierge encourages both the brands and the influencers to think bigger—to have greater aspirations for expanding celebrity capital than they might on their own.

Attaining brand buy-in falls to the agency. Acting as a creative concierge requires less production on the part of the agency and more facilitation. Influencers come with their own unique creative voice and niche, which their audiences have come to expect across platforms. As Yolanda (founder and chief executive officer, Style Coalition) notes, being a creative concierge means understanding the unique challenges and risks embedded in influencer advertising:

> At the end of the day if you look at the influencers, their audiences are an extremely important asset that they cannot lose by diluting their brand and becoming too promotional, losing their own voice. There are many risks in potentially trying to take something that started organic and turn it into commercial property. This is where we help [influencers] and brands make sure it's really a creative collaboration that is valuable for consumers. They create content and people want to consume it. If that content is brought to you by P&G or ties-in to one of their messages, it's a win-win.

In contrast to traditional advertising methods (e.g., print, television), influencer advertising abandons a significant portion of creative authority to the influencer. This shift in power aligns with the characteristic of advertising practitioners serving in a creative concierge capacity. They can open the door for brands and influencers to come together, but in the end it is up to the brands and influencers to creatively trust each other and follow through on the charge. Lina (senior marketing manager, *Vogue*) notes this can be challenging because "advertisers want us to promise that we can get influencers to do certain things. We try and put a positive framework into place, but the reality is, we're not controlling the experience." This sentiment is mirrored throughout our data. For example, Patrick (director of corporate communications, Proctor & Gamble) suggests that some level of abandoning creative control is inherent:

> If you go back to when you could walk into an agency and say, "I want Roger Federer to appear [in my campaign]," money would exchange, days would be booked, scripts would be read. Everything from A to Z was controlled, everything. . . . Today, you have to accept that there is a principle of influencer strategy that you don't control: the transfer of content.

To leverage celebrity capital, influencers, agencies, and brands must all maintain shared beliefs about who is in creative control and who determines possibilities for collaborative practices to unfold. As the middleman, advertising practitioners serve in the capacity of creative concierge for brands and influencers. Graham (digital agent, United Talent Agency) explains:

> A lot of [influencers] don't really have the complete perspective on what's available for them . . . when you sit down and say, "Well, have you thought about this or this?" They go, "Oh wow, I didn't think of those opportunities and that sounds exciting" or "That sounds great" or "That sounds terrible." But our job is to show them the universe of possibilities and then help craft a plan that makes sense.

Acting as a creative concierge requires agencies to help influencers understand their potential for acquiring celebrity capital. Graham points out, "You need to think about: What's authentic to their brand? How do they not screw up their relationship with their audience—these people who really believe in them? What's authentic to the brand yet allows you to continue to extend it?" Advertising practitioners capitalize on influencer audiences and scale creative ideas to develop creative advertising campaigns and opportunities for transporting audiences. This reinforces the influencer celebrification as celebrity capital begets celebrity capital.

## Evaluative Practices in the Influencer Celebrification Process

The influencer celebrification process continues through evaluative practices, which legitimize acquisition of celebrity capital. Findings reveal two evaluative influencer celebrification practices: content traversal and community-centric KPIs. Advertising industry practitioners act as impact analysts in the influencer celebrification process, assessing an influencer's

relevance and potential for success as it is tied to acquiring celebrity capital.

### Community-Centric KPIs

Celebrity capital is legitimized not by having the most followers but rather by demonstrating quality and commitment to those followers. Our data point to the evaluative practice of community-centric KPIs, which we define as qualitative assessment of audience commitment to validate celebrity capital. The modern social media landscape exists within a big data marketplace, and quantitative metrics are often used to evaluate influencers' celebrity capital. Thomas (chief revenue officer, LASIA) suggests that "data is basically like the oil of the twenty-first century," but influencer celebrification cannot be captured by numbers alone. Participants in our data point to community-centric means of legitimizing celebrity capital and thus the potential to monetize celebrity capital. Influencers create nicknames for their followers, generate shared memes and catchphrases, and build rituals with the audience. These factors cannot be captured in numbers but can translate to legitimizing celebrity capital. Brian (associate director of corporate communications, Proctor & Gamble) implies community-centric KPIs act as a litmus test for influencers to legitimize their accrued celebrity capital and for brands to seek access:

> It's like hosting a party with all your friends and then suddenly, out of nowhere, somebody you don't even know runs in and drowns out your party. They're not going to be very welcome; you're going to kick them in the arse and throw them out. You have to become part of the community. You have to offer something in a nonpartisan way, and you have to earn your right to be invited to the party. Maybe not that one, but the one that comes after, you get invited to it, and that takes investment.

Proving the closeness and uniqueness of their own community contributes to acquisition of celebrity capital by legitimizing it. Influencers can point to their community as evidence of celebrity status. The community itself then picks up the reins and group members become ad hoc influencers to one another within the community. Celebrities might be legitimized by their performances in a substantive domain (e.g., sports, television). For influencers, the substantive domain is the attention economy. Community-centric KPIs represent evaluative practices that legitimize celebrity capital and thus potential to exchange that celebrity capital for monetizable opportunities. Judah (head of marketing, Judgex) suggests measuring "engagement" does not provide the full story. He says "a lot of value [lies in] being able to understand who all the people are that are actually participating in a lot of that online engagement." Thus, community-centric KPIs contribute to community-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification. Celebrity capital is then acquired by demonstrating audience commitment, which appeals to brands.

### Content Traversal

Social media content is no longer siloed by individual platforms. For instance, a TikTok video may be reposted on Twitter, Instagram Reels, and other platforms. Our data point to an emergent evaluative practice of content traversal, which we define as tracking the movement of influencer content across and between platforms. Erik (manager of digital analytics, Burson-Marstellar) suggests content traversal is key in influencer advertising:

> We watch to see where that message goes—how it travels through media. We understand what the potential impact is based on the audiences that pick it up. We watch to see how the audience responds. We figure out how to target, then we watch the response. At the end, we look and we see, "Okay, who did we miss?" This feeds back to the beginning and helps us figure out: How do we position this? Who do we talk to? It is this whole wonderful cycle.

Tracking content as it moves through social media is foundational influencer celebrification, particularly as audiences disseminate influencer content. The shared content provides evidence of an influencer's reach and legitimizes the acquisition of celebrity capital. As Erik indicates, audiences carry social media content through the Internet. Brands can use this information to identify influencers with widespread celebrity capital who can better reach a broad cross-platform audience. Original content is not shared exclusively by its original creator. Content traversal tracks the reach of an influencer's content across domains and points to the stickiness and spreadability of the content, beyond the influencer's own community.

Erik's colleague Landon (director of analytics products, Burson Cohn & Wolfe) suggests that this feedback loop is a "perpetual survey" to "instantaneously engage how people react." Others in our data echo the sentiment that content traversal must be captured at an accelerated pace to match the haste with which content moves through modern social media. Mark (executive vice president, Brandwatch) suggests content traversal is evaluated on "a sort of hour-by-hour basis where those snapshots you take have to be very current because, if you take it only once a week, then that influence has changed dramatically." Betsy

**Table 2.** Comparing celebrities and influencers.

| Category | Celebrities | Influencers |
|---|---|---|
| Context for gaining celebrity capital | Typically famous for a substantive reason/claim | Famous for being "Internet famous" |
| Gatekeepers of celebrity capital | Curated by traditional intermediaries (e.g., agents, studios) | Curated by crowds |
| Media for leveraging celebrity capital | Scheduled and structured appearances (e.g., press junkets, interviews, launches) | Consistent—"always on" |
| Conduit for celebrity capital appeal | Catapulted by exceptionalism and unique opportunity | Catapulted by authenticity and unique voice |
| Preferred pathway for monetizing celebrity capital | Endorsement<br>Attention via public recognition from a devout fandom | Sponsored content<br>Attention via online recognition from a devout following (i.e., "eyeballs") |

(executive director of creative services, *Vogue*) suggests content is "shared right away, multiple times, across many social media platforms, all within twenty-four hours or less."

Understanding how branded content and influencer content move through platform geographies and across digital borders reciprocally feeds into celebrity capital. This means brand partnerships with influencers directly work to boost influencers' celebrity capital and thus their own personal brands. Tracking conversations and content in this way allows influencers to prove their celebrity capital is worthy of monetary investment, thus creating even more opportunities for brand partnerships and increased celebrity capital. Content traversal contributes to content-oriented synergistic effects within influencer celebrification. Influencers represent a distinct type of celebrity and thus a distinct process in attaining celebrity capital, which might then be exchanged for economic value (e.g., endorsements). More endorsements reciprocally drive more celebrity capital (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). Tracking how content moves through social media spaces—and more importantly, the conversations that consumers have in engaging with that content—gives influencers and brands a more holistic view of influencer celebrification.

### *Advertising Practitioners As Impact Analysts*

In the influencer celebrification process, advertising practitioners act as impact analysis: sussing out the value of meaningful celebrity capital and how much an influencer needs to maintain success. Advertising practitioners not only estimate the impact of influencers; they also must use these metrics to report back to clients. Ben from Synthesio states, "There's always a point where someone in that management ladder stops and says, 'Well so what? Why are we here? What does it all mean? Great, we have 100,000 likes now and viral videos with millions of views, but has it really helped?'" Ben's answer, which is shared by others in the data, is to deeply invest in and engage with online communities to capture how embedded a brand is becoming or has become in a given community, or what is the value that brand has brought to the community. Traditional social media advertising metrics (e.g., views, engagement rates) focus on quantifying success in terms of individual platforms and individual tactics (e.g., click-throughs on an Instagram story). In contrast, our findings point toward the value of using community-driven KPIs to evaluate advertising that leverages influencers' celebrity capital. For a brand, gaining entry to an influencer's online community, becoming legitimized within the community, and providing value to the community is a better indicator of effectiveness. As Cherie (director of strategic planning, Burson Cohn & Wolfe) explains:

> With every client at the beginning, we would say "Okay, this is the investment that we have. Let's look at these measurable outcomes we are trying to achieve as they relate to the influencers themselves." . . . That is not a very accurate way of assessing what the return actually was and, again, that used to be associated with a dollar value, but now it can be much more qualitative.

Customizing measurement practices for each client further puts control into the hands of the client to evaluate success of advertising as it is tied to the acquisition of celebrity capital. As Cherie suggests, a single algorithm or evaluation tool may not fit every client. Clients must determine their own goals and objectives. But this can be difficult as clients/brands continue to rely on evaluation models built through and for traditional media and apply those metrics to the unique nature of influencer advertising.

## Discussion

Traditional celebrity capital derives from accumulated media visibility; for influencers, this is achieved uniquely. SMIs are able to synergistically accrue celebrity capital from both content and community. Extant

literature tends to lump influencers and celebrities into the same category in terms of acquiring celebrity capital. This consequently minimizes any understanding of how influencers might convert celebrity capital into monetizable resources for advertising. Our study highlights key distinctions in the celebrification process for influencers relative to traditional celebrities (see Table 2). Traditional celebrity capital gets built by external media (e.g., magazine, television talk shows) based on substantive domains of entertainment (e.g., sports, music) and largely independently of the audience's needs and wishes. Our study indicates, however, that influencers' celebrity capital is built through direct interaction with the audience and direct response to their requests. Active creation of conversations within an influencer's community and the resulting spread of content across platforms fosters yet another layer of celebrity capital for influencers. These processes get amplified by advertising practitioners whose commercial associations further grow influencers' celebrity capital. Next, we discuss implications for theory and practice, with suggestions for future research.

### Theoretical Implications

Extending previous work on celebrity capital and influencer advertising, our analysis articulates the process by which influencers acquire celebrity capital within an interconnected social media advertising ecosystem, referred to as influencer celebrification. Empirical findings identify types of practices in the influencer celebrification process: generative practices (attention labor and platform agnosticism); collaborative practices (audience portability and creative ideation); and evaluative practices (community-centric KPIs and content traversal). A key contribution of this study lies in the conceptual development of influencer celebrification and the identification of the six emergent practices within this process. These practices produce community-oriented synergistic effects across attention labor, audience portability, and community-oriented KPIs and content-oriented synergistic effects across platform agnosticism, creative ideation, and content traversal.

To date, influencer advertising literature relies heavily on conceptual and theoretical frameworks rooted in traditional celebrity endorsements; however, our research potentially questions this approach. Influencers, as our research shows, demonstrate fundamental differences in how celebrity capital is acquired, thus calling into question reliance on existing celebrity research. Theoretically, this points to a need for theoretical frameworks grounded in influencer functions, experiences, and culture—not as online "microcelebrities" but as a novel category of SMIs. Conceptualizing influencers as merely a subset of celebrities potentially minimizes their power and value in modern promotional culture and the unique ways they interact with consumers, brands, and one another.

Our study advances existing theories on the production and reproduction of celebrity (Rojek 2001; Gamson 1994; Couldry 2003; Turner 2013; Driessens 2013) by identifying the role of the influencer's community in contributing to influencer celebrification. The influencer's audience cannot be discounted: the audience dictates the type of content it wants to receive in the manner that it wants to receive it. Related work centers a quantitative perspective of audience engagement in influencer advertising. In contrast, our research highlights the relational ways in which influencer celebrification is catapulted by the audience beyond clicks and likes. An influencer's community is an integral part of the celebrification process as audience members become a conduit of the influencer's content—spreading it across platforms as they see fit.

Increasing attention has been given to executing influencer advertising (e.g., disclosure practices, Evans, Hoy, and Childers 2018; impact of authenticity, Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard 2020). By theoretically framing our study in the domain of celebrity capital, we shift the theoretical discussion from the "being" and "doing" aspects of influencer advertising to the "becoming" aspects of influencer advertising. This reinforces the process-oriented nature of influencer celebrification rather than focusing on SMI as a static status (Jerslev 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016). As such, future work should more deeply explore how influencers maintain or lose celebrity capital, which may differ from prior research on decelebrification among traditional celebrities (e.g., Bill Cosby, Kevin Spacey; Mortensen and Kristensen 2020).

The concept of influencer celebrification recognizes the distinct process of attaining celebrity capital, thus answering the call for theorization within the celebrity life cycle (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019). Future research might explore the varied types of celebrity capital influencers gain through the process of influencer celebrification and boundary conditions within which influencer celebrification unfolds. Attention, authenticity, and engagement are central to the appeal of

influencers (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016). But these concepts often go unquestioned as "good" practices of influencer advertising. The emergent theoretical concept of influencer celebrification calls into question terms like authenticity. For instance, influencers might hack influencer celebrification to gain celebrity capital in seemingly authentic but immoral or deviant ways (e.g., spreading health misinformation). More research is needed in this vein. Scholarship is also needed to explore influencer celebrification across a diverse set of influencers. For example, biases may exist in attention labor, for example, as influencer content is a function of "popularity" within a potentially oppressive social media landscape. One would like to believe this is an equal opportunity process, but previous research demonstrates algorithmic biases (Bishop 2021; Noble 2018). Are there algorithmic forces that oppress or democratize influencer celebrification for historically excluded populations, for example?

Our research acknowledges theoretical slippages between the categories of celebrity and influencer in prior literature. And indeed, the current research raises the question: Can influencer celebrification be applied to celebrities as a theoretical frame? SMIs can become more traditional celebrities (e.g., comedian Liza Koshy was an online influencer turned celebrity television host) and traditional celebrities can become primarily SMIs (e.g., retired American gymnast Shawn Johnson primarily uses Instagram for promotional influencer content). Theoretical framing must acknowledge and explore movement between categories of celebrity and influencer, along with unique liabilities for engaging in influencer celebrification. Recognizing such oscillations will advance theoretical insights for both influencer advertising and celebrity endorsement.

## Practical Implications

Understanding the roles of advertising practitioners (e.g., talent scouts, creative concierges, impact analysts) in the influencer celebrification process carries practical implications for the rapidly professionalizing influencer industry (Freberg et al. 2011). Some of the first influencer campaigns launched in the mid-2000s, when YouTube and Facebook were novel media outlets. Nearly two decades later—with the emergence of interconnected and interactive platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitch)—influencers themselves have become entrepreneurs, launching their own product lines and hiring agents to negotiate their contracts. Likewise, the influencer advertising industry has adapted quickly, with new in-house influencer marketing teams, advertising agencies dedicated to influencer campaigns, and sophisticated analytics to track influencer success. The days of influencer advertising being a niche do-it-yourself domain have passed. Our research shows there is value in investing in influencer advertising in and of itself independent from the behemoth category of social media advertising and with a distinct approach relative to traditional celebrity endorsements. Social media advertising as a field of expertise is not synonymous with influencer advertising; it requires a unique skill set. Influencer advertising practitioners must toe a careful line: contributing to the influencer celebrification process in ways that preserve influencer authenticity while also leveraging influencers' accrued capital for commercial means.

In traditional celebrities endorsement, clearly defined boundaries exist between celebrities as the "hired" face of a campaign relative to advertising experts and practitioners. In contrast, our research shows slippages between how a "practitioner" or expert is defined. Influencers are hired by companies and advertising agencies, but they are also advertising experts themselves, with well-developed experience in promoting their own personal brands—themselves. Influencers are an important resource for developing creative strategies beyond being merely hired for "sponcon" (sponsored content). Influencers differ from traditional celebrities in that they are experts in the medium upon which their celebrity capital is typically leveraged: social media. When we consider how expertise is culled in the influencer advertising domain, influencers themselves should be looked to for their unique expertise. A key to leveraging influencer celebrification is to shift how advertising practitioners view the role of influencers; that is, influencers do not work *for* a brand; influencers work *with* a brand. The relationship between influencers, practitioners, and, importantly, online communities should be conceived of as symbiotic rather than hierarchical. As such, all perspectives should be equally weighted.

While much of the power has shifted to the hands of influencers and their followers, our study suggests advertising practitioners play a key role in contributing to influencer celebrification. This reveals new opportunities for advertising practitioners to leverage their own power in the process. For instance, advertising practitioners can turn inward to brand employees to identify potential brand influencers. Platforms such as TikTok increasingly provide a behind the scenes look at business operations from the view of factory and frontline workers. With careful curation and creative idea generation, such content has the potential

to positively impact the brand reputation. This is even more critical when we consider how content moves across and between media borders, often catapulted by the community rather than the brand or influencer. This points to a need for more expansive measurement of influencer advertising, beyond single platform metrics.

Future research should seek to uncover how to quantitatively measure influencers' celebrity capital, with a potential focus on developing a scale to capture this concept (see Gunter 2014). More in-depth longitudinal and ethnographic studies are also warranted, tracking the ebbs and flows of influencer celebrification as the structure of the influencer advertising industry evolves. Influencers, agents, and clients work across multinational contexts and must navigate cultural differences. Cross-cultural comparison in the acquisition of celebrity capital within the influencer industry could be a fruitful direction for future inquiry. To date, much of the policy-oriented research in influencer advertising focuses on misinformation and disclosure practices (Ershov and Mitchell 2020). These domains should continue to be explored through the lens of influencer celebrification; however, more critical research is needed to explore how vulnerable consumers (e.g., children) are privy to and exploited by the influencer celebrification process in influencer advertising. Policy research should consider the online conversations occurring between influencers and their followers, particularly as narratives may be manufactured to acquire more celebrity capital (e.g., influencers using clickbait psychology terms like *gaslighting* and *narcissism*; Dodgson and Colombo 2021).

Indeed, despite the proliferation of social media platforms, much of the research to date focuses on examining influencer advertising on a single platform (e.g., Instagram influencers, YouTube influencers). Social media platforms come and go, but to have a lasting effect in an advertising campaign, brands must understand how SMIs withstand platform changes and bring their followers along with them for the ride. More specifically, extant research has focused predominantly on the content that appears on specific social media platforms and minimized the role of the community in contributing to the celebrification of the influencer. In the previous era of social media advertising, content was king; today, content and community are king. The domain in which influencers acquire celebrity capital—the Internet—is largely the same domain where their commercial value lies. For advertising practitioners, this is a fundamental shift from harnessing the power of a traditional celebrity. Advertising practitioners must recognize the creative agency and communal power underlying an influencer's celebrity capital. Moreover, as influencers work with advertisers, this produces even more celebrity capital; the process becomes a continual loop.

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