University of Cape Town

MA in Media Studies

Masters Dissertation

Authenticity, Commodification of the Self, and Micro-Influencers: An in-depth analysis into the online identity construction of South African micro-influencers within the Western Cape

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Author:

Joshua Bull

Supervisors:

A/Prof. Wallace Chuma

Dr. Ron Irwin

University of Cape Town

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to engage with the ways in which micro-influencers within the Western Cape construct their online identities on Instagram. Theories of critical political economy of the media, self-branding, and the commodification of the self were applied to the context of micro-influencer identity construction as a means of understanding the mediated relationships between influencers, the brands they collaborate with, the platform Instagram, and the ways in which these relationships effect the construction of their online identities. This study made use of individual interviews with micro-influencers, as well as a micro-influencer focus group session in order uncover the main themes in relation to the influencers' perceptions of their online activity. A qualitative content analysis was also performed on content posted by the sample of micro-influencers that coded for the influencers' uses of platform affordances, photographic content, and their identity construction within their images based on concepts of gender representation in the media by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2000). Central to the micro-influencers' notions of success on the platform, and their perceptions of processes of identity construction, was the concept of authenticity. However, the authenticity referenced by the influencers, focused more on processes of fostering the perception of authenticity within the minds of their audience towards the self they perform online, as opposed to acting in accordance with one's true self. It was also found that their performative online identities were predicated on processes of the commodification of the self. In this sense, the construction of the influencers' profiles was dictated by processes of the commodification of the self, and the influencers understanding of how to create the perception of authenticity within the minds of their followers towards their online self.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

A study conducted by BusinessInsider South Africa (2019), using MediaKix data, predicts that in the year 2022 brands will be spending as much as USD$15 billion on influencer marketing. The rise in popularity of social media platforms in the last decade has brought with it a wave of social media-specific celebrities, termed 'social media influencers'. These are individuals who have managed to attain some level of notoriety by accruing a large online following through just their social media channels. Historically, celebrities became famous due to their success in their line of work, be it sport, acting, art etc. This fame then resulted in the celebrities developing a significant following through their widespread popularity. However, the surge in popularity of social media has created celebrities outside of this traditional path of development, where celebrities are simply famous for their social media profiles. This phenomenon has received the monikers 'internet-famous' or 'insta-famous'.

Simply put, influencer marketing is a process where brands partner with individuals who have a significant online following. The individual is remunerated in some manner in return for favourably referring their followers to the brand with which they are collaborating. Influencers are paid by brands to use products before their substantial online audience. Iqani (2019) argues that social media influencers operate as customer and consumer brand ambassadors. These are individuals who actively spend time attaching themselves to brands, thus undertaking valuable work in building brand equity. Influencer marketing is primarily a form of word-of-mouth marketing that is predicated on the belief that an influencer speaking about or consuming products publicly is able to influence consumer brand perceptions and consumer purchase decisions (Groeger and Buttle, 2014; Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014; Schivinski and Dobrowski, 2016; Iqani, 2019).

This research argues that influencer identity construction is performative. Central to the influencers' construction of their online identities are theories of the commodification of the self, as well as their understanding of how authenticity is perceived on the platform. The

influencers' top priority is to foster the perception of authenticity within the minds of their followers towards their performative commodified selves.

In understanding the concept of social media influencers, Senft (2013) forwards the concept 'microcelebrity', which the author defines as "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (2013: 1). The concept of 'microcelebrity' resonates with theories of self-branding that emerged at the turn of the century. The notion of 'self-branding' has seen a significant resurgence in terms of mainstream popularity, and its application to the individual due to the rise in popularity of social media. Sometimes referred to as 'personal branding', self-branding is a process whereby individuals develop their own distinctive public image that can be used for commercial gain and/or the increase in cultural capital (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). In this sense, self-branding can be understood as a tool with which to achieve microcelebrity status.

The aim of this study was to engage with the ways in which micro-influencers within the Western Cape were deploying concepts of self-branding in constructing their online identities. Central to the influencers construction of their online identities was the pursuit of authenticity. All aspects of the identity construction process were considered by the influencers in terms of the affects they had on fostering their perceived online authenticity. Authenticity also examines the ways in which influencer marketing departs from traditional forms of brand management, as the influencers require a great deal more autonomy and freedom in their content creation. Excessive prescription and scripting of their content would ultimately negatively affect the engagement with that content on Instagram by their followers, as well as negatively affect their followers' perception of the influencers' authenticity. It will be argued here that the influencers are in constant pursuit of fostering the perception of authenticity within the minds of their followers in relation to their online identities. These online identities are fundamentally

identities predicated on notions of the commodification of the self. In this sense, influencers are trying to develop perceived authenticity towards their commodified online identity.

In order to comprehensively engage with these processes, this research explores debates relating to the political economy of social media, social media as an extension of the public sphere, process of identity construction and self-branding, as well as theories of the commodification of the self.

1.1 Instagram and the public sphere

In critically engaging with the ways in which the micro-influencers construct their online identities, it is imperative to understand the context within which they are constructing them. For this reason, this paper devoted attention to understanding and engaging with debates regarding social media and its role in society. The purpose of this was to understand the factors informing the processes of the platform, which impact how individuals construct and present their online selves. In doing this, theories regarding the critical political economy of the media were highly valuable in deconstructing the complex environment in which these influencers operate online.

In discussing whether or not Instagram is able to constitute an extension of the public sphere, as many proponents of the internet believed platforms such as social networking sites would, this research argues that although Instagram is able to connect individuals with a greater online community and facilitate the exchange of information, it does so within a highly mediated environment, which is a significant problem for a public sphere. Instagram makes use of highly sophisticated algorithms that filter content and encourage certain online interactions. The purpose of these algorithms is to implement highly effective niche-targeted marketing in an attempt to influence consumer purchase behaviour. Pappacharissi (2002) argues that although the internet does have the potential to expand the public sphere, it is a platform created within a capitalist context, and therefore is at the mercy of capitalist modes of production, accumulation, and commodification. Fuch (2014: 79) explains that most social

media platforms' model of capital accumulation is to turn user data that is private, semi-private and public into a commodity which is then sold to advertisers who present targeted advertisements to user. Instagram is a platform that is free for its users to use. Their business model relies on collecting data in relation to the users, and using this data to implement niche-targeted marketing on the platform

Targeted advertising refers to the process whereby advertisements are displayed only to a subset of users, based on the attributes selected by the advertiser (Speicher, et al., 2018). Facebook collects and infers several hundreds of individual attributes on all users, covering everything from demographical features, behavioural features, and interest features (Andreou et al., 2018; Speicher, et al., 2018). Social Media targeted advertising can occur in three ways: attribute-based targeting, personal identifiable information targeting, and look-alike audience targeting (Speicher et al., 2018).

What is important to note is that it is not only advertising content that is featured and targeted, but rather, Instagram also filters content posted by users using sophisticated algorithms that determine what content should be shown to which users. Adam Mosseri (2018), the Head of News Feed at Facebook, has stated "we will predict which posts you might want to interact with your friends about, and show these posts higher in feed." Backstrom (2013) also states that, "[t]he goal of News Feed is to deliver the right content to the right people at the right time…"

It will be argued that Instagram is a heavily mediated environment, where certain content is shown to certain users based on algorithmic predictions and targeted advertisement campaigns. To this end, Instagram, should not be viewed as an extension of a Habermasian notion of a public sphere, due to the fact that engagement on the platform can hardly be considered to be open-ended, as content is mediated via sophisticated algorithms.

Two prerequisites for a Habermasian notion of the public sphere to exist are: that citizens must be guaranteed freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of expression (Habermas, 1964). The algorithmic nature of Instagram does not allow for the freedom of association or the freedom of expression, as it actively encourages certain connections, and favours certain content based on algorithmic predictions.

1.2 Critical Political Economy of Instagram

Critical Political Economy of the media is a theory that aims to engage in the ways in which media products are created in relation to the dynamics of production, and the ways in which the dynamics of production affect media outputs (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Critical Political Economy of the media gives specific focus to private owned media, and the ways in which media institutions are integrated into general market processes of accumulation, how their strategies shape the communication landscape, as well as how they exercise power, in both an institutional and ideological sense (Murdock and Golding, 2016).

This paper will expand on Patelis's (2013) argument, where he argues that the personalisation of social media conceals the reality that one is engaging in processes of commodification, which slowly integrates communication and commerce until they become homogenous. Instagram is a highly mediated environment where sophisticated algorithms based on user data integrate niche marketing campaigns into the communication landscape of the platform in an attempt to influence consumer purchase decisions.

The oligopoly Facebook (now named Meta) has created in relation to social networking sites, of which Instagram is a part, is of particular concern to media theorists writing on the critical political economy. At the end of 2019, it was reported that Facebook owned the four most downloaded apps of the last decade (Shead, 2019). It is reported that each of these four platforms have over a billion users, respectively (Shead, 2019). Across the different platforms, Facebook's business model fundamentally remains the same. It provides a platform which is free to use for users, and then collects large amounts of personal data from the users, which it

then sells to advertisers, allowing them to execute targeted and personalised advertisements (Tucker, 2014).

Taha Yasserie, an Oxford Internet Institute senior research fellow, is quoted in an interview by the BBC as saying, "[i]t's not okay, one company owning four of the most popular social networking and communication apps, at best, can be described as a data monopoly" (Shead, 2019). A critical political economy favours a competitive media environment comprised of multiple stakeholders, which is not what Facebook and Instagram currently represent.

1.3 Authenticity on Instagram

Handler (1986: 2) argues that the notion of authenticity is a Western cultural construct linked to conceptualisations of the self, whereby the individual plays a central role in our understanding of reality. Trilling (1971), argues for a similar understanding of authenticity, believing that authenticity has to do with acting in accordance with one's individual existence, and one's true inner self. A theme of authenticity emerged strongly in the data from this research project. Influencers seem to believe that central to one's success on the platform was one acting authentically for one's followers.

What is important to note, however, is that the conceptualisation of authenticity that the influencers referred to, seemed to differ from traditional scholarly definitions of authenticity, such as the ones mentioned above by Handler (1986) and Trilling (1971). Such definitions of authenticity centre on the individual acting in accordance with their inner self, and the authentic person is one whose outer actions are in line with, and a representation of, their inner self. However, the notion of authenticity, as expressed by the influencers seemed to be more in line with Franssen's (2019: 315) definition of celebrity culture, which argues that celebrity culture is a make-believe culture of artificiality and image control, which often revolves around talking about authenticity, but one in which it is very difficult to determine what is truly authentic.

This is because when the influencers referred to the notion of authenticity, referring to a process whereby they act in accordance with their "true-self" rather than a process which revolved around how their online self, lived up to the version of their self that existed within the minds of their followers. Acting authentically seemed to be less of a process of internal reflection, and more of a process of external reflection, focusing on their followers' perceptions. In this sense, fostering authenticity online was not about ensuring that one's online self was an accurate representation of one's inner self, but rather, it was a process of trying to create the external perception or image of authenticity within the minds of one's followers.

Authenticity, therefore, as referred to by the influencers, was making reference to what could be described as a performative branded self-image that they had consciously constructed and maintained in order to acquire cultural and economic value (Hearn, 2008; Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Tse, Cheng and Chan, 2018). Goffman's (1959) theoretical metaphor of identity is helpful in understanding this form of performative identity construction, where he draws an analogy between a theatre and life, arguing that the self is performative, and that, just as in the theatre, in life there is a 'back-stage' and a 'front-stage'. Franssen's (2019) definition of celebrity culture involves understanding identity as performative, this makes it difficult to determine what is truly 'authentic'. The performative nature of influencers' identities makes it difficult to determine legitimate 'identity expression' (person) from 'image manufacturing' (personae) (Svenjenova, 2005; Orsatti and Riemer, 2012).

A clear trend that emerged was that being consistent online was central to fostering a perception of authenticity towards this performative self. Affordances is a term in this regard that refers to the different elements a platform offers its users. For example, on Instagram, the affordances of every post are either an image or a video, which is accompanied by a caption. Additionally, users are able to include hashtags and geo-tags, tag other users in the image or caption, and reply to comments. Though not an exhaustive list, all of these different elements are afforded to the users when constructing a post.

What was found, was that across the sample of influencers, there were no noticeable trends in relation to affordances used. However, within each influencer's sample of images, there was a clear preference for the use of a certain set of affordances. Individual influencers made use of their own combination of affordances, and then used this combination consistently. In this way they presented their own consistent manner in which they communicate with their followers, thereby building their sense of authenticity. To some extent, their combination of affordances acted as a type of digital accent in their online communication.

The content analysis findings in relation to affordances used, echoed findings from the interview portion of the study, where influencers made reference to their distinct and recognisable 'style'. By style, the influencers were referring to the fact that they felt their Instagram feed contained a unique and distinct aesthetic stemming from their creative choices in content selection and editing. As with their unique combination of affordances, their choices regarding image selection and editing were used consistently in order to present a coherent and consistent image of themselves, with the perception that this would improve their perceived authenticity within the minds of their followers.

Underpinning Instagram's affordances and aesthetics is, "a digital reimagining of photographic traditions" (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020: 2). Gibbs et al (2015: 257) note that each social media platform has, what they refer to as, a unique "platform vernacular" made up of a combination of styles, grammars and logics. In relation to the content analysis findings, it appeared that not only does Instagram have its own unique platform vernacular, as described by Gibbs et al. (2015), but each individual influencer presented their own consistent 'personal vernacular' which consisted of the unique ways in which they appropriated the platform affordances when communicating their online identities to their followers.

Performative identities are both positional and strategic (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012: 6). Often these performative identities are constructed along antagonistic and intersecting practices, positions and discourses (Hall, 2000: 17). Authenticity, in relation to a performative

theory identity construction becomes something that is "claim made by or for someone, thing or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson, 2005: 1080 as cited in Williams, 2006: 177). Authenticity, therefore, needs to not only be understood not only from the perspective of the individual seeking authenticity, but also from the perspective of those who are granting it (Willians and Copes, 2005: 1090; Orsatti and Riemer, 2012: 6).

1.4 Commodification of the self

The central argument within this paper, however, is that the authenticity that influencers seek in relation to their performative self is in relation to a performative self whose performance is predicated on the commodification of the self, referring to the performative elements of self-branding employed by the influencers, as well as the construction of their identity through the public displays of consumption of certain products and brands. Therefore, the perception of authenticity they are trying to establish is a perception in the minds of their followers, towards their online commodified self.

Commodification of the self has been argued by scholars to occur in two distinct ways. The first form of the commodification of the self occurs when one begins to view oneself as a product with market exchange value. In this sense, individuals are effectively viewing themselves as a commodity by attaching a market value to themselves. Theories of self-branding, whereby one attempts to stand out from competitors, are constructed along these lines of attributing a market exchange value to your person.

The second form of the commodification of the self is described as a process whereby the commodities one purchases and utilises become central to one's identity. This type of commodification of the self emerged with a societal shift in the 1950s and 1960s, whereby identity began to become determined more by individual impulse, and the satisfaction thereof, and less by a person's institutional role within society. This shift brought with it the advent of new marketing scripts, whereby commodities became positioned and sold as instruments of individual liberation (Davis, 2003). The purchasing of goods became framed not only as a

means to fulfilling one's individual desires, but as a way to meet one's needs for connection, recognition, as well as values to live by (Davis, 2003).

This paper argues that theories of the commodification of the self, based on the consumption of commodities are not dissimilar to Hall's positioning theory (1996), which argues that identity is comprised of an ensemble of different subject positions. The difference, however, is that instead of identity conceived of as different subject positions in discursive debate, identity is conceived of as comprising an ensemble of different consumption patterns. Davis (2003), argues that as a person is transformed into a consumer, that their social identity becomes increasingly shaped by their consumption patterns.

Perhaps the most interesting theme that emerged from the interview portion of the study was that the influencers felt their consumption of certain products had an effect on their perceived authenticity in the minds of their followers. They believed that if they consumed, and were associated with the right products and brands, their followers would perceive them to be more authentic. At the same time, however, the influencers believed that consuming the wrong brands could have a negative effect on their perceived authenticity. In cases where specific brands were mentioned, influencers did not make reference to the utility value they would derive from certain products, but rather emphasised the role certain brands and products played in shaping their identity, as well as the role these brands played in shaping how they were perceived. In the interviews there was mention of the fact that the influencer was already a big follower and user of the brand, before any form of reciprocal collaboration or partnership occurred, so as to characterise their relationship with the brand as being authentic and not transactional.

In relation to the commodification of the self, representations of gender within mainstream media, as defined by Goffman (1979), were coded for within the content analysis. The findings from the content analysis demonstrated that not only are the influencers' online identities constructed by the products they consume, but their identities are also constructed

through the displays of gender that brands utilise in their informal marketing scripts. It was found that gender displays typically associated with the female gendered identity within mainstream media and advertising, as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), were present within the female presenting influencer's content and construction of their online identities, and absent in the male presenting influencer's portrayals of their online gendered-identity.

This is a type of commodification of the self where it is not only through the consumption of certain products that the self is expressed, but where it is also constructed through the replication of brand images within their own content of the products they consume. Klein (2000) has argued that successful corporations primarily produce and sell images of a brand, as opposed to actual products. Expanding on what Klein is saying, it appears that influencers primarily develop an identity based on the consumption and reproduction of brand images, as opposed to actual products.

1.5 Theoretical framework

This research project made use of four main theories within media studies to contextualise and deconstruct the different elements of this paper. Firstly, theories of self-branding were used as a means of understanding micro-influencers' processes of identity construction on Instagram. Self-branding involves the process of an individual developing their own distinctive public image to be used for commercial gain and cultural capital (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). Discourse around self-branding often tends to encourage entrepreneurial aspirants, that draw upon market logic, codes and processes of mainstream cultural industries (Hearn, 2008; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Theories of self-branding proved to be useful in understanding the online dynamic that micro-influencers navigate.

Secondly, in order to understand processes of influencer-marketing, theories of word-of-mouth marketing were used as a means of outlining the specific processes involved, as well as understanding the significant potential that influencer-marketing seems to possess. The

accessibility, transparency, and reach of the internet has empowered marketers to once more turn to word-of-mouth marketing as a means of encouraging consumer purchase decisions (Kozinets et al., 2010). Online word-of-mouth marketing, however, no longer operates on a small one-to-one basis, but rather, on a scale of one-to-many (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 2).

In understanding the online dynamic of Instagram as a platform, theories of critical political economy of the media helped highlight the highly mediated environment of Instagram. Critical political economy of the media is a theory that aims to try and understand media products in relation to their dynamics of production (Murdock and Golding, 2016). It examines how private owned media are able to exercise power, both institutionally and ideologically, through market processes of accumulation, and how these affect the communication landscape (Murdock and Golding, 2016). To this end, it also was used as a means of understanding how institutions such as Facebook, the owner of Instagram, is able to exercise power through mediating the online communication landscape.

Finally, in critically engaging with the findings from the research portion of this study, theories of the commodification of the self were applied in order to understand the ways in which influencers' online identities are constructed. Commodification of the self has been argued to occur in two distinct ways (Davis, 2003). The first forms refer to a shift in one's perception of self, where one begins to view oneself as a product with a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). The second form refers to a process where one begins to view one's identity as being constructed through consumption (Davis, 2003). This research claims that micro-influencers construct commodified selves both by relating to the online self as a product with a market exchange value, as well as constructing their online identities through their patterns of consumption.

1.5.1 Micro-influencer identity construction as a process of self-branding

Keller (1993) argues that the primary goal of branding is to create strong, favourable, and unique associations in the mind of consumers towards your brand, that are able to help differentiate you from your competition within a crowded market place. Self-branding, as mentioned earlier, is a process involving different individuals developing a unique public image for themselves, that is used for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Processes of self-branding aim to create a public identity that is able to respond to the needs and interests of their perceived audience (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

1.5.2 Influencer marketing as modern word-of-mouth marketing

The popularity of social networking sites has once more given rise to theories of word-of-mouth marketing. As mentioned, however, a fundamental difference is that word-of-mouth marketing through social media is no longer an intimate act of one-to-one communication, but rather operates on a one-to-many scale (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010). In order for word-of-mouth marketing to be truly effective, it is not only important to focus on 'what' is being said about a brand, but also 'who' in particular is saying it (Hsu et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Kilgour, Sasser and Larked, 2015). This study argues that at its core, influencer-marketing is a modern form of word-of-mouth marketing, where influencers aim to create a distinct brand personality that is synonymous with the brand personality of existing commercial brands.

1.5.3 Political economy of social media

McChesney (2008) argues that concerns regarding concentration and commercialisation of the media are more pressing in relation to 21st century forms of contemporary media than ever before. Concentration of ownership means that the way in which social relations and social realities are constructed is informed by social, cultural, economic and political forces (Just and Latzer, 2017). The BBC reported in 2019 that Facebook owned the four most downloaded phone applications of the last decade (Shead, 2019). These included Facebook and Instagram

platforms. The concertation of ownership of social media platforms, as well as the rise in popularity of influencer marketing have meant questions relating to critical political economy of the media, such as the organisation of voluntary digital labour, the commercial push to appropriate contributions by users in service of community production, as well as the changing terrain between amateur and professional activity (Murdock and Golding, 2016), have become more pressing.

1.5.4 Identity construction and the commodification of the self

When referring to the commodification of the self, there are two distinct ways in which it has been expressed by scholars. The first conceptualisation of the commodification of the self involves viewing oneself as a type of product with market exchange value (Davis, 2003). In this sense, one views oneself as a type of tradable commodity.

The second conceptualisation, and the one this paper focuses on, centres on the notion of constructing one's identity through the products one consumes (Davis, 2003). This notion of the commodification of the self, became popular in the 1950s and 1960s when we witnessed a shift in terms of self-definition in society whereby one's identity shifted from being based on one's institutional roles, and became concerned with the satisfaction of one's inner impulses (Davis, 2003). This shift brought with it the development of new marketing scripts, which began to advertise products as being instruments of individual liberation (Davis, 2003: 45). This second conceptualisation of the commodification of the self involves identity in terms of self-definition, namely, becoming constructed through the products one consumes (Davis, 2003).

1.6 Methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were used to triangulate the research. A quantitative content analysis was conducted on a sample of 500 images, which were collected across 20 different influencer profiles. For the qualitative research methods,

both a focus group, as well as individual interviews were conducted. In total, one focus group and four individual interviews were conducted.

1.6.1 Defining the micro-influencer

This project focused specifically on micro-influencers within the Western Cape operating in the fashion and lifestyle industry. The term micro-influencer is defined for this research as a type of microcelebrity, as outlined by Sent (2008), who had managed to accrue for him - or herself a substantial online following, and who then used this online following to gain social capital and access financial resources (Abidin, 2015). For the sake of this project, the influencers must have engaged in some form of remunerated work that resulted in them posting content relating to a specific product or brand on their personal Instagram feed, where remuneration could be in the form of either monetary compensation or commodity exchange. The remunerated work included both formal work in which brands and influencers stipulated expectations within a contract prior to any work commencing, as well as informal work, where product and merchandise was 'gifted' to the influencers with no real expectations outlined from the perspective of the brands of the influencers. The number of followers that each influencer within the sample had, ranged from 1,000 followers to 30,000 followers.

1.6.2 Sample

The sample of the interview and focus group portion of the study was comprised of seven influencers. This included one focus group of three influencers, as well as four separate individual interviews. For the qualitative interviews and focus groups, a type of purposive sampling, which turned into snowball sampling, was utilised. Individuals were selected and contacted if they met the criteria mentioned above. The Cape Town Instagram community is fairly intimate, and therefore, through meeting and interviewing the first few influencers, more interviews were generated.

For the content analysis portion of this study, a sample of 20 Cape Town micro-influencers was selected. Once again, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to select the 20 influencers who made up the sample.

10 Instagram posts were collected per influencer. This meant that a total of 200 images were analysed for the content analysis. The 10 posts per influencer were all collected on the same day, and were the 10 most recent posts on their feeds.

1.6.3 Focus groups

Focus group sessions are a way of capturing group discussion regarding certain topics, and are thus used as a means of uncovering a group's collective view in relation to a certain topic (Gill, et al., 2008). A focus group provided a space within the scope of this project for micro-influencers to engage with one another in regards to a few semi-structured questions. This helped bring to light broad themes, and trends micro-influencers experienced as a group, to which the interviewer would not otherwise have had access. Focus groups are able to bring to light a collective way of thinking and understanding experiences within a given group (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

One substantial focus group session was conducted, which consisted of a group discussion with three micro-influencers. The session was recorded, and the audio recordings were later transcribed. A thematic discourse analysis was then conducted on these transcripts to uncover any major themes that emerged within the session.

1.6.4 Individual interviews

Focus groups are able to uncover group experiences and perceptions. However, the nature of group discussions means that they can sometimes lack depth. It was for this reason that individual interviews were also conducted in the same manner, which provided an opportunity to more deeply explore micro-influencer practices and perceptions. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. Semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewee to share

rich descriptions and experiences within the conversation with the interviewer, reserving the latter interpretation of the conversation to the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

In total, four individual interviews were conducted. The interviews were once more recorded for transcription purposes later. A thematic discourse analysis was conducted on the transcripts so as to isolate the main themes that occurred within the respective interviews.

1.6.5 Content analysis

A content analysis is a type of non-intrusive research method that allows for the examination of a wide range of data, over a long period of time, that aims to identify popular discourses and the meaning they generate (Macnamara, 2005). Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 31) explain that the goal of a content analysis is to impose an order or structure on a collection of media, with the goal of understanding their meanings. A quantitative media content analysis focuses on measuring factors such as size and frequency of media messages, and uses these factors to determine the potential impact of media messages. A qualitative content analysis serves to explain the relationship between a text and its audience understanding, acknowledging that media texts are polysemic in nature, and their attempts to understand the meaning of a media text to its particular audience (Macnamara, 2005). This study employed a combination of both quantitative and qualitative elements of content analysis in analysing the micro-influencers' posts. A code book was created that allowed for the systematic and consistent analysis of the content collected.

1.6.6 Ethical considerations

1.6.6.1 Content

When researching social media platforms and the content posted by users of those platforms, ethical questions regarding privacy and copyright become important. Boyd and Crawford (2012) argue that it is a problem for researchers to justify their actions as being ethical, simply because the data they make use of for their research is accessible through social

media. The evaluation of research ethics should not be ignored simply because data is seemingly public (Boyd and Crawford, 2012).

Townsend and Wallace's (2016) argue that the question of whether or not social media is public or private comes down to whether or not a social media user can reasonably expect their content to be viewed by a stranger. Townsend and Wallace (2016), argue that if a social media user could reasonably expect a stranger to view their content, that content would not be considered private.

Applying this definition to the content posted by the micro-influencers, we observe all of their content to be within the public domain. This is because all of the influencers who took part in this research project have, what Instagram refers to as, a public account. This means that anyone using Instagram is able to view their content, not just the followers that a user has approved. In this sense, we can argue that the influencers can reasonably expect strangers to view their content.

The role of influencers is to create and distribute social media content around a brand in relation to the products they have been given (Hutchins and Tindall, 2016: 64). For this reason, brands are typically interested in influencers who have a wide reach, and who have built up trust with their followers (Burns, 2016). The very nature of operating as an influencer is to try and get the most number of people viewing your content as possible in order to satisfy the commercial imperatives of the brands they represent. In this sense, influencers can not only reasonably expect a stranger to view their content, but rather, they are actively trying to get strangers to view their content in pursuit of a larger online following. For this reason, any content collected from the influencers' Instagram accounts could ethically be considered public, and included in this research project. That being said, any content that is deemed to reveal sensitive personal information will not be published in this research paper, but will be collected for analysis purposes. Only content deemed as not divulging personal information will be included in the final paper.

In relation to copyright considerations of using the influencers' content within the scope of this research project, it was noted that in using the platform, one has to agree to the terms of use as stipulated by Instagram, which contains a licensing agreement that allows Instagram to make use of their content without any form of compensation. Instagram does not claim intellectual property rights of the content. It simply reserves the right to use the content, with attribution, without remuneration.

The company states on its platforms:

> We do not claim ownership of your content that you post on or through the Service and you are free to share your content with anyone else, wherever you want. However, we need certain legal permissions from you (known as a "license") to provide the Service. When you share, post, or upload content that is covered by intellectual property rights (like photos or videos) on or in connection with our Service, you hereby grant to us a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide license to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate, and create derivative works of your content (consistent with your privacy and application settings).

This licensing agreement, however, does not necessarily extend to third party researchers. Therefore, in all cases the influencers were contacted, explained the scope of this research project, and what their content would be used for. The influencers were all given the option to opt out and not allow their content to be used, in which case their content would have been excluded from this study. It is noted that no influencer asked to opt out, and not allow their content to be used for the sake of this research project.

1.6.6.2 Interviews and focus groups

Before entering a focus group session or individual interview, both verbal and written consent was obtained from each participant. A record of the written consent was kept for future

reference, if necessary. All interviews were recorded, and verbal consent was also captured on the audio clip prior to the commencement of the focus group or interview. The interviews were transcribed, and the influencers' names were not included in the final research paper, where excerpts from their transcriptions were used. The reason for this was to protect the influencers' professional reputations, as discussion often centred on remunerated work that they had done for particular brands. In all the cases discussed within the focus groups and interviews, the influencers were free to divulge information, as they had not signed any nondisclosure documents stating that they could not. That being said, for the sake of ensuring no damage to future business and brand partnerships by protecting their professional reputation, the names of the influencers interviewed are not published within this paper.

All excerpts that were deemed to divulge sensitive and personal information, such as an influencer's home address, or family members, were not included within the final submission of this paper.

Finally, although the age of consent to use Instagram is 13, only influencers over the age of 18 were contacted to take part in this research project. This was so as to ensure that they were of legal age to give their own informed consent, being adults in the eyes of the law, to take part in the following research project. No influencers under the age of 18 took part in any aspect of this research.

1.7 Findings

1.7.1 Content analysis

The content analysis comprised three different sections. The first section examined platform affordances, and the different affordances of which the influencers made use. Platform affordances referred to the particular aesthetic and functional elements Instagram offered its users when posting and engaging on the platform. Gibbs et al. (2015: 257) argue that every platform has its own unique mix of grammars, styles and logics, contributing to what is possible on the platform through affordances provided, adapted, and appropriated. What was observed

was that each influencer made use of a different combination of affordances, and made use of those consistently. There were no notable trends in terms of affordances across the sample of influencers.

The second section of the content analysis was concerned with the photographic content of the posts. It was noted that in almost all of the images coded, the influencers were present. However, only half of the images also contained a brand or product to some extent. It was also noted that in terms of clothing, images posted by female-presenting influencers received more engagement when the influencers wore less, or more sexualised, items of clothing. This trend was not observed among male presenting influencers.

The third and final section of the content analysis focused on the ways in which influencers constructed their identity in terms of gender within the posts. Concepts of gender displays within mainstream advertising, as defined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), were coded for. It was found that female presenting influencers seemed to adopt and recreate gender cues, as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), such as the feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination, and licensed withdrawal in constructing their gender identities. These same gender cues were not present within the content of male-presenting influencers. According to Goffman (1979), these are gender cues historically associated with female-presenting identities.

1.7.2 Interviews and focus groups

There were two main themes that emerged from the focus group session and interviews. The first was concerned with the ways in which the influencers constructed their online profiles. It was found that the influencers' profile construction was comprised of three different elements, namely, their niche, their individual style, and their motivation. Their niche referred to the online community that they occupy. Central to their niche was their particular interest. The online community that they were a part of seemed to be organised along the lines of shared

interest. Their profiles all reflected their niche, and therefore, their relevance in their interest group, to some extent.

The second element of their profile construction, their style, referred to the notion that the influencers all felt their profile contained a unique and personal, aesthetic. Their aesthetic was conveyed in the content they posted, and was therefore predominantly based on their editing techniques and content selection. However, there was a clear sentiment that their styles were unique enough that their followers would be able to identify content that they had posted.

The final element of their profile construction has been referred to here as their motivation. Their motivation seemed to be their intentions to expand their reach as influencers on Instagram. The motives all varied among the influencers. However, it is an important factor to note, as it was observed that their motivation plays a significant role in shaping the content they post, and therefore informing the online profile they construct.

Finally, the second major theme that emerged from the focus group interviews was the influencers' concerns with presenting, what they referred to as an 'authentic' self. This theme centred on concepts of being 'true to who you are', and being 'real' on Instagram. Many times, success on the platform was equated with being authentic, and the fact that other users were able to pick up on this authenticity.

1.8 Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to engage in the ways in which the micro-influencers within the Western Cape, operating within the fashion and lifestyle industry construct their online identities. The four research questions that this paper tackles are the following:

1. What are the ways in which Instagram micro-influencers in South Africa, within the fashion and lifestyle category, construct their online identity?

2. How do they use their branded selves for commercial gain?

3. How do advertising norms affect their identity?

4. What role does Instagram play in the mediation and construction of their online identity?

In order to comprehensively answer these questions, a content analysis was conducted on content posted by a sample of 20 micro-influencers. A focus group session, and individual interviews were also conducted. These methods resulted in a diversified approach to engaging with the questions, allowing for the triangulation of findings.

The key finding of this study was that micro-influencers construct their online identities through processes of the commodification of the self. The first aspect of the commodification of the self involves relating to oneself as a product with a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). Theories of self-branding whereby one attempts to market the self in an attempt to stand out in a competitive work environment fit within this first form of the commodification of the self (Davis, 2003). The online social media global economy encourages the metanarrative that the self, deployed within the continuous conscious construction and maintenance of a public branded self-image, and is a means of acquiring cultural and economic value (Hearn, 2008; Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Tse, Cheng and Chan, 2018). The promotional culture of social media means that celebrity status "becomes a generalised model of profitable self-production for all individuals" (Hearn, 2008: 208).

The second form of the commodification of the self, which was found to be present in the influencers' constructions of their online identities, centres on the idea that one's identity is constructed through the products they consume (Davis, 2003). Hall's (1996) positioning theory speaks about identity construction as an amalgamation of different subject positions. Applying positioning theory to the second form of the commodification of the self, it will be argued that influencers' identities could be described as an ensemble of different consumption positions. This second form of the commodification of the self was expressed either in public

displays or consumption, or the re-creation of mainstream media and advertising's depictions of gendered identities, and in some cases both.

It was also observed that the influencers' understanding of authenticity, and the ways in which that manifested itself online, played a significant role in the self-mediation process of identity construction. The influencers strived to create the perception of authenticity in the minds of other users, and many times believed success on Instagram was predicated on being perceived as authentic. To this end, the influencers' online identities and actions were continuously interrogated in relation to their understanding of how authenticity played-out on Instagram, and the factors that affected it, in order to foster and maintain a perception of authenticity toward their online identity.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter aims to introduce major relevant debates within the field of media studies, as well as to relate them to this study's critical analysis of the online practices of identity construction of micro-influencers within the Western Cape, South Africa.

The first section of this chapter explores important literature regarding relevant debates around identity construction, the internet as an important component of the public sphere, and the ways in which ownership and institutional structures are able to shape the online communicative space.

Section 2.1 will begin by exploring relevant literature on identity construction. Identity construction is central to influencers' online activity. In looking at identity construction of micro-influencers on Instagram, this study considers Beck's (1997) conception of identity construction as a form of subpolitics. Gidden (1991) argues that politics is constituted through the everyday practices of individuals, and that politics is fundamentally centred on the question of 'who do I want to be?'. In this sense, this chapter argues that identity construction is inherently a political process, and that citizenship can be understood as part of ones' political identity (Mouffe, 1993).

Identity construction of Instagram influencers is inherently a political process, that does not include debates regarding the media, and the internet in particular, as a form of public sphere after Habermas. This chapter includes a thorough introduction to contemporary debates regarding conceptualisations of the public sphere, and highlights the relevance of discussing such debates within the scope of this research project.

Structures of ownership and institutional organisation are important in understanding the nature of social media platforms, such as Instagram, when discussing the extent to which they are able to constitute a public sphere, and how they are able to exercise power over their users through shaping the communication landscape. Critical political economy of the media is able

to provide valuable insight into the online economic dynamics that are present within the mediated boundaries of social networking sites, and how these impact identity construction, as well as raise questions around the organisation of voluntary digital labour in relation to micro-influencers.

Section 2.2 begins by contextualising online influencer identity construction as a form of self-branding. Self-branding, is a process involving an individual developing their own distinctive public image to be used for commercial and cultural capital gain (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). In the context of social media, self-branding often centres on constructing compelling narratives regarding one distinctive image as a means of sustaining audience attention (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). Page (2012) argues that this process of constructing compelling narratives as a means of self-branding, results in particular emphasis being placed on the construction of one's identity as a type of product that can be consumed by their audience.

Section 2.2 then moves on to discuss platform-specific self-branding. Scholars have argued that self-branding online is not necessarily practised in the same manner across different platforms. Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere (2017) argue that online social media users make use of what they term platform-specific self-branding. This refers to the idea that social media users create different brands across different platforms, based on the imagined affordances of each platform, as well as their placement within the large social media ecology (Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere, 2017).

Theories of word-of-mouth marketing are then introduced as a means of theoretically framing processes of influencer marketing. Word-of-mouth marketing refers to a naturally occurring phenomenon where word-of-mouth affects a significant portion of consumer purchase decisions (Brooks, 1957; Dichter, 1966; Kozinets et al., 2010). Influencer marketing is fundamentally a process of trying to harness the positive effects of word-of-mouth marketing by encouraging influencers with a substantial online following to share positive experiences

with other customers, making their story about a brand or product relatable and relevant to their audience (Bughin, Doogan, and Vetvik, 2010).

Following discussions of influencer marketing fundamentally being a process of word-of-mouth marketing, the concept of social media influencers will be discussed in detail. Positive word-of-mouth marketing requires the right people saying the right things about a brand, therefore, in order to fully understand how influencer word-of-mouth marketing works, it is important to understand what we mean by 'influencers', who make up the component of the individual speaking about the brand in word-of-mouth marketing. This paper argues for a definition of micro-influencers which combines Iqani's (2019) concepts of brand ambassadors with Senft's (2013) definition of micro-celebrities.

Following the definition of micro-influencers and word-of-mouth marketing, discussions regarding a critical perspective on influencer brand value creation will be considered. Iqani (2019: 233) argues that, "critical writing on branding situates it as a sophisticated and dynamic force of neoliberal capital, aimed at consolidating commercial and neoliberal power." A critical perspective on influencer brand value creation looks at the ways in which social media influencers are able to reinforce a brand's commercial and neoliberal power.

Finally, this chapter will close with the inclusion of discussions regarding the commodification of the self. In understanding influencer marketing in relation to self-branding, word-of-mouth marketing, and processes of brand value creation, it is important to engage with how these affect conceptualisations of the self. Two distinct forms of the commodification of the self will be defined in order to apply these to the process of influencer marketing, and engage in the ways in which influencers construct their online identities.

2.1 Identity construction, the public sphere, and the mediated context of online networks

2.1.1 Online identity construction as a form of subpolitics

Beck (1997) refers to individualisation as an inherently political process of identity construction characterised by reflexive modernity. This concept of individualisation centres the notion of citizenship upon concepts of 'identity' and 'the political', defining citizenship as a distinct aspect of an individual's identity that interacts with all other aspects that culminate in defining an individual (Mouffe, 1993; Beck, 1997; Bakardjieva, 2009). Mouffe (1993) defines citizenship as being part of one's political identity, which consists of identifying with the political principles that form the foundation of modern pluralist democracies. Hall (1996: 6) argues instead that identification is a signifying practice marked by contingency, which requires active discursive work, and therefore, believes that identities are temporary points of attachment to different subject positions that one accesses through discursive practices. In this sense, one could define the concept of identity as an ensemble of different subject positions (Bakardjieva, 2009).

Positioning theory has often been used to explain identity construction, where an individual's identity is constructed by positioning himself/herself in relation to discursive repertoires provided by a given cultural context, and by speaking from these respective positions throughout the course of their life (Davies and Harre, 1990; Bakardjieva, 2009). Beck (1997), however, describes this same process as "subpolitics". Gidden argues that fundamentally central to the concept of the political is individual identity (1991). Gidden (1991; 214) believes that politics is fundamentally a project that aims to tackle the central question of 'who do I want to be?' This definition of identity seems to be in line with Beck's (1997) concept of subpolitics, where subpolitics constitutes a mode of political operation, and whereby political agents are able to enter from outside of existing traditionally recognised political or corporate systems. This means that politics does not simply centre on traditional institutions, but rather, that it is constituted by the everyday practices of individuals.

An early example of personal identity constituting a form of political participation can be observed within feminist movements, where the discussions that were being had among women in regard to their daily lived experiences during the liberation movement constituted a form of political action (Bakardjieva, 2009). Gidden (1991; 214) believes that globalisation affects individual self-actualisation in the sense that it intrudes deeply into the reflexive project of the self. Gidden (1991: 214), also argues, however, that the process is not unidirectional, as self-actualisation is also then able to have an influence within global strategies.

Bakardjieva (2009) believes that Beck's (1997) concept of subpolitics is actually too simplistic, and rather, that there is still another level of citizenship, which goes deeper than subpolitics, that Bakardjieva terms "subactivism". Subactivism refers to the everyday small scale actions and decisions made on an individual level, which have either a political frame of reference or an ethical frame of reference (and in some cases both), that remain submerged in the everyday lives of citizens (Bakardjieva, 2009). A central element to this notion of subactivism is the private sphere of individuals (Bakardjieva, 2009). Political power, in the context of subactivism, therefore, refers to personal empowerment that can be viewed as the power of an individual to act in accordance with the person they choose to be based on their reflexively chosen moral and political frames of reference (Bakardjieva, 2009).

Bakardjieva's (2009) conceptualisation of subactivism understands identity construction through what other scholars might considered to be a performative lens. A performative lens of identity construction views identity as something which is enacted, or performed, daily and co-constructed through communication and discourse (Butler, 1990; Dunn 1997; Orsatti and Riemer, 2012). A representational lens of identity construction views an individual's identity as something that is pre-given in essentialist terms, and fixed (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012). A performative lens, however, views identity not as static or essentialist, but rather is something which is perpetually articulated and co-constructed through lived, social participation (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012). Hall (2000: 17) argues that performative identities are "constructed across

different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." Orsatti and Riemer (2012: 6) argue that a performative lens "allows us a richer, more complete and experienced understanding of the practice of constructing identity."

A performative lens of identity construction on social media views both one's communicative actions as well as self-representation to constitute part of their identity performance (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012). Secondly, a performative lens of identity construction on social media would view one's own identity as being continuously co-constituted through participation on social media platforms (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012).

It is in line with this argument that proponents of internet argue that it does have the potential power to improve political processes, as it provides the ability to connect citizens, thereby allowing them to take part in a range of different discussions, increasing the flow of information, and thus exposing them to different subject positions, which result in new forms of subjectivism, and identity construction (Noveck, 2009; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012).

2.1.2 The public sphere in the context of the internet

Jürgen Habermas (1964) believed that the public sphere constituted a realm of our social life within a society, where public opinion can be formed. Habermas (1964) explains that whenever two private individuals assemble and engage in some form of reciprocal conversation freely, it constitutes part of a public body, and they are therefore enacting within the public sphere. Habermas (1991/1973) believed the public sphere to be a domain of social life where public opinion could be formed through rational public debate. Habermas (1989/1962) argued that informed and logical discussion among private individuals could lead to public agreement and decision-making.

Early examples of the public sphere that Habermas (1991) cites are places such as coffee houses or salons, where individuals congregate and are able to engage in debate with one

another around matters of general interest to society. It was Habermas's (1964) belief that the primary role of the public sphere would be to mediate between society and the state within democratic societies in order for the public to play a role in policy-making and the shaping of democracy.

There are two prerequisites for a Habermasian notion of a public sphere to exist. These two prerequisites are often taken for granted in modern democracies; however, it is necessary for both, a guarantee of freedom of assembly and association, as well as the freedom of expression (Habermas, 1964). These are liberties that must pertain equally to all citizens within a society in order for a healthy Habermasian public sphere to exist. Habermas (1991: 1) explains that if something is to be considered public, it must be open and accessible to all. Habermas stresses that the public sphere is independent of economic and political power, and is not simply a sphere of public political communication, but also a sphere which is free from the censorship of the state, and free from private ownership (Fuch, 2014).

Later, Habermas (1964), explained that for a public sphere to exist on a full societal level, that aimed to outline public opinion, specific means for transmitting and receiving information within a large public body would need to exist. It was here that Habermas believed the media played a critical role. Habermas (1964) explained that he believed magazines and newspapers, as well as television and radio, were the media of the public sphere. Since then, it has often been said by scholars that mainstream media within a democratic society constitutes Habermas's public sphere, where citizens are able to have access to political and civic engagement (Wasserman and Garmin, 2014).

Proponents of the internet as a form of the public sphere argue that online discourse will increase political participation, thereby paving the way for a democratic Utopia (Papacharissi, 2002). Papacharissi argues that the internet is able to encourage and facilitate discussions that promote a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions (2002). Sceptics, on the other hand, caution that technologies such as the internet, which are not universally accessible, and which

frequently induce fragmented discussions, far from guarantee a revived public sphere (2002). Fuch (2014: 89) comments that we can acknowledge that social media and the internet possesses a potential to be an extension of the public sphere, however, they argue that this sphere is limited by the steering media of money and political power in order for corporations to own and control, and for the state to monitor, users data on social media.

Habermas (1964) did, however, note that even within modern liberal democracies, his notion of a liberal public sphere cannot be applied normatively to the actual conditions of modern industrially developed mass democracies that organise and operate in the form of a social welfare state. The major problem for Habermas is that his model of the public sphere requires a separation between that which is considered public, and that which is considered private. Habermas (1989) himself notes this in his critique of what he terms the Bourgeois public sphere, saying:

> "The model of the bourgeois public sphere presupposed strict separation of the public from the private realm in such a way that the public sphere, made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered part of the private realm. To the extent that the public and the private became intermeshed realms, this model became inapplicable" (Habermas, 1989: 175).

Relating the internet to this criticism, the conceptualisation that it could act as a means of expanding Habermas's public sphere may also be flawed in the sense that the internet is able to situate itself firmly in both public and private realms, compounding this problem for Habermas. Papacharissi (2002) argues that it is because the internet constitutes both private and public spaces, it appeals to individuals wanting to reinvent their private and public lives. The internet provides new terrain, where the age-old friction between persona and collective identity – the individual and the community – is able once more to play out (Papacharissi, 2002).

Fraser (1990) criticised Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere, explaining that it functioned merely as an arena for the privileged men to exercise the skills of governance, as it excluded women and non-propertied classes. Fraser (1990) argued that for a functional public sphere to even exist, inequalities within society need to be addressed. Even simply the formulaic nature of rational critical debate will mean that citizens with varying levels of literacy and educational backgrounds are excluded from taking part equally in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990).

Other scholars have taken a different point of view, arguing that even though we may have expanded the public to include women and people of all marginalised social classes, this is still insufficient in trying to create Habermas's public sphere, as we exist within a social system where the public does not necessarily matter (Papacharissi, 2002). For example, it has been argued that the privatising market forces of our capitalist social system have produced a mass commercial culture, which has replaced the public sphere (McCarthy, 1995). Looking at commercialisation in relation to television and radio, it has been noted that advertising revenue has more of an impact on programming than democratic ideals (Papacharissi, 2002). McChesney (1995) believes that, given the dominant existing patterns of global capitalism, it is most likely that rather than creating a new political culture, the internet will simply adapt to an existing one.

Since Habermas' theorising of the public sphere, we have seen significant developments and changes in the media landscape. Print, television and radio are no longer the only dominant forms of media, but rather, we see a more diversified media landscape, with a particular rise in the popularity of online social media platforms. This means more current research around the different forms of media would need to be conducted in order to make the claim that newer forms of media still constitute part of the public sphere. More research needs to be done regarding whether or not the internet is able to extend the public to include marginalised groups

sufficiently where older forms of media could not, but also in relation to whether or not commercial imperatives have once more replaced public ideals in online spaces.

This paper aims to add to the already existing substantial body of literature surrounding the internet on Habermas's public sphere by discussing relevant criticisms mentioned above in relation to the practices of micro-influencers on Instagram. Debates regarding the separation of what is considered public and what is considered private are only further exacerbated by the carefully curated sharing of intimate details of one's private life in the pursuit of online authenticity by micro-influencers. Fraser's (1990) criticism regarding access also seems to still apply to debates regarding the internet as a form of public sphere in South Africa due to the highly unequal socio-economic context, coupled with the exorbitant data prices. However, the most damning criticism seems to come in the form of McCarthy's (1995) argument that the public sphere could be replaced by a mass commercial culture produced from privatising market forces. The online identity construction of micro-influencers seems to extend McCarthy's (1995) criticism insofar as the influencers construct their online identity in relation to their patterns of consumption.

2.1.3 Political economy of social media

Critical political economy of the media is a theory that aims to try and understand media products in relation to the dynamics of their production (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Critical political economy views the media as industrial and commercial organisations that produce and distribute commodities (Murdock and Golding, 1973: 205). It looks at private owned media and how these institutions integrate into general market processes of accumulation, how their strategies shape the communications landscape, and how they are able to exercise power, both institutionally and ideologically (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Elliot (1972: 144) defines political economy as a theory that investigates the organisational setting as well as social context within which content production took place. In this sense, it examines the ways in which news values and occupational ideologies are influenced by structures of power and

resources (Golding and Elliot, 1979). This theory examines the ways in which systems of ownership and funding affect media output.

Applying this in relation to older forms of mass media, one is able to engage with the ways in which ownership and funding structures of the media exert power and influence over their consumers. Political economy of the media also historically positions the media within society as a type of Habermasian public sphere. It looks at symbolic resources that are provided by cultural institutions as playing an essential role in the effective exercise of informed citizenship, which is defined as the right, as well as capacity, of an individual to participate fully within social life, and the ability to contribute to determining its future form (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Critical political economy is, therefore, a criticism of the structures of mass media within democratic societies, and the effects that can have on creating and sustaining a healthy public of informed citizens.

Fuch (2014: 89) argues that the world of social media is characterised, "by three antagonisms: a) the economic antagonism between users' data and social media corporations profit interests, b) the political antagonism between users' privacy and the surveillance-industrial-complex as well as citizens desire for accountability of the powerful and the secrecy of power, and c) the civil society antagonism between the creation of public spheres and the corporate and state colonisation of these spheres." Through contextualising social media within society with the help of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, Fuch (2014) argues for a return to Habermas's original, and more materialistic, conceptualisation of the public sphere that uses critical political economy of the media as a foundation for the analysis of social media.

Some scholars have argued that there has been little application of political economy of the media to new forms of online media (Mansell, 2004; McChesney, 2008). Mansell (2004) argues that due to this neglect of new forms of media by political economy, the overall economic and social dynamics of the production and consumption of new forms of online media, including social media, remain the subject of a degree of speculation. The nature of the

internet has raised some fundamental critical questions around the organisation of voluntary digital labour, the commercial push to appropriate contributions by users in the service of community production, and the changing terrain between amateur and professional activity (Murdock and Golding, 2016). These questions arise out of the fact that previously self-organised and voluntary cultural production would be mostly confined within particular localities or interest groups. However, online digital distribution allows for the potential for more generalised circulation, access, and appropriation of users' cultural products (Murdock and Golding, 2016).

McChesney (2008) argues that concerns regarding concentration and commercialisation of the media are in fact more pressing in relation to 21st century contemporary forms of media than ever before. Treating institutional and social relations of mass communication simply as given, or normal, and either implicitly neutral, or in some cases socially beneficial, scholars are unable to engage with political and intellectual issues facing contemporary forms of communication (McChesney, 2008). McChesney argued this within the context of the rise of Web 2.0, prior to the advent of Instagram and many current popular social networking sites. When looking at the powerful mediating role social networking platforms play, and the incredibly concentrated ownership thereof that we currently observe, McChesney's concerns seem more applicable now, over a decade later, than ever.

This study contends that to some extent, Mansell (2004) and McChesney's (2008) arguments still apply, particularly in relation to social networking sites. Political economy of the media has historically been a theory applied to news rooms, and broadcasting studios. However, this study found that using it as a lens with which to look at social networking sites, as suggested by Fuch (2014), provides valuable insights into the politics of identity construction, representation, and the online economic dynamics present within the mediated boundaries of social networking sites.

2.2 Social media influencers and self-branding

2.2.1 Identity construction as self-branding

Within the political climate of neoliberal individualism, one is able to correlate the popularity of the notion self-branding with the growth and development of social media platforms (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Self-branding, sometimes referred to as personal branding, involves the process of individuals developing their own distinctive public image to be used for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

Self-Branding, in the context of social media, concerns concepts of attention and narrative (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). There are a multitude of ways in which compelling narratives are able to attract and sustain an audience. However, what is key to the success of influencers is that their narratives are able to find a following though social media and stand out in the online attention economy, where one witnesses an unprecedented number of influencers competing with one another across more screens for an ever-increasingly distracted, dispersed, and privatised audience (Brody, 2001; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

Page (2012) argues that within the use of social media, there is a particular emphasis on the construction of one's identity as a type of product that can be consumed by their audience. Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) take this one step further, noting that there is a specific kind of identity construction that is driven by social media, which is a process of self-mediation. The content that users actually share with their audience is a highly curated, often abridged, snapshot of how they want to be perceived by their audience (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017).

Discourses around self-branding practices tend to often encourage entrepreneurial aspirants that draw upon the market logic, codes, and processes of mainstream cultural industries (Hearn, 2008; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Marwick (2013) argues that within the context of the internet, this type of identity construction, taking the form of socially mediated entrepreneurialism, is often conveyed through status-enhancing and attention-seeking behaviours.

In an online study taking a peek into the world of fashion bloggers, Duffy and Hund (2015), identify three main tropes that draw on contemporary logics of self-branding, as well as post-feminist sensibilities. The first they describe as the destiny of passionate work, in which:

> "Discourses of "passion" have been used to rationalise un- or under-compensated labour in both the fashion and new media sectors, illuminating how producers derive value from their creative activities irrespective of monetary compensation or material rewards" (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 4).

The bloggers considered in their study tended to invoke the narrative of career passion as their driving force, even though they are also earning sizeable incomes from their digital media brands (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

The second trope they identify is that of "staging the glam life" (Duffy and Hund, 2015). By this, they refer to the way in which bloggers tended to disrupt the binary between work and leisure. Marwick (2013; 122-123) describes the same process as "aspirational production", which is an attention-seeking practice, whereby, individuals present themselves in what appears to be a high, or higher, social status position. While this is a form of identity construction, Duffy and Hund (2015: 6) note that "The glam life" is a continually reiterated lifestyle that primarily exists through the aesthetics and language of commercial brands."

Duffy and Hund (2015), argue that attempting to navigate this personal brand paradox, whereby, the created self needs a consistent but distinct visual aesthetic and voice in order to make them self a potential partner for large commercial brands, requires significant self-discipline.

The third and final trope used by bloggers is referred to as "carefully curated personal sharing" (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 7). This third trope involved the bloggers finding a fine balance between presenting "the glam life", but still sharing enough personal elements of their

lives with their readers in order to come across as authentic. They argue that this is because the twentieth century has seen a progressive sentimentalisation of the public sphere, a concept Illouz (2007) named 'emotional capitalism' (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

These three findings are echoed in a study by Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017) a few years later, who found there to be three main reasons for the recent rise in popularity of self-branding:

1) Social media tacitly promises fame (and subsequent wealth) to 'ordinary' users and thus encourages practices of microcelebrity.

2)Within the political culture of neoliberal individualism, self-branding is encouraged with the promise of reward.

3) The commercial viability of some social media influencers, whose success depends on self-branding and practices of microcelebrity, has proven to be both inspirational and seemingly replicable (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017: 194).

2.2.2 Platform-specific self-branding

Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere (2017) also argue that self-branding is not necessarily practised in the same manner across platforms, but rather, in the form of platform-specific self-branding, where users create different brands across different platforms, due to the imagined affordances of each platform, as well as their placement within the larger social media ecology (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017). Their work situates itself within broader research that argues that the collapsed contexts of social media mean users react to this by creating and maintaining various socially mediated 'selves' (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017). They define these affordances as "[t]he complex relationship between technology's material and social factors; affordances represent the opportunity for an interaction between the technical properties of an object and the actions of a social agent" (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017: 3).

Gibbs et al. (2015:257) highlight a similar process that they refer to as 'platform vernacular', which is constituted by the unique combination of grammars, logics, and styles a social media platform comes to have. 'Platform vernaculars' contribute to what is possible on social media platforms through the affordances provided to, appropriated by and adapted by users (Gibbs et al., 2015; Leaver, Highfield and Abindin, 2020)

Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere (2017) contend that the imagined affordances of each platform are based upon three assumptions. The first is that of platform features (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017). This refers to considerations by the individual about the specific platforms material and design features, the platforms culture, as well as the way in which these elements interact within the larger mediated environment (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017).

The second imagined affordance centres on assumptions about the platforms audience (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017). They demonstrate how social media platform users have a sense of target audience that they aim to broadcast their content to, and therefore, aim to align their choice of platform with their desired audience (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017).

The third and final affordance refers to the producer's own self-concept (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017). They argue that users were also reflexive in relation to their own self-constructs, such as their own perceptions about their skills and abilities, their preferences and predilections, as well as what they intend to communicate in relation to their self-brand, to their respective networked publics (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017).

2.2.3 Word-of-mouth marketing

With the advent of new media technologies, and the rise in popularity of neoliberal individualism, it seems we have come full circle in the marketing department. Before any forms of media, there was only word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth marketing can be defined as a

naturally occurring phenomenon, affecting a significant amount of the majority of consumer purchase decisions (Brooks, 1957; Dichter, 1966; Kozinets et al., 2010). In order to capitalise on word-of-mouth marketing, marketers not only need to focus on 'what' was being said about their brand, but also 'who' was saying it (Hsu et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Kilgour, Sasser and Larke, 2015).

Research has demonstrated word-of-mouth marketing to be the primary factor that influences between 20% and 50% of all consumer purchase decisions (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 2). Its influence is the most significant when products are relatively expensive, as consumers tend to conduct more research, deliberate longer, and seek more opinions than they would otherwise (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 2). The right message, from the right person, is able to expand and resonate within relevant interested networks, positively affecting brand perception, market share, and consumer purchase rates (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 3). Intentional word-of-mouth campaigns involve identifying relevant influential individuals to become brand and product advocates (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 8).

The current literature identifies three main types of word-of-mouth marketing. The first is referred to as experiential word-of-mouth marketing. This accounts for 50% to 80% of all word-of-mouth marketing, and is understood as a direct result from consumers' experience with a product or service (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4). Experiential word-of-mouth marketing largely occurs when a consumer's experience with the product or service deviates from what they expect (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4). This deviation could be positive or negative, due to the fact that consumers rarely praise or complain about a product or service when they receive exactly what they expected to (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4).

The second type of word-of-mouth marketing is consequential word-of-mouth marketing. This occurs when consumers pass on messages about a product or service after coming into contact with the brand's traditional marketing campaigns (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4). It has been argued that interactivity and creativity are able to directly increase

the creation of positive consequential word-of-mouth marketing (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 7).

The third and final type is intentional word-of-mouth marketing. Intentional word-of-mouth marketing occurs when marketers and brands use celebrities as endorsements to trigger a positive consumer response in relation their product or service (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4). Intentional word-of-mouth marketing, however, is not hugely popular, as the effects are difficult to measure, and many marketers are unsure if they are able to successfully execute an intentional word-of-mouth marketing campaign (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 4).

Harnessing the positive effects of word-of-mouth marketing involves "providing customers with the opportunity to share positive experiences, and making the story relatable and relevant to the audience" (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 7). The initial point of departure for managing word-of-mouth marketing is "understanding which dimensions of word-of-mouth equity are most important to a product category" (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 7). That is a question as to whether it is the identity of the person conveying the message, what is being said about the brand, or the environment in which the message is circulated (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 7). Brands, of course, are not able to control what consumers tell other consumers. However, ambitious marketers are able to use word-of-mouth marketing to shift from simply consequential campaigning to intentional campaigning (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 8).

The accessibility, transparency, and reach of the internet has empowered marketers to once more turn to forms of word of mouth marketing as a means of encouraging consumer purchase decisions (Kozinets et al., 2010). Online, word-of-mouth marketing no longer operates on a simple one-to-one communication basis, but rather operates on a scale of one-to-many (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 2).

The advent of social media platforms has given theories of word of mouth marketing a new form in the shape of 'social media influencers'. Unlike any other slightly more traditional forms of media, social media is theorised as primarily an environment of consumer-to-consumer interaction (Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Ridings et al. 2006; Colleoni, 2013; Kilgour, Sasser and Larke, 2015). Therefore, it is believed that social media platforms allow users to rely more on social sources of information, such as influencers, than commercial sources to inform their actions and consumer behaviour (Pavlov and Stewart, 2000; Kilgour, Sasser and Larke, 2015).

2.2.4 Defining social media influencers

It has been argued that social media influencers are simply bloggers, celebrities, or pundits who have accrued a large online following (Hutchins and Tindall, 2016: 59). The role of these influencers is to create and distribute social media content around a brand in relation to their products that they have been given (Hutchins and Tindall, 2016: 64). For this reason, brands are typically interested in influencers who have both a high reach and trust with their followers (Burns, 2016).

Iqani (2019) however, argues that in order to understand the role social media influencers play in relation to branding, we first need to understand the different types of brand ambassadors that exist, and where social media influencers fit in in relation to these.

A brand ambassador is "an official or authorised representative of a brand […] that is held out to the public primarily for promotional purposes such as establishing or extending goodwill toward the brand" (Cohen, 2014: 1). It has been argued that there are three types of brand ambassadors that exist. Namely celebrity brand ambassadors, brand employees, as well as the brand customers themselves (Iqani, 2019).

2.2.5 Celebrities as sponsored brand ambassadors

Sponsorship is a process that occurs, "when a commercial brand hires a celebrity to be associated with the brand" (Kapferer, 2012: 93). The goal of any sponsorship deal is to take the values of a brand and align them with the values of a celebrity (Iqani, 2019) in order to establish and build brand equity.

2.2.6 Employees as brand ambassadors

Chernatony (2010), argues that employees are the original, first line of brand ambassadors, as their role is to try and maximise the assets of the company as a brand (Chernatony, 2010: 195). In this sense, the employees of a brand are not simply viewed as workers employed to do specific tasks, but also as storytellers who aim to spread the brand idea (Chernatony, 2010: 229). Cohen (2014), argues that employees are supposed to represent the brand in a personal capacity, thereby bringing the brand to life for the customer in a way that would not otherwise be possible through media communications.

2.2.7 Customers and consumers as brand ambassadors

Brands can be considered relational, built both online and offline by a multitude of different stake holders (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013). For this reason, consumers who spend time actively attaching themselves to brands are undertaking valuable work in building brand equity (Iqani, 2019). There has been a growing body of branding literature that views social media primarily as a word-of-mouth platform with the power to influencer consumer brand perceptions (Groeger and Buttle, 2014; Kimmel and Kitchen 2014; Schivinski and Dobrowski, 2016; Iqani, 2019).

Iqani (2019) argues that the concept of social media influencers centres on the third type of ambassador, by attempting to understand how ordinary consumers can represent a brand. The concept of social media influencers, however, does not appear to completely fit into the third type of ambassador, nor does it seem to fit within only a single type of ambassador mentioned above. Rather, the concept of social media influencers seems to straddle all three

types of ambassadors, borrowing different elements from each. Perhaps a more useful conceptualisation of social media influencers would be Senft's (2013) theory of micro-celebrities.

Senft (2013: 1) defines 'microcelebrity' as, "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same." Monus (as cited in Senft, 2013: 350) extends Andy Warhol's classic maxim, "[i]n the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes", noting rather that in the future, "everyone will be famous to just fifteen people". Senft (2013) explains that the idea of being 'famous to fifteen people', changes the celebrity game, as it blurs the lines between audience and community, two groups which traditionally required different modes of address. The difference here is that an audience is looking for someone to speak at, or to, them, where as a community consists of individuals who desire someone to speak with them (Senft, 2013). Audiences typically consist of a group of people whose focus is on the celebrity, or 'star', whereas within a community, the focus tends to shift between the different members. The concept of microcelebrity accounts for this shift in focus within a small community of people.

Another major element scholars researching this concept of microcelebrity note, is the level of online intimacy users create through sharing information regarding their private lives with other users. When examining celebrity practices on twitter, Marwick and Boyd (2011), find that celebrity is practiced through a process of the performance of 'backstage' access. Celebrities reveal to their audiences what appears to be private or personal information in order to create a level of intimacy between the participant and the follower (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Raun (2018) argues that intimacy, both as a type of genre and a type of capital, plays a significant role in the dynamics, strategies, and effective labour of micro-celebrities.

This paper argues that combining Iqani's (2019) types of brand ambassadors with Senft's (2013) definition of a microcelebrity is a more appropriate approach to understanding the role of social media micro-influencers in branding. This helps position the influencers both as

celebrity brand ambassadors, as well as consumer ambassadors, while considering the online ecosystem of mediated networks within which they exist.

2.2.8 A critical perspective on influencer brand value creation

Brands are democratic in the sense that they present an ongoing dialogue or conversation whereby consumers help build them simply by participating in the market (Frank, 2010). For this reason, it is important to understand the political and economic forces operating on this labour of the consumer (Iqani, 2019). Brands are not simply immaterial sets of ideas or beliefs, but rather represent actual assets that have value in and of themselves (Iqani, 2019). The asset value is derived solely from consumer attention (Arvidson, 2005: 7). Iqani (2019: 233) explains that, "critical writing on branding situates it as a sophisticated and dynamic force of neoliberal capital, aimed at consolidating commercial and neoliberal power."

The marketing of global corporations remains very interested in dictating what consumers should dream (Ewen, 1976: 109). However, within the context of online networked publics such as social media platforms, consumers are given the perception of freedom to determine what that dream looks like (Iqani, 2019). For actors using digital social media platforms to create and distribute content, which in some cases might promote or represent a commercial brand as well as their own personae, there exists a constant tension between action that is self-empowering, and the possible exploitation by economic power structures (Iqani, 2019).

Banet-Weiser demonstrated this in writing about young women in YouTube videos, noting that; "[y]oung women can articulate, craft and broadcast identities on YouTube, but they do so within the commercial context of branding and advertising, and this context can contain and limit young women." (2012: 66). This was also illustrated through the analysis of individually produced and shared Instagram photographs, where it was found that, like traditional mass media advertisements, powerful stories were put forward where the concept of happiness and freedom were equated with consumption (Jhally, 2006: 103; Iqani, 2019).

Iqani (2019), argues that this context, "results in a culture in which young people ask less who they are, and more how they can sell themselves" (Iqani, 2019: 234).

Ewen (1976: 14) notes that, "today nearly every moment of human attention is being converted into an occasion for a sales pitch"; a statement that seems more relevant now that ever within the context of social media. Iqani (2019: 234) argues that online identities exist in a hyper-mediated world, where they are directly engaged in both economies of production and consumption. Iqani notes that "[s]ocial media influencers contribute to the creation of the value of brands by engaging in the affective, emotional and communicative labour that gives brands meaning and influencer" (2019: 234).

2.2.9 Commodification of the self

The commodification of the self has been expressed in two ways by scholars. The first form of the commodification of the self refers to a shift in one's perception of oneself, where one begins to view oneself as a product that has a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). Theories of self-branding, which emerged in the 1990s, are often constructed along these lines, where they stress identifying ones marketable assets as a means of standing out from competition within a saturated job market.

Fundamentally, personal branding is a form of image marketing that operates just like branding any other product (Davis, 2003). Concepts of self-branding first emerged in an edition of the popular American business magazine Fast Company in 1997 with the publication of an article by Peters entitled *The Brand Called You* (2003). In this article, Peters (1997) argues that if we acknowledge branding as such a powerful tool in the process of selling products, then it only makes sense that we should applying the same concepts to the individual, and 'self-brand', as a means of standing out from other individuals within a competitive job market. Self-branding requires one to get in touch with their 'selling parts' in order to consciously craft these traits into a distinctive personae and relentlessly focussed image (Peters, 1997; Davis, 2003). According to Peters (1997), substance is not enough, but rather packaging accounts for a lot,

and therefore self-branders need style. The goal of self-branding is to turn oneself into an object of desire within the job market, via self-promotion (Peter, 1997; Davis, 2003).

Andrusia and Hanskins (2000), argue that self-branding is in fact an exercise in self-discovery. Davis (2003), however, argues that the process of self-branding is fundamentally about self-commodification. This is because to commodify something would be to relate to it as an object that can be bought or sold for, what Marx would describe, as an exchange value (Davis, 2003). Commodifying and marketing ourselves requires a utilitarian way of relating to ourselves, as well as others, because to commodify ourselves in an attempt to maximise our exchange value, where we envision ourselves as marketable objects (Davis, 2003).

The second form of the commodification of the self is noted to be the process whereby one begins to view one's identity as being constructed through the products they consume (Davis, 2003). Davis (2003: 46) argues that

> "To the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification, companies can position their goods and images not simply as fulfilling desires, but as meeting a felt need for connection, recognition, and values to live by… as one is turned into a consumer, their social identities become increasingly shaped by their patterns of consumption."

Scholars writing about the second form of the commodification of the self, have argued that this form of self-identification emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when a societal shift in relation to how people expressed their self-identification occurred (Bell, 1976; Yankelovich, 1981; Bellah et al., 1985; Davis, 2003). This shift placed new emphasis on the exploration of immediate experience, on finding one's inner voice, on the satisfaction of personal desires, on actively distancing oneself from institutional goals, and on allowing oneself to freely express one's intimate feelings (Bell, 1976; Yankelovich, 1981; Bellah et al., 1985; Davis, 2003). Davis (2003) refers to this as a shift in self-definition within society from one's self-definition being

based on achieving institutional goals within society, to one's self-definition being based on satisfying, or what Davis (2003) refers to as "their individual impulses". This shift constituted viewing one's feelings and actions as an expression of one's real self, as opposed to simply their alignment with institutional goals (Davis, 2003). Davis (2003), titles this transition a shift in one's self-definition being based on their 'institutions', to their self-definition being based on the satisfaction of the inner 'impulses'.

This second conceptualisation of the commodification of the self begins to realise one's 'real self' through the choices they make regarding their individual consumption of images, fashion and lifestyle available in the market (Davis, 2003: 46). These choices then become the means by which we perceive others, and vice versa (Davis, 2003: 46). Robert Dunn (1997) argues 'self-formation' to be a process which is in fact exteriorised, due to the fact that the locus of the self is not constituted through inner self, but on an outer material world of objects and images, which are valorised by commodity culture.

This paper will forward the idea that this second form of the commodification of the self, echoes Hall's (1996) conceptualisation of positioning theory as being a means of self-identification. Hall (1996) argues that through discursive practices within society, we are exposed to a number of different discourses and subject positions. Positioning theory (Hall, 1996) claims that one's identity is constructed as an ensemble of these different subject positions. This research will put forward the idea that the second type of conceptualisation of the commodification of the self that Davis (2003) describes, combines Hall's (1996) positioning theory with notions of consumer culture. By doing so, it argues that one's identity is constructed through their consumption patterns, effectively meaning that one's identity could be understood as an ensemble of different consumption positions.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced major debates within media studies which are relevant to the concept of social media influencers, online identity construction, and influencer marketing. It

opened by engaging with literature regarding relevant debates around identity construction, the internet as an extension of the public sphere, and the importance of applying critical political economy of the media to the context of the highly mediated environment of social networking sites. It then moved on to discuss concepts of self-branding, as well as platform specific self-branding, and influencer marketing as primarily a form of word-of-mouth marketing. The concept of micro-influencers was then defined, and a critical perspective on influencer brand value creation was discussed. Finally, theories of the commodification of the self were presented.

Section 2.1 began by defining concepts of identity construction as an inherently political process. Beck (1997), defined individualisation as an inherently political process of identity construction which has been characterised by reflexive modernity. Such conceptualisations of individualisation construct the notion of citizenship as a combination of one's 'identity' and 'the political', defining citizenship as a distinct aspect of an individual's identity, which interacts with all of the other aspects which culminate in defining who an individual's self (Mouffe, 1992; Beck, 1997; Bakardjieva, 2009). Gidden (1991), argues that politics is fundamentally a project to address the question of 'who do I want to be?'

Positioning theory has also been used as a means of explaining identity construction, whereby an individual's identity is constructed by positioning themself in relation to the different discursive repertoires, which are provided by their cultural context, and then by speaking from these respective positions throughout the course of their daily life (Davies and Harre, 1990; Bakardjieva, 2009). Beck (1997), describes this same process as "subpolitics".

It is in line with the arguments above that proponents of the internet believe that the internet holds the power to improve political processes, as it is able to provide a space to connect citizens, thereby increasing the flow of information, and exposing them to different subject positions (Noveck, 2009; Halpen and Gibbs, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012).

Section 2.1 then moved on to discuss the internet as a possible extension of a Habermasian notion of the public sphere. Habermas (1964) argued that a public sphere existed, which constituted a realm of social life within society where something along the lines of public opinion can be formed through rational public debate. Proponents of the internet have argued that the internet is able to extend the public sphere insofar as it is able to facilitate and encourage discussions that promote the exchange of ideas and opinions (Papacharissi, 2002). In looking at social media and influencer identity construction, it is important to include debates regarding the public sphere in order to engage with the questions of the extent to which social media platforms could be considered an extension of the public sphere. Social media platforms allow for the increased exchange of ideas.

It has also been argued, however, that the privatising market forces of our capitalist social system have produced a mass commercial culture which has all but replaced the public sphere (McCarthy, 1995). Papacharissi (2002), argues that, looking at commercialisation in relation to television and radio platforms, we have witnessed a shift to where advertising revenue has more of an impact on programming than democratic ideals do. McChesney (1995) argues reasonably that the biggest obstacle the internet faces in extending the public sphere are the dominant existing patterns of global capitalism.

The final portion of section 2.1 discusses mass commercial culture appropriating the internet for the promotion of consumer culture, by including relevant debates regarding the critical political economy of the media. Critical political economy of the media is a theoretical approach to studying the media that aims to try and understand media products in relation to the dynamics of production (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Central to critical political economy of the media is studying how private owned media institutions integrate into general market processes of accumulation, how their strategies impact communication landscapes, and how this allows them to exercise power, both ideologically and institutionally (Murdock and Golding, 2016). McChesney (2008), argued that the concentration and commercialisation of

online media are critical to understanding the dynamics of the productions of online media. Questions around the organisation of voluntary labour, commercial pressure to appropriate user contributions in service of community production, and the changing landscape between amateur and professional media production are crucial to engage with in relation to contemporary forms of online media (Murdock and Golding, 2016).

Section 2.2 began by introducing arguments within literature regarding identity construction and self-branding. Self-branding refers to the process of individuals developing their own distinctive public image, which they use for commercial and/or cultural capital gain (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Within the context of social media, self-branding centres on notion of narrative and attention (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Page (2012) argues that on social media, users place particular emphasis on the construction of their identity as being a type of product that can be consumed by their audience.

Discourses around self-branding tend to encourage entrepreneurial aspirants, drawing upon market logic and processes of mainstream cultural industries (Hearn, 2008; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Marwick (2013), believes that identity construction which takes place on the internet is a form of socially mediated entrepreneurialism, which is often conveyed through status-enhancing or attention-seeking behaviour.

This section then went on to discuss the ways in which self-branding is exercised on different platforms. Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere (2017) argue that self-branding is not necessarily practised in the same manner across different social media platforms, but rather, they argue for what they refer to as platform-specific self-branding. They argue that the imagined affordances of each platform, as well as their positioning within the larger online social media ecology, encourages users to create different brands across different platforms (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017).

Gibbs et al. (2017) describe a similar process whereby they argue that the unique combination of styles, logics, and grammars of a platform all contribute to what is possible based on the affordances provided to users, as well as the affordances adapted and appropriated by users. The unique styles, logics and grammars of a platform impact the use of what Gibbs et al. (2017: 257) refer to as "platform vernacular". The platform specific vernacular as defined by Gibbs et al. (2017) echoes the notions of platform specific branding as defined by Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere (2017), whereby the affordances provided, adapted and appropriated inform the ways in which users operate on a platform.

Section 2.2 then included discussions regarding word-of-mouth marketing, as a means of establishing word-of-mouth marketing as the foundation for social media influencer marketing. Word-of-mouth marketing refers to a naturally occurring phenomenon, which claims that word-of-mouth information passed on affects a significant amount of consumer purchase decisions (Brooks, 1957; Dichter, 1966; Kozinets et al., 2010). Capitalising on word-of-mouth marketing requires marketers focussing on not only 'what' is said about the brand, but 'who' it is that is saying it (Hsu et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Kilgour, Sasser and Larke, 2015). The right message, disseminated form the right person, is able to expand and resonate with relevant interested networks, resulting in a positive effect on brand perception, market share, and consumer purchase rates (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 8). Harnessing positive word-of-mouth marketing effects requires, "providing customers with the opportunity to share positive experiences, making the story relatable and relevant to the audience" (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010: 7).

The definition of social media micro-influencers put forward in this section combined conceptualisations of brand ambassadors with Senft's (2013) notion of micro-celebrities. According to Cohen (2014: 1), a brand ambassador is, "an official or authorised representative of a brand […] that is held out to the public primarily for promotional purposes". Iqani (2019) argues that there are three distinctive types of brand ambassadors that exist: celebrity

sponsorship as brand ambassadors, employees as brand ambassadors, and customers as brand ambassadors. Iqani (2019) argues that influencer marketing falls within the third type, viz. customers as brand ambassadors. However, it was argued that only understanding the concept of social media influencer marketing as a type of consumer brand ambassador does not fully capture the essence of influencer marketing. For this reason, Senft's (2013) definition of microcelebrities was introduced. Microcelebrity is "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (Senft, 2013: 1). Understanding micro-influencers as a form of Senft's (2013) theory of microcelebrities provides a more nuanced perspective on how micro-influencers are able to fit under more than just customers as brand ambassadors, but are also a form of celebrities as brand ambassadors, as well as employees as brand ambassadors.

Following discussions regarding the definition of micro-influencers, a critical perspective on influencer brand value creation was presented. It was argued that brands are democratic in so far as they are constructed through ongoing dialogue, whereby consumers build them simply by participating in the market (Frank, 2010: 254). "Social media influencers contribute to the creation of the value of brands by engaging in the affective, emotional and communicative labour that gives brands meaning and influence" (Iqani, 2019: 234). Iqani (2019) argued that for influencers who create and distribute content which is aimed to promote both a commercial brand as well as their own personae, there exists a constant tension between action by the influencer which is self-empowering, and the possible exploitation by economic structures.

Finally, the chapter closed by introducing relevant debates within academic literature regarding the commodification of the self. Within mainstream academic literature, the commodification of the self has been expressed in two distinct ways. The first form of the commodification of the self refers to a shift that occurs, where one begins to perceive oneself as being a product with a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). This tends to include theories

of self-branding, where one begins to stress one's marketable assets as a means of standing out from the competition within a saturated job market (Davis, 2003).

The second form of the commodification of the self that has been expressed by scholars refers to a process where one does not views oneself as a product necessarily, but when one begins to view one's identity as being constructed through the products they consume (Davis, 2003). This commodification of the self occurs when one begins to realise one's 'real self' through the choices they make in regards to their individual consumption of image, fashion and lifestyle available in the market (Davis, 2003: 46).

An argument was put forward in this section that the second form of the commodification of the self, echoes elements of Hall's (1996) conceptualisation of positioning theory as a means of self-identification. Combining Hall's (1996) positioning theory with the second form of the commodification of the self, where one's identity is constructed through their consumption patterns, we can begin to understand the commodified self as being an ensemble of different consumption positions.

This chapter opened with discussion regarding identity construction, fundamentally positioning identity construction as a political process. Arguments regarding the extent to which social networking sites on the internet can constitute an extension of a Habermasian notion of the public sphere were introduced. This was followed up with the introduction of theories regarding critical political economy of the media. Section 2.2 of this chapter introduced debates regarding self-branding, platform specific self-branding, and word-of-mouth marketing as being the foundation for influencer marketing. A definition of micro-influencers was presented, which combined Senft's (2013) theory of microcelebrities, with Iqani's (2019) definitions of the three types of brand ambassadors that exist. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion regarding theories of the commodification of the self. Two separate conceptualisations of the commodification of the self were presented. The first being a process whereby one views the self as a marketable product with an exchange value; the

second being a process in which one's identity is fundamentally constructed through the products one consumes. Hall's (1996) positioning theory was related to the second conceptualisation of the commodification of the self, arguing for a form of the commodification of the self, which can be understood and an ensemble of one's consumption positions.

Chapter 3 - Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This chapter will unpack the methodological approach that was taken in relation to data collection and analysis within the scope of this research project. It will also include discussion around relevant ethical consideration. The methodology portion of this chapter will cover the sampling, focus groups, individual interviews and content analysis that formed the data collection portion of the study. These research methods will be discussed in further detail.

The portion of this chapter devoted to ethical considerations will address arguments relating to the ethics of conducting human subject research, discussions around debates of whether or not social media content should be considered public or private, copyright considerations, as well as an overview of the ethics and protocols of conducting focus group sessions and individual interviews.

3.1 Sampling

This project looked specifically at Instagram fashion and lifestyle micro-influencers based in the Western Cape, Cape Town. The definition of micro-influencer used for this project are Instagrammers who are a type of "microcelebrity" (Senft, 2008) who have managed to accrue for themselves a significant online following, who then use this online following, and the social capital that comes with it, to benefit through access to financial resources (Abidin, 2015). In order for each of the Instagrammers to be classified as a micro-influencer for this project, they had to demonstrate that they had taken part in either some type of brand deal or brand collaboration for remuneration. Remuneration could come in the form of monetary compensation. However, equally, remuneration could be in the form of material goods, for example clothes. The latter is important to note as micro-influencers tended to receive remuneration as material goods. However, these material goods were still given to them under the pretence they publish content with the product to their followers. The remuneration for their broadcasting about a brand to their followers is very often simply products from that brand.

The deals between influencers and brands were in some cases formally organised beforehand, where compensation was contingent on certain published deliverables. However, in other cases, it was much more informal, where a brand never actually stipulated any requirements from the influencer, but merely gave the influencer material remuneration with no communicated expectations. Amongst micro-influencers, this seemed to be the most common form of collaboration. However formal or informal the agreement between the brands and the influencer, the intention on the brand's part is always to associate themselves with the influencer and the influencer's following. In all cases, the deal requires the influencer publishing or broadcasting to their following regarding said brand. Influencer marketing is premised on the idea that influencers are able to impact their followers beliefs and practices so long as they are able to captivate and maintain the attention of their followers (Hearn, 2010; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015). The sample of influencers in this study had following that ranged between 1,000 followers and 30,000 followers.

For the interview and focus group section of the project, seven influencers were spoken to. This included one focus group of three influencers, and four individual interviews. The content analysis portion of the used a sample of 20 micro-influencers. 10 Instagram posts per influencer (20 influencers) were coded, meaning a total of 200 posts were analysed in the content analysis.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the influencers. This was to ensure all influencers who took part in this project met the aforementioned criteria. The influencer community within Cape Town is fairly intimate and collaborative, meaning sampling took on a snowball effect, where identifying and meeting with influencers led to the introduction of other micro-influencers. Contact between influencers was either evident through micro-influencer's Instagram posts, or was made reference to in face-to-face conversation.

3.2 Focus groups

Focus group sessions are centred around group discussions, and the aim is to enable and encourage group discussion (Gill et al., 2008). Gill et al. (2008) argue that the aim of a focus group session is to uncover a group's collective view in relation to a particular topic through group discussion. Focus groups were particularly useful in this project, as it was a space for micro-influencers to engage with one another around a few semi-structured questions, which are able to bring to light broad themes and trends in relation to being a micro-influencer that the interviewer would not have otherwise had access to. The reason for this is that focus groups encourage peer-to-peer engagement, meaning they are not simply responding to questions from an interviewer, but engaging in questions and debate with one another about common experiences and practices of operating as a micro-influencer on Instagram. Focus group sessions are able to highlight a collective way of thinking and understanding experiences within a particular group (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

One substantial focus group session was conducted, and consisted of three micro-influencers. The focus group session was recorded, and the audio recordings were transcribed after each session. Once the transcribing was complete, a thematic discourse analysis was performed on the transcription in order to bring latent themes with the texts to the surface.

Discourse can be defined as being comprised of two elements: firstly, it looks at the articulation of a particular point of view; but secondly it is also concerned with the exchange of said points of view within a group setting (O' Shaughnessy, Stadler, and Casey, 2016). A discourse analysis, therefore, aims to uncover the latent meanings articulated by individuals in order to identify the main themes in relation to that discourse (Hesmondalgh, 2006). A thematic discourse analysis on the transcripts of the focus groups conducted was able to uncover the common practices and perceptions regarding Instagram usage, and influence practice among the micro-influencers involved.

3.3 Interviews

While focus groups are useful at identifying broader themes in relation to group practices and perceptions, they can sometimes lack depth. For this reason, individual interviews were then conducted on a one-on-one basis, where the interviewer and interviewee were able to go into a deeper level of discussion around operating as a micro-influencer. The interactive nature of qualitative research where initial data analysis coincides with data collection (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) meant that questions for individual interviews evolved along the way and were often informed by the focus group sessions and other interviews, as it is through dialogue in conversation that more questions arise (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. Semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewee to share with the interviewer rich description phenomena and experiences within conversation, reserving the latter interpretation of the conversation to the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The interview questions shifted away slightly from being centred around the micro-influencer community as a whole and the communities' practices, and provided a deeper look into the individual practices and experiences of the interviewees.

In total, four individual interviews were conducted. Each interview was recorded just as in the focus group sessions, and the audio files were transcribed post-interview. Again, a thematic discourse analysis was conducted on the transcripts to uncover the latent themes present within each interview, as well as isolate main themes which occur through the respective interviews.

3.4 Content analysis

Macnamara (2005) explains that media content analysis is a type of non-intrusive research method that allows for the examination of a wide range of data, over a long period in order to identify popular discourses and their meanings. Typically, within media research methods, there have been two main approaches to content analysis, the first being a quantitative approach, and the second being a qualitative approach. These different approaches have also

been conceptualised as the humanist and behaviourist approaches to content analysis. Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 32) explain: "Behavioural content analysis is not always or necessarily conducted using quantitative or numerical methods, but the two tend to go together. Similarly, humanist content study naturally gravitates towards qualitative analysis."

Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 31), also explain that the aim of a content analysis is to impose some sort of order on a collection of media in order to understand their meanings. Media, however, are characterised by a wide range of factors that include elements such as the medium, production techniques employed, messages communicated, sources quoted, and the context in which the media content was published (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 31).

Berger (1991: 272-273), illustrates a quantitative approach in their definition of media content analysis, noting that "Content analysis… is a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, or whatever) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular form of art."

A quantitative media content analysis focuses on measuring factors such as size and frequency of media messages, and uses these factors to determine the impact of media messages. It attempts to quantify media texts into statistical data, in order to be able to measure it scientifically.

Many media scholars, however, argue that quantitative content analysis on its own is not sufficient in determining the impact of media messages. Newbold et al. (2002: 80) explain:

> "The problem (with quantitative content analysis) is the extent to which the quantitative indicators are interpreted as intensity of meaning, social impact, and the like. There is no simple relationship between media texts and their impact, and it would be too simplistic to base decisions in this regard on mere figures obtained from statistical content analysis."

A qualitative content analysis differs in that it attempts to explain the relationship between a text and its likely audience meaning, acknowledging that media texts are polysemic in nature, and attempts to determine the meaning of a media text to its audience (Macnamara, 2005). A qualitative content analysis looks at factors such as audience, media and context in order to understand the meaning of a text, as opposed to only engaging with the text itself (Macnamara, 2005).

It is widely argued by media scholars, that in order to be able to fully understand the potential meanings and impacts of media texts, a combination of quantitative content analysis, as well as qualitative content analysis should be used (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Hansen et al., 1998; Macamara, 2005). This study, therefore, employed a combination of both quantitative and qualitative elements of content analysis when looking at the influencers' posts.

Posts were collected with a mobile phone, by screenshot. The use of screenshots as the method for data collection also allowed for the collection of other data that relates to the post, for example, the amount of likes, views and comments a post received. This was useful in attempting to try to evaluate the success of a post, as well as help to inform the practices of the micro-influencers and how they made use of the different affordances of the platform.

The affordances coded for referred to all of the specific elements the influencers were able to edit and control when posting content to Instagram. The posts were coded according to 7 elements relating to platform affordances. These were:

1. Is the content shared in the post, a Photo or Video?
2. Does the Instagrammer tag other users in the post (within the image and/or the caption)? Yes or No
3. Is the tagged person a: a) Brand; b) Influencer; c) Friend; d) Photographer?
4. Does the Instagrammer use Hashtags in the post caption? Yes or No
5. Does the Instagrammer include a Geo-tag on the post? Yes or No
6. If a Geotag is included, is it a) Tagging a real location or b) Tagging a fictional location?
7. Did the influencer reply to all comments on the post? Yes or No

Within the realm of qualitative content analysis, narratology and semiotics offered efficacy (Newbold et al., 2002). Narratology focuses on the narrative element within a text, with an emphasis on understanding the meaning that is constructed by the story's structure and choice of words (Newbold et al., 2002). Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems, and how readers may interpret them (Newbold et al, 2002).

A code book was be created for the content analysis in order to allow for the systematic and consistent analysis of the data. The code book contained guidelines for both the quantitative and the qualitative elements of content analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations

When conducting human subject research, the potential ramifications of one's research on the participants who take part in the study needs to be factored into the researcher's approach to the study. Moreno et al. (2013: 709), define human subjects, within the concept of human subject research, as a living, "individual about whom an investigator obtains data through interaction with the individual, or identifiable private information."

This definition of human subject research, situates parts of this study firmly in the aforementioned field. The interview component of this study is, very obviously, considered data, which the researcher has obtained through direct face-to-face interaction with the participants. The collection of data through Instagram, however, is not quite as clear cut.

Given the that the field of social media research is a new, and rapidly changing, field, there are not yet any clear ethical frameworks for researchers entering the field to follow (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). That being said, this study applied concepts, and ethical considerations, of human subject research to its approach in studying Instagram content. While the collection of photographic, visual or audio data through Instagram does not necessarily constitute face-to-face interaction with a subject, there is a form of online interaction when the researcher comes into contact with content posted by participants. The researcher also cannot

access any Instagram content without their own dedicated Instagram account. Therefore, the researchers account comes into online contact with the participants account when accessing the participants content. This then raises some key ethical considerations borrowed from other forms of human subject research around what content can be considered public, as well as looking at issues of privacy and the personal risks involved for participants.

3.6 Public vs. private

Establishing whether Instagram content is considered public or private information is important when asking participants for consent. It is easy to simply make the claim that because they have published the content on Instagram, and they do not have their account set as private, their content is within the public domain, and therefore does not require consent when studying it (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). However, Boyd and Crawford (2012: 672), argue that "it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data is accessible… The process of evaluating the research ethics cannot be ignored simply because the data are seemingly public."

Moreno et al. (2013) state that if a social networking site requires one to create an account and sign in with a user's name and password, it cannot necessarily be considered the public domain. Thus, any content posted might not necessarily be regarded as private, but consent to use the content would be required. Instagram requires one to create an Instagram account in order to view any content on Instagram. Creating an account requires setting up a profile using an email address, password, and unique profile handle.

Creating an Instagram account also requires one to agree to Instagram's terms of use policies. It can be tempting for researchers to conflate users agreeing to terms of use, which many times (and more specifically in the case of Instagram) include policies around accessing and sharing/re-use of data by third parties, as a form of informed consent (Salmon, 2014; Townsend and Wallace, 2016). One of the major flaws with this argument is that most users report that they in fact have not read the terms and conditions relating to the use of a particular

platform thoroughly, and therefore, if one is going to use users' agreeing to the terms of use as a form of consent, it would be unethical to refer to this consent as informed. Secondly, Boyd and Crawford's (2012: 672) objection that simply having access to data does not necessarily mean it is ethical to use that data for research purposes would still apply.

In order to engage with these ethical considerations around privacy, Townsend and Wallace (2016) argue that the central question is whether or not the social media user is able to reasonably expect their content to be viewed by a stranger. If the user could reasonably expect their content to be viewed by strangers, Townsend and Wallace (2016) would not consider that to be private information. However, if the user could reasonably expect that strangers will not be able to view their content, regardless of whether a stranger does manage to access the content or not, Townsend and Wallace (2016), would argue that the information could be considered private. This argument about reasonably expecting one's content to be observed by strangers was to be applied to the case of Instagram for the sake of this study, in order to ethically justify the use of certain users' content.

This study was also only researching content, which was posted by social media influencers only. Social media influencers on Instagram differ from private users, as their primary aim is to engage with as big an audience as possible. The larger their audience, the more attention they are able to leverage in the online attention economy, and the more profitable their profiles can become. Townsend and Wallace (2016), state that content posted by public figures of any sort on their personal social media accounts is less problematic, because the aim of posting the content is to reach as wide an audience as possible, and therefore, they should reasonably expect all of the content they post to be accessed and observed by strangers. This study argues that social media influencers fit into this category of public figures. Townsend and Wallace (2016), also argue that when conducting social media research, it is always important to ensure anonymity, unless the users are public figures intending on

dispersing their content as widely as possible. It, therefore, would not be unethical to identify social media influencers within this study.

With that being said, influencers were still contacted in advance for consent, as explained below under copyright considerations, in order to inform them of the research being conducted before any of the data for the content analysis was collected. Instagram requires the minimum age of users to be 13 years old. However, due to the legalities of giving informed consent, only influencers over the age of 18, who can legally be considered adults will be approached for this study. This ensured that the participants were fully consenting adults, who are legally allowed to give consent on their own behalf.

3.7 Copyright considerations

Agreeing to Instagram's terms of use means that all Instagram users sign a licensing agreement with Instagram, that allows Instagram to use the content without any compensation. Instagram, however, make no claim to the intellectual property of the content, but rather acknowledge that the content is still the intellectual property of the user, and will credit them as such. Instagram's licensing agreement allows for them to reuse a user's content wherever they feel necessary. This licensing agreement, however, does not necessarily extend to third parties, such as researchers. Therefore, written consent allowing the use of their content within the content analysis was acquired from the influencers beforehand. The researcher claims no intellectual property rights or licensing over the content, and will ensure that wherever content is used in the case of this study, proper attribution to the content is given. This agreement will only extend as far as the content being eligible to be included in this study, and will not contain any rights for the researcher to access the content for commercial purposes.

3.8 Interview and focus group ethics

All interviews were recorded, and along with written consent, verbal consent was requested at the beginning of any interview, and included in the recorded audio clip. Personal information (for example contact information or home address) regarding the influencers will

remain private. However, public elements of their Instagram practices relating to the study may be included. Influencers were at any time able to ask to leave the interview and to be removed from the study, or, outline to the interviewer what information was private or sensitive and could not be included in the study. All conversations were recorded to ensure proper ethical procedures are followed.

In relation to the interview portion of this study, anonymity was also important, as it was key to discuss influencer marketing practices, and past influencer marketing deals. Particularly with informal micro-influencer deals there are often no non-disclosure agreements signed. However, disclosure of certain information may affect the influencers professional reputation. For the sake of protecting their professional reputation, and ensuring no harm is caused in relation to brand relations of future brand prospects, all participants will remain anonymous within the research paper

3.9 Conclusion

This study deployed triangulation through the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, focus group discussions, and individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used. The sample of 20 influencers that was used for the content analysis was selected purposively in order to ensure the influencers met the relevant criteria to be considered micro-influencers. Of these 20 influencers, three took part in a focus group discussion, and four took part in individual interviews as well.

The aim of the focus group was to uncover the groups collective view in relation to the semi-structured questions posed by the researcher through group discussion. The individual interviews, however, were able to uncover more depth in relation to the practices of the micro-influencers as they face-to-face individual interviews allow for a deeper level of discussion. The questions for the focus groups and individual interview were semi-structured in nature. Semi-structured questions allow for the participants to share rich descriptions of phenomena

and experiences with the interviewer (DiCocco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed, and once transcription was complete, a thematic discourse analysis was performed on the transcripts in order to uncover major latent themes that emerged during the discussions.

A content analysis was performed on a sample of images collected from the 20 micro-influencers. The most recent 10 posts per influencer at the time of data collection were recorded. Overall the content analysis analysed 200 images. The goal of a content analysis is to impose some form of order on a collection of media, as a means of understanding their meanings (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 31). A quantitative content analysis focusses on measuring factors such as size and frequency of media messages, in an attempt to measure the impact the messages have. A qualitative content analysis is different in that it attempt to explain the relationship between a text and its most likely audience meaning, while acknowledging that media texts are polysemic (Macnamara, 2005).

The posts analysed in the content analysis were collected via screenshot. Screenshots allowed the collection of not just the visual text component of the post, but also the use of other platform affordances such as commenting, geotagging and hash tagging. A code book that contained both quantitative and qualitative elements was created for the analysis of the screenshots collected.

Finally, this chapter closed by putting forward relevant ethical debates regarding human subject research and social media research. When conducting human subject research, it is important to consider the potential ramifications of one's work on the participants who take part. In order to mitigate any potential negative ramifications, the identities of the participants were kept anonymous.

In debating whether or not social media research should be considered public or private, this chapter built upon Townsend and Wallace's (2016) argument, whereby they argue that one

should consider information public if a user can reasonably expect their content to be viewed by a stranger. For this reason, only influencers whose accounts were listed on Instagram as 'public' were included in the sample. Listing their account as public meant the influencers could not only reasonably expect strangers to view their content, but were more than likely intending for strangers to view their content given the nature of operating online as a micro-influencer.

Chapter 4 - Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis is divided into three sections. The first examines the different elements the influencers made use of in their posts. This was framed within the context of platform affordances, and the coding conducted aimed to observe trends within the use of the multitude of affordances available to the influencers. What was observed was that across the sample of influencers, there were no distinct trends in terms of what affordances were used most. Rather, what was observed was that each influencer seemed to have their own approach to which affordances they used in communicating with their followers, and they remained consistent in this regard. Each influencer seemed to have their own unique consistent approach to communicating on the platform. This was understood as a means of establishing their online authenticity. By remaining consistent and unique in how they present their posts, they are able to construct an online voice, and unique approach to communicating with followers that their followers are able to recognise.

The second section of the content analysis examined the photographic content present within the images posted by the influencers. It was noted that in almost all of the posts that were coded, the influencers were present as the main subject. In this sense, their Instagram feed is a curated album of posts about themselves. The images were also coded for products and brands present within the posts. It was found that only half of the posts contained a brand or product of some description. This seemed to be a deliberate decision taken on behalf of the influencers in order to avoid their feed appearing as being appropriated solely for advertising purposes. Within the photographic content, the influencer's clothing was also coded for. It was found that overall, female presenting influencers wore more revealing clothing than male presenting influencers. It was also noted that among female influencers, there was a positive relationship between the extent to which clothes were revealing and the level of engagement with a post. The more revealing the clothing in female presenting influencers' posts, the higher the degree of engagement. This trend was not observed among male presenting influencers.

The third and final section examined the ways in which identity was constructed within the posts. In order to do this, concepts of gender displays in mainstream media advertising by Goffman (1979), and Gill (2009), were utilised. What was observed was that cues such feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination and licensed withdrawal were common within content posted by female presenting influencers, and on the whole, were generally absent in the content posted by male-presenting influencers. In this way, it seemed that the influencers were relying on, and recreating, mainstream depictions of gender within their online gendered identities.

4.1 Platform Affordances

Every Instagram post brings with it the opportunity to make use of multiple features. The more features one uses on a post, the more data they publish in relation to that post. However, the primary aim of any Instagram post is to share visual content with your followers. This visual content can be in the format of still images, like photographs, or in video format. Along with the visual aspect of each post, there is an accompanying caption. The caption is text-based, and often serves to contextualise the visual post. Within the caption users are able to make use of hashtags, to link their post to broader discussions, and also tag other users by including their unique user handle. Finally, users are able to geo-tag their post, providing a geographical location for it. During the coding process, all of these different aspects of a post were recorded in order to try to understand the influencers' practices, and how they made use of the different elements afforded to them by the platform.

What was found was that while there was no obvious trend among the influencers in terms of what affordances were utilised, what was noted was the consistency of use of certain affordances by the influencers. Each influencer seemed to have his/her own approach in terms of what affordances they utilised, and how they utilised them, and were consistent in their use of said approach. Each post would make use of the same set of affordances that the rest of the posts made use of within the sample of posts from that individual influencer. Across the

different influencers' samples of images, however, there was a range of uses of different affordances noted. The different influencers all seemed to have different approaches in terms of what affordances to utilise when posting to their Instagram account.

In this sense, the influencers are consistent in how they communicate to their followers. They all had a slightly different way of communicating with their followers. However, they were always consistent in the way in which they did this. One reason for this is that consistency of communication is able to help foster a sense of authenticity among their followers. In this way, their followers become familiar with their communication style, leading to a level of intimacy between the influencer and their followers.

The individual affordances coded for will be discussed in further detail, outlining the different findings in relation to each platform affordance.

4.1.1 Video vs. images

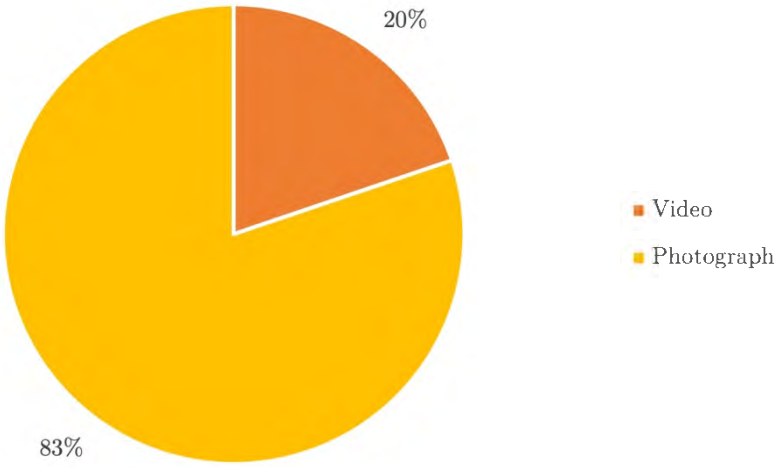

Figure 1: Photograph or video

As per Figure 1, it was found that 83% of all of the posts were still images. This demonstrated a trend of the significant preference among the sample of influencers for

photographic content over video content. Despite the fact that the influencers were given the opportunity to post videos, both in short and long form, they showed a clear preference for photographs. On average, it was found that photos significantly out-performed videos in terms of engagement.

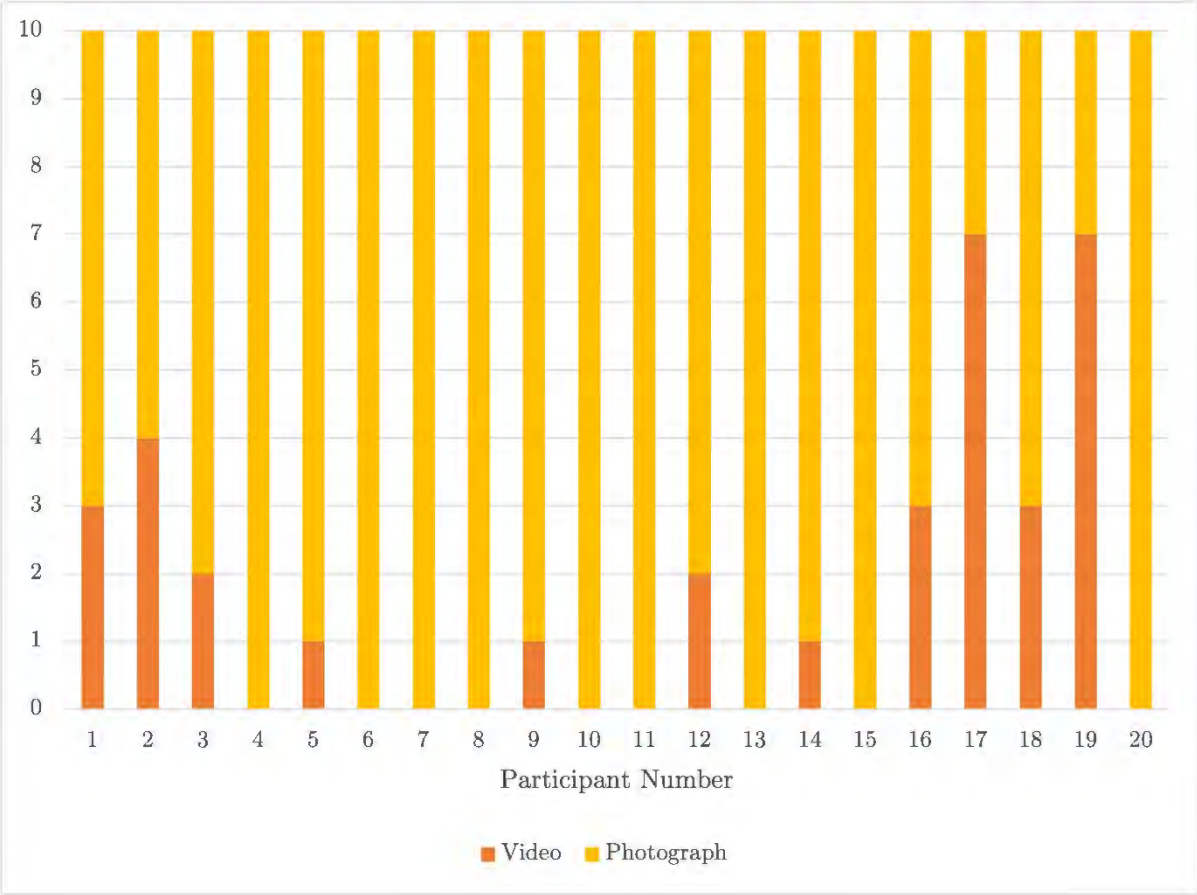

Figure 2: Photograph or video by participant

What is important to note, however, was that in the 17% of posts that were video content was not evenly spread over the twenty influencers, but came predominantly from a few individuals. For example, as illustrated in Figure 2 above, within two of the twenty influencers' samples of posts, it was found that seven out of their 10 posts were in fact video content, and overall their video content received higher engagement than their photographs. The explanation for this discrepancy can be found in relation to the influencers' specific niche. While all of the influencers fall into the broad category of fashion and lifestyle, they all also occupy more

specific niches within that. The two influencers who used predominantly video content were both mountain bikers. Within the mountain biking niche, it was found that video content outperformed photographic content.

Although an overall trend of a preference for photographic content over video content was observed within the sample, it is also important to note that this trend seemed to be niche specific, and may not be the case for all niches within fashion and lifestyle influencers. What is clearly observed from this is that certain niches favour certain content. There were no cases where the probability of an influencer posting a photograph or a video were equal. In all twenty cases, the influencers demonstrated a clear preference to one or the other, depending on their niche, and the content that best served that niche.

4.1.2 Tagging

Tagging other users in both the caption and/or the image proved to be very popular, as 69% of all of the posts analysed contained a tag to another account. Tagging others helps boost engagement by including that post within an online network of peers. In all cases where there was a form of brand collaboration, the said brand being collaborated with was also tagged. However, even in posts that were not brand- or product-related, the influencers who regularly tagged would tag other influencers and other users, as a means of establishing their online network.

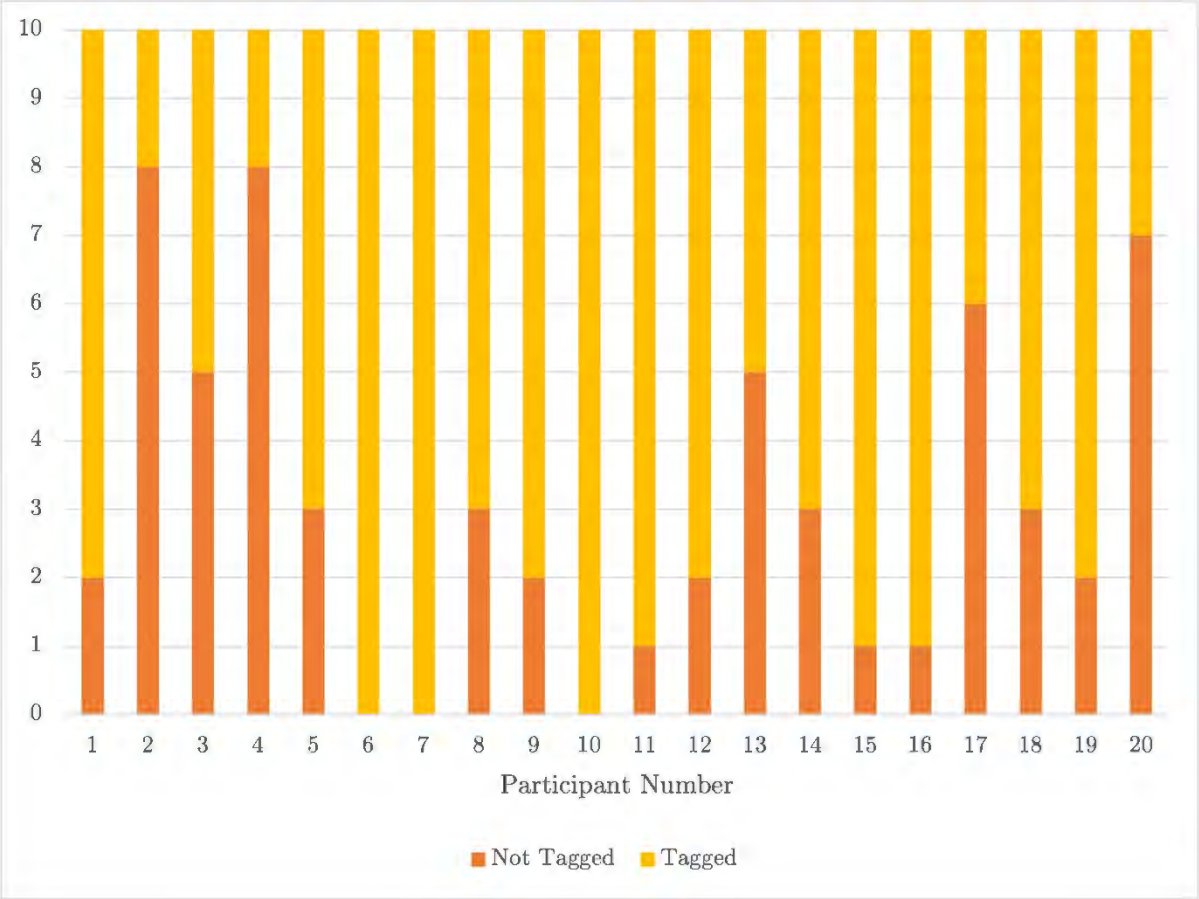

Figure 3: Use of tagging by participant

Figure 3 above demonstrates that there is no clear trend across the sample of influencers in relation to tagging other users in their posts. However, it does demonstrated that within certain influencers samples, they either tend to show a clear preference for using tags, in which case they use the frequently, or a preference for not using tags, in which case the utilised tags infrequently. While there is no trend observed across the sample of influencers, there are clear trends within the influencers samples of posts, demonstrating they have a preference.

4.1.3 Hashtags

While hashtags can be a useful way of inserting posts into broader online topics or discussions, it was found that the influencers did not display a clear preference for using hashtags, or for not using hashtags. 50% of all of the posts contained hashtags within their

caption, and the other 50 did not. This means that the chance of influencers using hashtags versus not using hashtags were statistically equal.

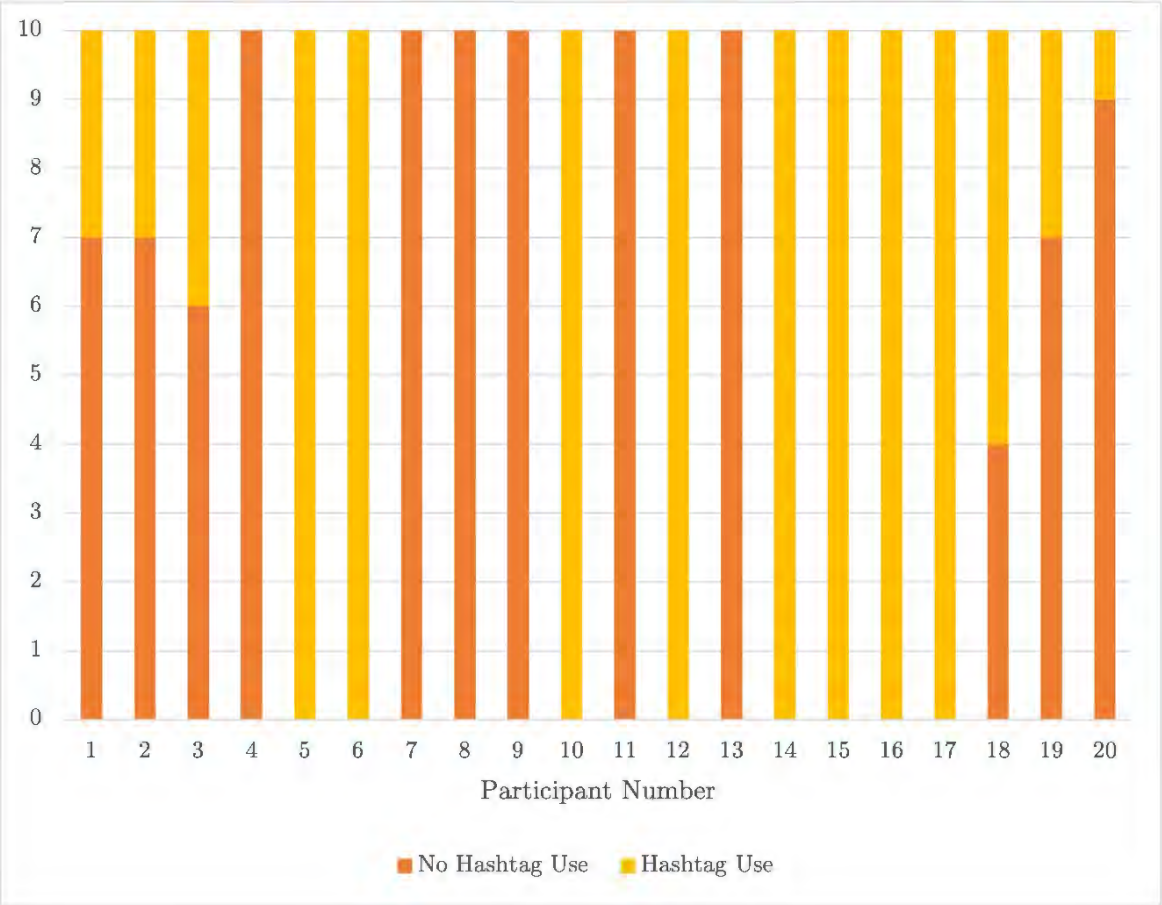

Figure 4: Use of hashtags by participant

Just as in the use of tagging other users, within Figure 4 relating to the use of hashtags within posts, we do not observe a trend across the sample of influencers demonstrating a group preference, however, within each influencers sample they demonstrate a clear individual preference for the use, or lack thereof, of hashtags. Unlike the use of tagging other, however, the use of hashtags seems to be a more polarising issue, within individuals not only demonstrating a preference for or against hashtags, but demonstrating an extreme preference for their use of them.

4.1.4 Geotag

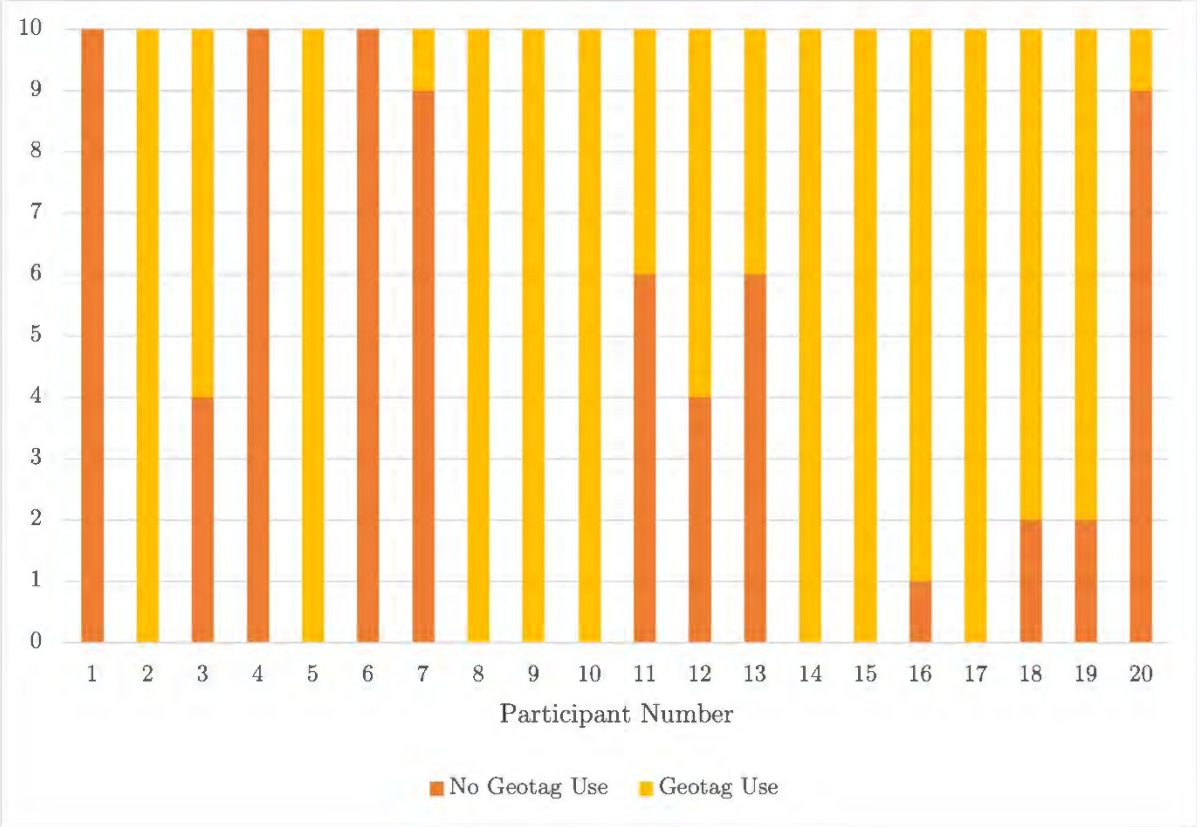

Figure 5: Use of geotags by participant

Of the two hundred posts analysed, it was found that 64% contained a geo-location tag. Figure 5 above shows that across the sample of influencers there was no distinct trend relating to use, or lack thereof, of geotags in the influencers posts. Rather, again, what we observe a trend within the influencers samples of images that demonstrate a clear preference either for or against the use of geotags. It appears that each influencer had a different opinion on the matter.

It was also noted that there were times where influencers used geo-tags, however, the tag that they used were fictional and did not represent a real location. In these cases, the geotag feature was used as a means of commenting on the image as opposed to locating it geographically. In this sense, the tag served as a type of second caption for the image. That

being said, it was only in 20% of all posts containing a geotag that fictional tags were used, 80% of the geotags used represented real locations, as seen in Figure 6 below.

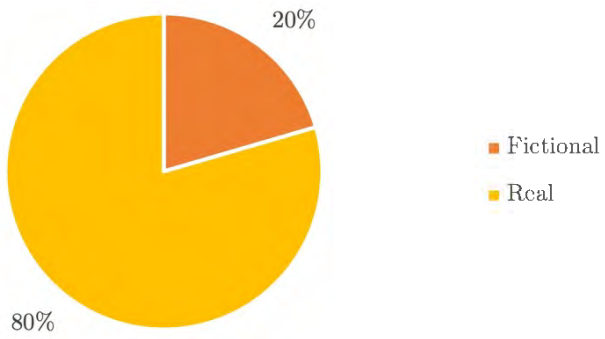

Figure 6: Fictional vs real geotags

Within the context of being a micro-influencer in the fashion and lifestyle sector, tagging their location helps solidify their brand as a local influencer, or aids in constructing an adventure-based travel-brand depicting the various different locations the influencer has visited.

4.1.5 Comments

The comments section of a post provides the influencers followers' with a means of engaging with them. For this reason, it was important to analyse the nature of the comments section, and the type of engagement that was occurring. The first element of the comment section examined whether the influencers were replying to comments posted by their followers. It was found that in only just over half (53%) of all of the posts, the influencer had replied to all of the comments left by their followers. This 53%, however, was not distributed evenly over the whole sample of influencers.

Rather, what was observed, as illustrated in Figure 7 below, was a trend whereby influencers either replied to comments or they did not. For those who did reply to comments,

they would reply to all comments on all of their posts, whereas those who did not reply would, in some cases, not have replied to any of their followers' comments. It was also observed that in some cases, the influencers who did not reply to comments, disabled the comments section entirely.

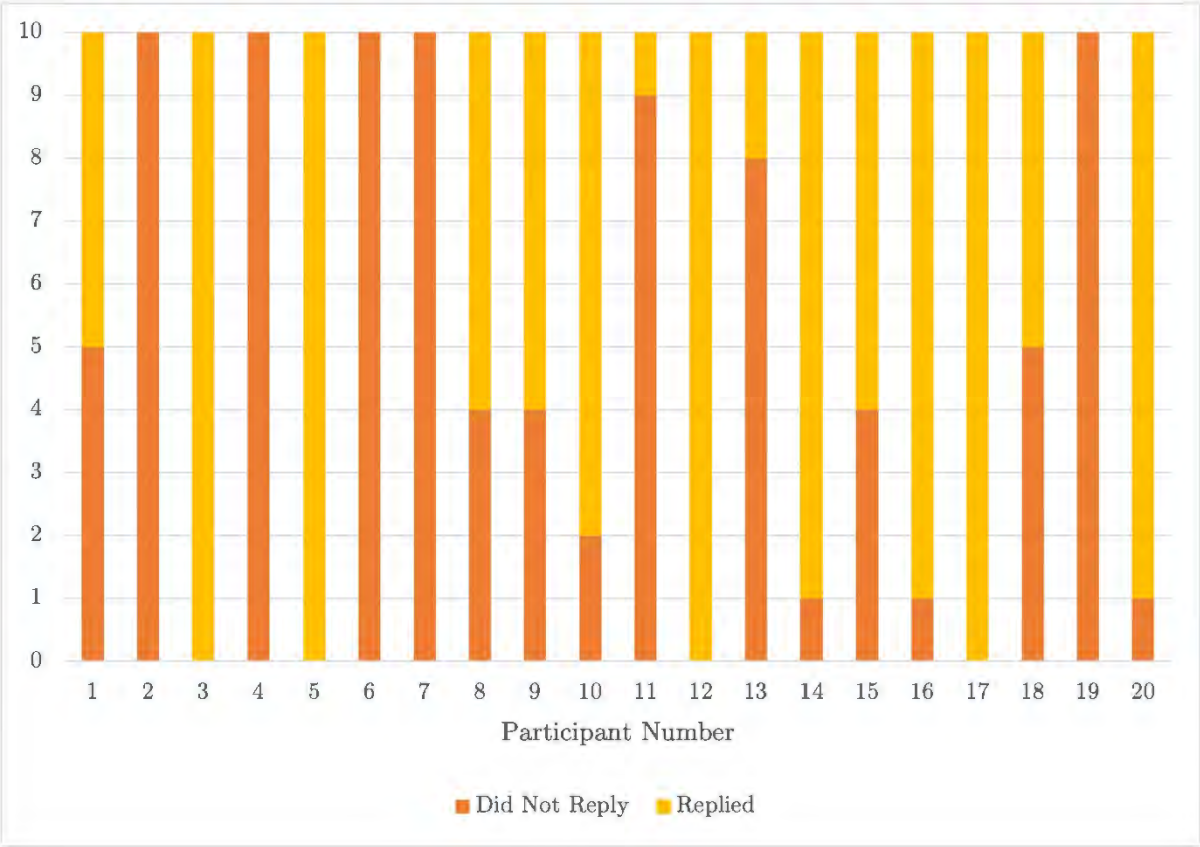

Figure 7: Use of comments by participant

4.2 Photographic content

In coding for the photographic content of each post, it was found that the overwhelming majority of posts included the influencer as the main subject. The influencers were present in almost all of the posts. In contrast, only around half of all of the posts included a product of some sort. This seemed to be a deliberate choice on the behalf of the influencers as a way of ensuring their Instagram feed still maintains a sense of individuality, and not fall into the trap of becoming what was referred by one of the participants in the focus group session as a 'sell

out', where all an influencer posts is content promoting products and brands. In this was they attempt to create a perception of authenticity among their followers, as their Instagram feed is portrayed as a means of sharing private information, or individual insight into their lives.

What is interesting to note is that it appeared to be a balancing act, where influencers post content with other brands present, as this is what they are compensated for. However, they need to ensure their Instagram feed does not only become a platform for advertising other brands, but a platform for their followers to still get insight into them. Based on the content analysis it seemed that the major number was that for every one piece of branded content posted, at least one piece on non-branded content be published.

The discrepancies in terms of self-presentation based on clothing were also important to note, as there was over a 20% difference between male-presenting influencers and female-presenting influencers in terms of being fully-clothed in images. Female-presenting influencers tended to present themselves in more revealing clothing compared to male-presenting counterparts. Correlating a post's success in terms of the level of engagement a post receives with the amount of clothing worn, it was also observed that posts by female-presenting influencers received higher engagement when less of their skin was being covered. Among male-presenting influencers, it was found that posts were as likely to be as successful as one another if the influencer was fully clothed or partially clothed. This demonstrates a clear eroticisation of the female body on Instagram.

4.2.1 Subjects Present

Out of the 200 images coded, it was found that the influencers were present within 182 of the images. The images where influencers weren't present consisted either of landscape photographs, product photographs, or in some cases text over a photograph or blank background. Of the 182 images, there were other subjects present in the image with the influencer in 26 images. The 156 images of just the influencers showed a clear preference among them for posting images of themselves, with no other subjects in the image. This

presented their feeds as a type of curated photo album of the influencer that reaffirmed the fact that followers are following an individual, as opposed to a group of people.

4.2.2 Product Present

Although all of the influencers have performed some sort of brand collaboration, and included brands and products in their content, it was still evident that they also prioritised posting content not related to any brand. This is illustrated through the fact that only 107 out of 200 posts included a product of some kind from a brand collaboration.

There were 93 out of 200 images that were not related to a brand in any way. Influencers did not want to give off the perception that all they do is brand work, as their feed will ultimately no longer come to represent them, but represent the brands for whom they work. Posting original content that has no ties to any brand helps to ensure the influencers' authenticity with their followers, and maintain their ownership over their Instagram feed through positioning it's primary aim as serving as a type of curated album of the influencer.

4.2.3 Clothing

When it came to the influencers' presentation on their timeline, there were stark discrepancies in relation to the influencers' appearance. Within the sample of male influencers, 66% of all of the posts contained the males fully-clothed. Among females, however, the percentage of fully-clothed pictures only accounted for 44% of all posts. A clear trend was observed that among the female influencers, there tended to be less clothing worn. 26% of female posts were coded as partially clothed, as opposed to 17% of male posts. Females were also photographed more frequently, 14% of the time, in revealing swim wear, compared to the 8% of revealing swim wear within the male sample. There were also no male photographs where the influencer was fully nude. However, there were four photographs in the sample of females presenting themselves in the nude. These were photographs that were taken to intentionally highlight the fact that the influencer was not wearing any item of clothing.

When correlating post success with clothing, a clear positive relationship was observed in the female sample, whereby the more revealing the outfit, the more successful the post. It was interesting to note that in the male sample this was not the case. It was found that within the male sample posts that were coded fully-clothed, and partially-clothed presented the same average success rate.

The success rate of a post was taken by dividing the number of likes on a post by number of the influencers' following, and representing it as a percentage. This illustrates what percentage of the influencers following are actually engaging with a post. The posts were also coded for whether the influencer appeared fully clothed, partially clothed, in revealing swimwear, or fully nude. There was a clear trend in the female sample, where the more revealing their clothing in a post, the more engagement that post received. Female posts coded fully-clothed had an average engagement rate of 6%. This compared to partially-clothed female posts that averaged a 9% engagement rate. Posts that consisted of the influencers' wearing revealing swimwear, or in some cases underwear, received an average engagement rate of 11%. These figures are illustrated in Figure 8 below.

	Engagement Ratio (likes/followers)	Number of Female Posts
Fully Clothed	6%	44
Partially Clothed	9%	26
Underwear/Swimming Costume	11%	14
Nude	8%	4
NA	4%	12

Figure 8: Table of engagement ratio according to clothing

Although the positive relationship of increased engagement on posts with less clothes worn does not seem to hold for the images coded as nude true in Figure 8, there were only four

images within the nude category, and therefore, the population of nude images is not large enough to draw conclusions.

Within the male sample, fully-clothed and partially-clothed posts seemed to perform exactly the same, both showing an average engagement rate of 9%. This shows that male posts where the influencer is fully-clothed are just as likely to receive high engagement, as posts where the influencer is partially-clothed. Revealing swimwear within the male sample did perform better on average, with an engagement rate of 15%. However, of the 100 male posts, only eight were photographs of the influencers in swimwear, and therefore, there was insufficient data to confidently say that a trend was observed whereby swimwear photographs performed better. This is because with only eight posts, the average had the potential to be skewed drastically by any outliers, and it was observed that engagement rates for male swimwear posts ranged fairly significantly. The amount of posts coded fully-clothed and partially-clothed produced more accurate average representations of trends, and it is from this that we are able to establish that male posts are equally likely to be successful whether the influencer is fully clothed or partially-clothed in the photograph.

4.3 Identity construction

This section of the content analysis aimed to focus on the influencers' construction of their online identities. It builds on work done predominantly by Goffman (1979), and Gill (2009) that looked at gender displays within mainstream media and advertising. What was found was that in many cases the influencers seemed to adopt the gendered representations employed in mainstream advertising as a means of constructing their online gendered identity. Elements such as Goffman's (1979) concept of feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination, and licensed withdrawal were utilised predominantly by female influencers in order to depict a feminine online version of themselves. Cues from mainstream advertising that were used to depict female identities were adopted by female influencers as a mean of constructing an online female persona.

It was interesting to note, however, that while the influencers seemed to adopt elements of mainstream displays of gender within media and advertising, they still demonstrated significant agency in how these gender depictions were used. This is clearly observed in displays of the eroticisation of the body by influencers, in which sexual cues are used as a means of displaying one's sexual identity as a form of sexual power, as defined by Gill (2009). There was also significant agency demonstrated on behalf of the influencers in relation to when and how sexual cues were utilised.

The adoption and adaptation of mainstream displays of gender within advertising by influencers illustrates the highly negotiated context of Instagram, where influencers are able to adopt and/or challenge mainstream presentations of gender in constructing their online identity. Within this highly negotiated context, influencers have significant agency in determining their presentation of their online identity, and consequentially their displays of gender.

4.3.1 Touch

The photographs were also analysed for touch to see what the influencers were doing in the photographs. It was found that only 28% of the male photographs contained the influencer in the act of touching something. Of these touching images, 64% consisted of the males touching themselves in some manner. In most instances, the male touch consisted of their hands down, and placed in their pockets.

Within the female sample, however, it was found that 65% of all of the photographs consisted of the females touching something. Of these photographs that included touch, 88% consisted of the female touching herself in some manner. Often female influencers were photographed with their hands on their hips, or touching their face and hair, or an item of clothing that they were wearing. More than half of the whole sample of female photographs contained the females touching themselves in some way. In both the male and female samples, there did not seem to be any functional reason for touching themselves, but rather it seemed to

be a constructed element of their pose they were striking, and did not contain any type of functional purpose.

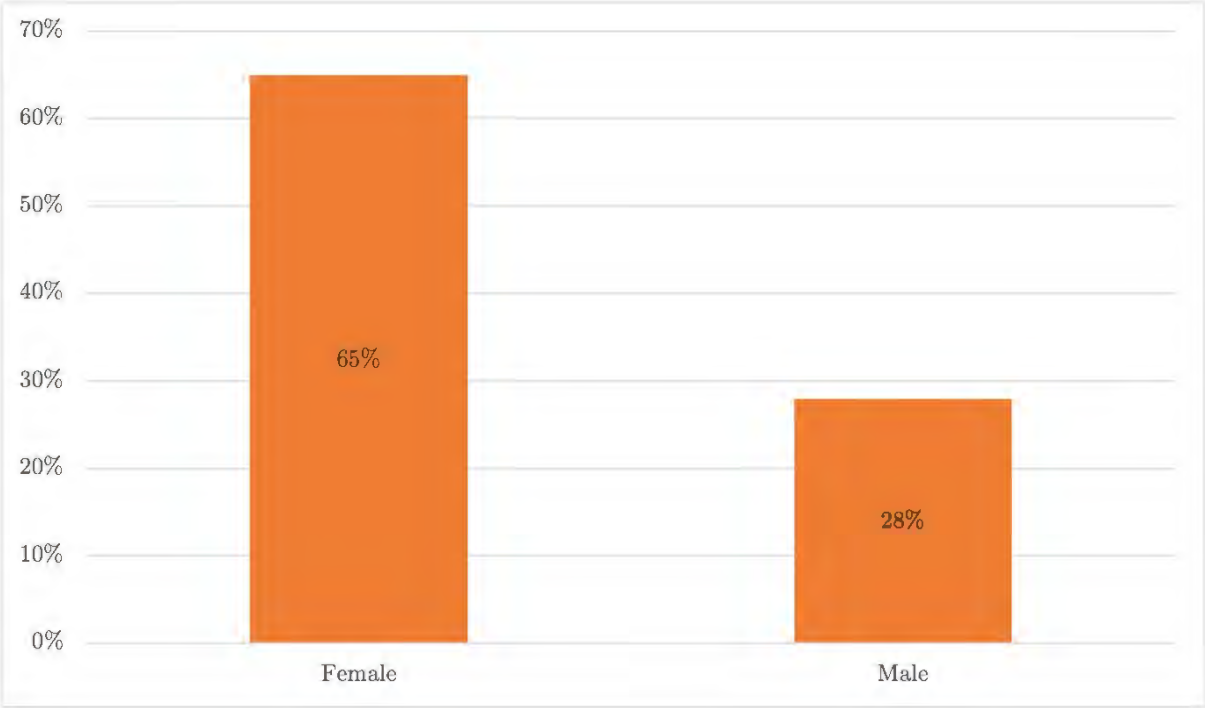

Figure 9: Number of posts containing Touch

Figure 9 above shows that these findings appear to be in line with the trend Goffman (1979) observed within mainstream advertising that he referred to as 'the feminine touch', where women were displayed more often than men in scenes within which they touch something. In many cases it was found that women would be touching themselves in some manner with no apparent functional end (Tortajada, Arauna and Martinez, 2013). Social networking sites are online spaces of opportunity and risk, which are deeply affected by gender, and which are emerging arenas for negotiation within an increasingly sexualised media environment (Tortajada, Arauna and Martinez, 2013). These findings demonstrate that the female presenting influencers in the sample seemed to employ mainstream media and advertisings depictions of the 'feminine touch' in constructing their own online gendered identities.

4.3.2 Ritualisation of subordination

Within the total sample of influencers, 68% of the female photographs consisted of the female influencers posing in a position of subordination. This compared to the 7% of male images ,where the influencer posed in a position of subordination, as illustrated in Figure 10 below. Female influencers were regularly photographed lying down, or positioned with bent arms, crossed legs, or a tilted head. The male influencers were almost never photographed in similar positions. The male influencers were mostly photographed in a straight up right position, with hands at their sides.

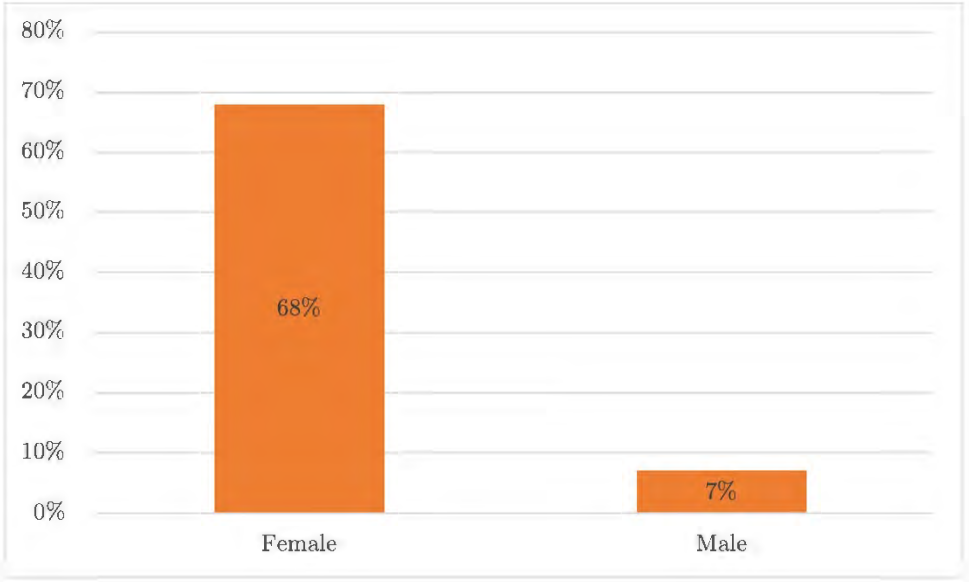

Figure 10: Number of posts containing Ritualisation of Subordination

These findings are directly in line with Goffman's (1979) findings whereby he observed that mainstream advertising favours the ritualisation of subordination by women. Goffman (1979), explained that women are often depicted in positions where they are lying down, with folded limbs, crossed feet, or in childlike body positions, and in some cases even playful. Relating this to the micro-influencers, we once more observe a trend where the portrayal of gender among the female presenting influencers is in line with mainstream media and advertising's depictions of women in subordinate poses.

4.3.3 Licensed withdrawal

While it was popular for influencers to appear as if they are not mentally present within the photograph, and that their minds were somewhere else, it was observed that this was significantly more popular within the female sample. Figure 11 illustrates Female influencers appeared to be mentally withdrawn from the photograph 61% of the time, compared to the 27% of male influencers.

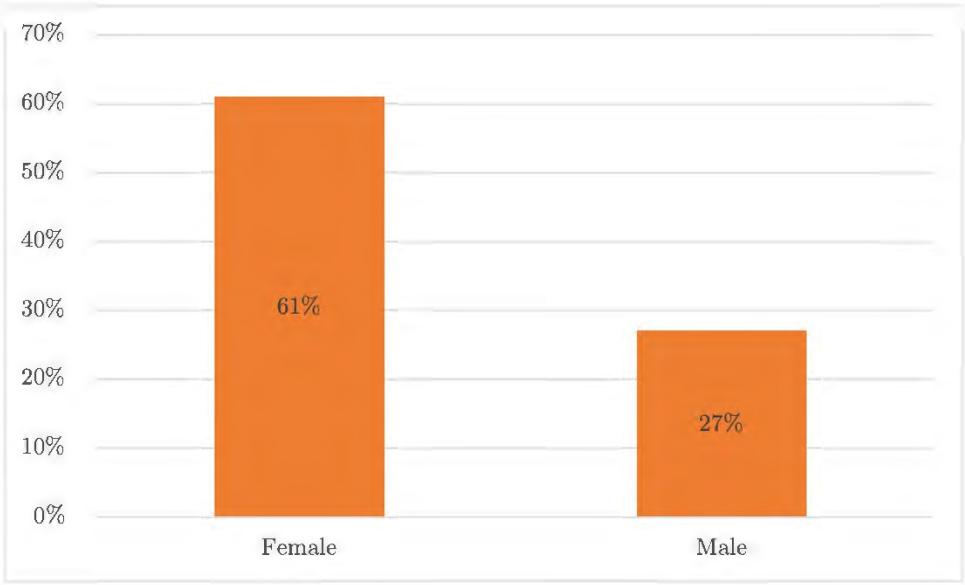

Figure 11: Number of posts containing Licensed Withdrawal

Goffman (1979) refers to this trend as licensed withdrawal. We witness licensed withdrawal when we observe individuals, predominantly women, absorbed in thought, often appearing disoriented or distracted and in need of protection (Goffman, 1979). Licensed withdrawal is often combined with feminine touch, where a woman's mind appears to be elsewhere as she touches something that she pays no attention to (Goffman, 1979). It was observed that licensed withdrawal was significantly more common among female influencers, and that, again, the female influencers appear to be adopting, and recreating mainstream representations of gender in their content, while constructing their online identity.

4.3.4 Eroticisation of the body

It was noted that 52% of the images from the female sample depicted the influencer's body in an erotic manner. Within the male sample, only 22% of the images consisted of eroticised bodies. See Figure 12 below.

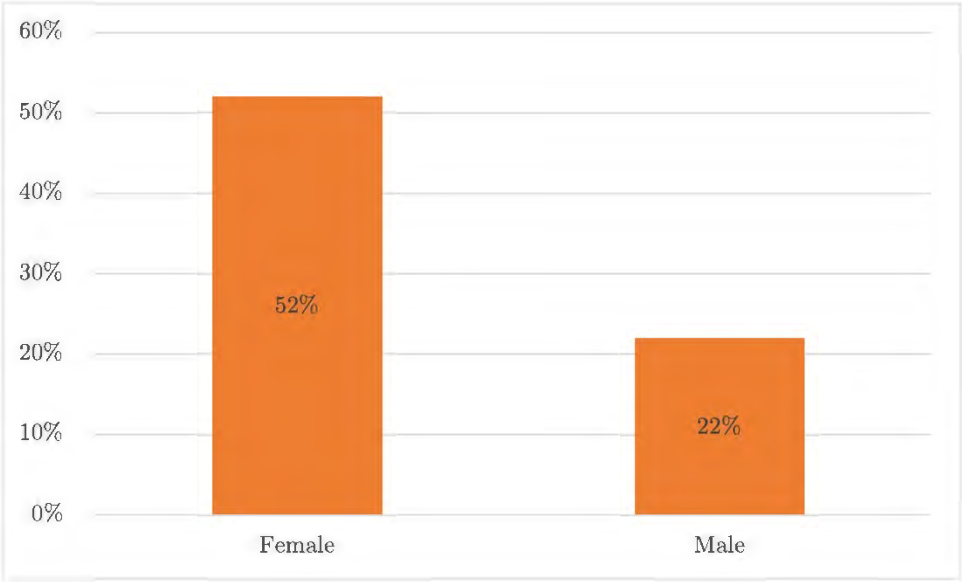

Figure 12: Number of posts containing Eroticisation of the Body

What was interesting to note is that while influencers are predominantly the subjects of their own posts, and therefore are presenting themselves as an object to be looked at, they are not always necessarily doing this within an erotic manner. Only just over 50% of female images consisted of eroticised bodies, which demonstrates a great deal of agency on the side of the influencers in controlling how they are to be portrayed. Female influencers were portrayed in an erotic manner when they chose to be. However, when they chose not to, their physical appearance was not eroticised in any way. This seemed to indicate a great deal of agency on the behalf of the influencer in determining their presentation.

The eroticisation of the body extends Gill's (2009) work identifying a series of representational practices within mainstream advertising that included the eroticised male body, as well as women's explicit displays of their own sexual desires. Gill (2009) explains

that these representation practices are often adopted by women as self-presentation resources, in which they aim to display themselves as sexual objects, not simply for male approval, but as a means of deploying their sexual powers for their own pleasure. The eroticisation of the body, as defined by Gill (2009), implies a high level of agency of the behalf of the subject present, whereby, they are in control of the presentation and sexualisation of their body, and any explicit displays of sexualisation are as a result of the intentional use of these resources of self-presentation. This appears to be in line with the trend observed within the sample of influencers. It was found that women presented themselves in a sexualised manner more frequently than men, how the sexualisation of their bodies did not dominate the presentation of their online identities, but rather demonstrated the intentional use of their agency in depicting themselves as individual with sexual power as a means of attaining their own pleasure.

4.4 Conclusion

The content analysis was divided into three sections. The first section coded for the affordances used by the influencers within each post. What was found was that across the sample of influencers 200 posts analysed there were no distinct trends in relation to which affordances were used most often. However, within each influencers sample of 10 images there were clear trends demonstrating a preference for a certain combination of affordances. This means that across the group of influencers there were no trends in relation to which affordances were used most often and how, however, within each influencer's sample of 10 images there were clear trends showing a preference for certain affordances. The influencers seemed to each have a unique combination of affordances that they made use of consistently.

The second section of the content analysis aimed to analyse the photographic content present within each image. It was found that across almost all of the images the influencers were present as the main subject within the post. The images were also analysed for products and brands present within them. It was found that only around half of the images contained a brand or product of some description. The photographic content included coding for the

influencers clothing present within the content posted. It was noted that overall female presenting influencers were captured wearing clothing that was more revealing than male-presenting influencers. In relation to the levels of engagement received by each post it was found that female-presenting influencers received higher levels of engagement on posts where they were depicted as wearing revealing clothes. It was found that the more revealing the clothing of the influencers appeared to be, the higher the levels of engagement that post received. This same trend was not observed in relation to male-presenting influencers.

The third section of the content analysis aimed to examine the ways in which the influencers' identities were constructed in their posts. This section used concepts of gender displays within mainstream media and advertising as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009) to do so. It found that gender cues such as feminine touch, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal were present within the content of female-presenting influencers. However, these same cues were generally absent within the content posted by male-presenting influencers. The three aforementioned cues are typically associated with feminine depictions of gender in mainstream media and advertising, and in this sense it appeared the influencers seemed to rely on, and recreate, mainstream media and advertising depictions of gender.

Chapter 5 - Focus Group and Interview Findings

A thematic discourse analysis was applied to the interview and focus group transcripts in order to uncover themes relating to the ways in which the influencers construct their online identities. It was found that two main themes emerged from the discussions, that each housed smaller sub-themes within them. The first related to the ways in which the influencers construct their online profiles, and element crucial to their overall online identity. It was found that there were three sub-themes present within the ways in which the influencers construct their profiles. The first sub-theme to note was referred to as the influencer's niche. Niche was perhaps one of the more significant factors determining the construction of influencers profiles. Their niche referred to the particular online community in which they existed. It was found that these online communities were often situated around particular interest groups, and were organised along lines of common, and shared, interest. The content the posted on their profiles all reflected their niche, and subsequently, their relevance within that particular interest group. Their interests informed their content. For example, an influencer operating within the niche world of fashion would not be found posting content relating to other niches, such are cars or mountain bicycles, as it would not be relevant to their online community.

The second sub-theme that emerged in relation to the ways in which the influencers constructed their profiles was referred to by the influencers as their individual style. Their style referred to the fact that the influencers all expressed the sentiment that they felt their content possessed a unique and personal aesthetic. Their personal aesthetic was communicated in the content they posted, and was therefore fundamentally a question of their story telling style, their image selection, and their editing techniques. There was a clear sense among the influencers that their individual styles were not only unique to their profiles, but were also recognisable by their followers, meaning their followers would be able to discern particular content as being posted by said influencers. In this sense, their style operated as a type of digital

signature, whereby their followers were able to determine which content belonged to which influencer.

The final sub-theme that emerged in relation to the ways in which the influencers constructed their profiles was their individual motivation. This theme related to the motivations influencers presented as being the forces that drove them to seek influencer status. Their motivations seemed to centre on their intentions on the platform, and their reasons for operating in the way in which they do. Motivations seemed to range fairly significantly between the influencers, however, it was an important them to mention, as it was clearly an important factor in determining what content an influencer posted. Motivations ranged from intentions such as wanting to share one's art, to wanting to inspire other creators, to wanting to inspire female body confidence among one's followers and peers within a particular niche.

The second main theme that emerged from the focus group and interviews were the influencers concerns regarding presenting an 'authentic self.' This theme often evoked notions regarding being 'real' and being 'true to who you are' on the platform. However, what was interesting to note was that authenticity seemed to revolve less around how it impacted the ways in which their influencer felt about, or perceived themselves, and was more concerned with the ways in which the influencers were being perceived by their followers. Authenticity was also positioned as central to one's success on the platform. In this sense, despite evoking notions of being 'true to who you are' it was not necessarily in the pursuit of the definition of one's identity for individual reasons, but was rather argued as being central to the pursuit of success on the platform.

Within this theme of authenticity, a frequent sub-theme was that of the fact that the influencers all felt that in order to maximise the perception of authenticity, they needed complete creative freedom when it came to determining the media outputs of a brand collaboration. They expressed the feeling that the more creative direction, and limitation, they were given, they less authentically that content was perceived by their followers. And,

therefore, in order to achieve maximum perceptions of authenticity, they needed to have complete creative control over the content that they posted. Of course this presented somewhat of a paradox, as brands and brand managers, are not going to quickly, or easily, relinquish control of the perception and portrayal of their brand to influencers. Brand collaborations were usually met with fairly strict limitations on what was permitted by the influencers, and what was not. The influencers did not approve of such restrictions.

5.1 Constructing a profile

In relation to the ways in which the influencers construct their online profiles, there were three sub-themes that emerged from the discussions. These were the influencers' niche, their individual style, as well as their motives for establishing their online presence. These three themes work in conjunction with one another in creating the influencers' unique online identity. It was observed that certain themes played more of a role in the construction of certain profiles and online identities. However, what was found was that they were all present to some degree in the construction of the influencers online identity.

Niche, style, and motivation were grouped together as sub-themes under the main theme of Constructing a Profile, as while they were all different, but fundamentally they all played a similar role in achieving the outcomes which resulted in the construction of the influencers Instagram profiles. By profile, we are referring to the influencers individual page on Instagram which consists of the content they post, as well as their bio and profile picture. It was found that these three themes operated with one another as types of filters, which determined the content posted by the influencers, and the final the outcome of the influencers profiles.

The construction of the influencers profiles are central in understanding the construction and communication of their online identities. Tse, Cheng and Chan (2018: 141) argue that, "In meeting the changing demands of authenticity and visibility in social media, performances of identity and connections are discussed to entail new sociotechnical labours and digital literacies." Orsattie and Riemer (2012) argue that a performative lens of identity construction

on social media views ones identity as perpetually articulated and co-constructed through participation online on social media platforms. However, (Tse, Cheng and Chan, 2018) argue in relation to contemporary platforms on the internet that as they have become as mass medium, the online and the offline worlds have become more integrated, limiting individuals rooms for identity play, thus forcing individuals to assume and maintain a more consistent identity online.

The three sub-themes identified in constructing the influencers Instagram profiles were identified as the primary factors that were consistently applied to their approach in selecting content to post, the manner in which the content is posted, and subsequently the overall construction of the profile. As mentioned previously, the overall construction of the influencers profiles is one of the fundamental ways in which influencers communicate their online identities. Orsatti and Riemer (2012) argue that performative identities on social media arise from, and are shaped and changed through, everyday practices and participation in social media. The three sub-theme investigated below were identified to play a significant role in the everyday practices and participation of the influencers, determining how the presented themselves online.

5.1.1 Niche

"I think it depends on the type of account… I think depending on your niche, that determines what you should be posting." Pete

Niche, was perhaps one of the most significant determining factor in shaping the influencers' online presence. Their niche directly determined what the content of the posts posted by the influencer should be. By niche, the influencers were referring to the particular online ecosystem or community in which they positioned themselves. Instagram was described as a platform comprised of numerous different niches. Followers of influencers are able to straddle niches, and be a part of more than just one. However, it was argued by the influencers that they themselves had to situate their profile within a particular niche in order to gain significant traction. All interview excerpts are cited verbatim.

"*When I first started Instagram I would just post anything related to me, it doesn't necessarily have to be riding related, and now I do on occasion post something not riding related, but I almost always keep it riding, something around a bike, or training or whatever, because your page gets a designated niche, so my page is a mountain bike niche, and someone else's might be a model or whatever, and that's what they want, they want your page to be specific."* (Interviewee 4, 20 October 2019)

Interviewee 4 was a lifestyle influencer who began his career as a professional mountain biker. The rise in popularity of social media, coinciding with his professional racing career, meant that he experienced increasing pressure from sponsors to develop an online presence. Instagram was just one platform his sponsors expected him to be present on. Over time, his following grew, and the success of his Instagram profile overtook the success of his professional racing career, and he found himself attracting new sponsors simply for his presence as a lifestyle influencer on Instagram.

Interviewee 4 speaks to the fact that as his profile gained more online traction, he had to narrow down the focus. This meant he wasn't able to "just post anything", and he had to begin to tailor his content in order for it to be relevant within his desired niche. He explains that as he developed on the platform, his content became more specific, in this case, focusing on mountain bicycles, in order for him to accrue more of a following.

This also clearly illustrates the notion that at the heart of one's niche lies a specific interest group to which the influencer belongs. Their interest group impacts what content they should be creating and posting, as they need to ensure that their content is both relevant and entertaining to participants of that interest group, namely those who potentially become their followers. For Interviewee 4, his interest group was mountain-biking, and thus, as he explained, he always ensures there is a bicycle present in some capacity in his content so that it is appealing to people within his particular interest group.

Niches, however, are not simply limited to sports as one participant explains: “There are Instagram content creators, there’s comedians, there’s so many niche’s to it” (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 Novemeber 2019).

As illustrated by Focus Group Participant 1, niches could even centre around things such as comedy and even content creation, with the definition of content creation including activities such as music, writing, photography, videography. This participant illustrates the fact that niches can centre on creative individuals, and the art that they produce, where there are niches devoted simply to poetry, stand-up comedy, or even just photography.

One participant explained how their journey into the Instagram niche of fashion began: “*Well it started as me just literally, my friends came over, and we were like what are we going to do, let’s just get all dressed up and take photos, and have fun with that. So, that is how it started, and then just by tagging brands and outfits they communicate with you and try to do deals and that. So I guess I literally just wear clothing on Instagram and show it on Instagram*.” (Interviewee 3, 07 February 2020)

This quote reveals two important elements. Firstly, and this was also expressed by the previous participant in relation to bicycles, they begin on a fairly broad and informal basis. Their content does not necessarily fit neatly into one niche, however, as they develop as an influencer and accrue more of a following, they begin to learn what content will be successful. From this, their scope of the content they publish begins to narrow as they hone onto a specific niche, eventually becoming an influencer within their field.

Secondly, however, this quote also illustrates the nature of Instagram niches, and how influencers post only content relevant within their niche. Taking this one step further, Interviewee 3 explained how she not only operate in fashion on Instagram, but how her niche is even more refined than that, limiting the clothes and outfits she shows on Instagram to active wear, swim wear, or underwear.

"*Most of the time I end up getting bikinis… a lot of the time I'm bikinis or fitness clothes. And a lot of the other girls are a lot of pyjama posts or something like that, so it's up to you to decide."* (Interviewee 3, 07 February 2020)

An influencers niche also determined how they used the platform to engage with their followers. Certain niches favoured certain types of content, and influenced the ways in which they made use of the different elements of the platform that were made available to them. Interviewee 4, the mountain biker, explains this in more detail as he outlined how his profile was not performing hugely successfully, but a simple change in the type of content that he posted had a massive impact on his success within his niche. In this case, the influencer determined, through trial and error, that still images did not perform as well as videos within his niche. As soon as he began to focus his content on only posting video content, he found that his profile began to grow, and become more significant within their mountain biking niche.

"*For a while, like a year, I didn't grow at all, and I couldn't figure out what I was doing at all, because my page was like growing, growing, growing; and then at the beginning of 2018 it kind of just hit a wall and couldn't grow… and then quite recently, actually, I thought let me try start posting more videos, and it was unbelievable, as soon as I started posting videos I started getting followers and I started to grow again. But, some people can grow well with images, so I think it depends on the type of account, and what the audience prefers, I think for mountain biking especially, people want to see more video content, people want to see action, they are bored of people with a cool bike*." (Interviewee 4, 29 October 2019)

Interviewee 4 also described operating within his niche as a type of balancing act, where he needed to not only ensure their audience was enjoying his content and that the brands he was working with were happy, but he also had to ensure that their content was optimised for Instagram's algorithm's. Instagram's algorithms are used by the platform to determine what content is shown to whom. Interviewee 4 believed that by understanding what Instagram promoted within a niche, you could ensure more users see your content.

"*They* [Instagram] *want your page to be specific, and so if you post something not in your niche, say your page is about mountain biking and you post a picture of a car, your reach will be killed, they won't show it. So, even though you have however many followers you want, they won't allow it to be seen more because they are like well this is not the right content. And I've seen that and I've tested it with various pictures where, so if I post a picture of a car, so even for example I have over 20 000 followers I'll get like 300 likes, but if I post a picture of a car and a bike, I'll get like 2000."* (Interviewee 4, 29 October 2019)

Posting on Instagram for Interviewee 4 was about trying to maintain a constant balancing act that required pleasing all parties involved in his specific niche, be it Instagram, the brands he collaborates with, or his followers. He explained that he began initially by only attracting mountain biking brands. However, as his following grew, brands from outside the world of mountain biking that wanted to speak to a mountain biking audience began to approach him. In order to capitalise on this, he needed to ensure he was creating content that was both relevant to his followers within his niche, as well as content that satisfies the requirements of the brands he was working with. Interviewee 4 explains, for example, how he was approached by car brands wanting to attract followers from his mountain biking niche, and, as he mentioned in the above quote, he had to find a way of incorporating the brand into his niche in order to ensure the success of his profile, and his prevalence within his community.

An influencer's niche, and their understanding of the rules of their niche and way in which it operates, was the single biggest factor in determining the content of their Instagram posts, and ensuring the success and growth of both their profile, as well as their commercial endeavours. This was explained by a participant who found that even simply changing his location and moving had a negative impact on his success within the niche he had initially carved out:

"*I moved to Vietnam in 2017. And obviously the idea behind local influencers is that you create local content. So, for a Capetonian ambassador, the idea is to largely create content in*

the place that you live. So me being in Vietnam, some of the brands didn't necessarily see eye to eye with me in terms of removing myself from Cape Town." (Interviewee 2, 29 October 2019)

Interviewee 2 had constructed his online presence around the city of Cape Town, and his life within it. Moving away from the City of Cape Town, with the aim of still documenting his life, had significant negative repercussions for his work with brands as well as his followers. This was because content posted was no longer in relation to his life in Cape Town, and from this he came to understand just how much his Instagram success within his niche relied on Cape Town being present within his content. Cape Town was a significant factor within the niche that he had carved out, and therefore leaving Cape Town, and not posting content in relation to Cape Town meant that the relevance of his content within his niche was diminished.

While all influencers interviewed fit into the broad category of fashion and lifestyle, what is evident from their remarks is that they all demonstrated an understanding of operating more intimately within smaller niches. These niches seemed to form along the lines of interests, where these influencers have risen to a type of microcelebrity status within their designated interest groups. As opposed to operating like a celebrity, where their personality constitutes somewhat of an interest group on its own, and they accumulate a following because of it, the influencers interviewed here displayed characteristics of being more of a peer taking part within an interest group than a celebrity. Robinson (2007) argues that effective identity performance online requires a user being literate in the relevant community language and values.

5.1.2 Style

The second theme that emerged in relation to the ways in which the influencers construct their Instagram profile was referred to as their "style". The influencers all referred to the notion that their Instagram feed had a unique aesthetic style due to their choices in the selection and editing of images. The influencers felt their content contained a unique aesthetic that was

recognised by their followers. This is clearly illustrated in the following two statements: "as an Instagrammer, you are known for your type of content, you are known for your feed looking a type of way, you are known for a certain preset on all of your photos" (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 November 2019).

"*I think what's crazy as an artist is how you can easily distinguish between these two artists just by their noticeable way of working, like their editing, their style, and what their vision is*" (Focus Group Participant 3, 21 November 2019),

Style in this case encompasses a few different elements of the platform. Firstly, influencers refer to their feed as having a certain aesthetic style, or rather a certain consistency or flow in the appearance of their overall feed. By their feed, they are referring to their profile where one views multiple photos posted by the influencer all at once. Emphasis was placed on the fact that Instagram is primarily a visual platform, and effort should not only be placed on the aesthetic appeal of one image, but the overall aesthetic of all of their images and how they work together. In this sense, their feed represents somewhat of a photograph exhibition for the influencers. This is expressed in the following statement, where the influencer makes clear reference to choosing photographs to post based on how they work alongside the other images they have already posted:

"*You need to look at the whole feed. Like yesterday I needed to post for Cotton On and I had a full body one and I had a closer more fun one, and I just looked at my previous photo and it was a full length one, and I'm like, I'm not going to post two full lengths next to each other, so I post the closer up more fun-looking one… Often I will go out with friends and take photos, but I won't post them. They will be able to post them, but they just won't go with my feed. I've always had a certain thing with my feed.*" (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020)

In order to achieve this overall, consistent aesthetic of their profile, it was not completely uncommon for an influencer to 'restart' their entire feed. This means deleting all of the previous

images that they have posted, and starting afresh. When one is viewing individual posts, the fact that the influencer has restarted their feed will not have any impact, it is only when one looks at their profile wall that their images aim to put forward a coherent aesthetic. The following statement by one of the influencers recounts their reasons for restarting their feed:

"Interviewer: And what made you restart your feed?

Interviewee: *It's very stupid, but I wanted it to be more eye-catching, I wanted people to look at my feed and be like, oh, this is such a nice feed.*

Interviewer: Did you feel the overall impression of it was not eye catching?

Interviewee: *Ja.*

Interviewer: What would make it more eye-catching?

Interviewee: *… I like having editing that is done most naturally, but at the same time something that you can see there is editing, so you can see there is more eye catching and aesthetically pleasing*" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

Their style encompassed both the overall aesthetic impression of their Instagram profile, as well as the photographic and editing techniques used in individual posts. The influencers that took part believed that their followers are able to distinguish their content from the content of other influencers. This is clearly outlined in the statement below referring to the creation of video content, where the influencers have attended the same event or place, yet have differing content. The participant believes that not only would their content differ from one another, but their followers would be able to identify which content belonged to which influencer, based on its style:

"*I think it also come a lot down to your personal brand and what people latch onto. Like me and Pete can go to the same place and like have similar content, but like you'll know if it's a Pete video and you'll know if it's my video.*" (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 November 2019)

What the participant it alluding to here, is that just as in branding a business where you will have certain brand guidelines in order to present a consistent brand image, the influencers utilise content creation practices that yield consistent aesthetic results. They then only post content as long as it is cohesive with their existing aesthetic style.

5.1.3 Motivation

The third and final theme that emerged from the interviews in relation to the construction of their online profile was the influencers' motive, or their intention for doing what they do on Instagram. Like the niches and styles, the influencers' motives all seemed to differ. The influencers all seemed to have different motivations for doing what they do. However, these motivations are important to note as a theme in relation to the construction of their profile, as they were found in some cases to have a significant impact in shaping the content posted by the different influencers. This is very clearly illustrated in the following statement where the influencer explains that through their profile they aim to promote body confidence:

"*My main aim at this stage now would be about women empowerment and body confidence.*" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

In the case above, the participant found that she is able to help others through their Instagram profile by promoting body confidence as a means of female empowerment. This, therefore, played a significant role in shaping the content that she posts. Images and captions are selected as a way to share her body confidence with her followers in order to set an example of self-love, and encourage her followers in their journey in body empowerment.

"*Well, especially with the whole body confidence thing you will show a bit more skin than what most posts do.*" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

This participant in particular felt that the best way for her to promote body confidence among her followers was to post images highlighting her body. Most images consisted of her posing in lingerie, bikinis, or partially clothed. In this sense, we are able to see how an

influencer's motives are able to feed back into their style and their niche, by influencing the content that they post. This participant wanted to promote body confidence by showing parts of her body, and therefore her feed was arranged accordingly. However, it is important to mention as a separate theme, as it is possible to have a significant impact when engaging in influencer marketing collaborations. For example, when brand aims to match their brand with the brand of an influencer, they might find an influencer occupying space within the same niche, who also has a similar or desirable aesthetic. However, the social causes an influencer might align themselves with may stand in opposition to the brand they are collaborating with, and therefore, not result in a favourable outcome for either party. For this reason, it was important to highlight the influencers' motives as a distinct element of their online identity construction.

Motives, however, did not have to relate to social causes only. One of the most common motivations given for doing what they do was that of passion. Discourses of passion emerged as a way of explaining what motivates them as an influencer. Passion in this sense referred to a passion for the process of creating content, viewing posting on Instagram as an expression of their art.

"*What differentiates these artists (influencers present) from people that are worried about their likes, they don't care about that, it is more about this is my passion this is what I love to do, so like he said people laughing at him, but he didn't care he was more focused on this is what I like this is what I'm going to do as compared to someone who is like oh this is cool and it can make me money*." (Focus Group Participant 3, 21 November 2019)

Instagram in this way was seen by the influencers as a platform for artists who are passionate about their craft to share their work with their following. The nature of Instagram meant that posting their work allowed them to have access to a large potential audience. The following statement outlines one of the influencer's perception of the platform, and how they

view themselves as a creative individual using Instagram as a way of sharing their art with their online audience:

"Interviewee 1: *I don't see myself as an Instagrammer*.

Interviewer: What do you see yourself as?

Interviewee 1: *As like a creator, and artist… So if another platform comes on that I can pull my audience to and I can enjoy that… For some people it is their jobs, but for me it is a platform that I get to play around with*." (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 November 2019)

The motivations given by the participants for becoming an influencer ranged from altruistic reasons, like empowering other women through body confidence, to using Instagram as a platform to express their passion for what they do and publish their work. Motivation, however, was important to mention as a sub-theme on its own that is used in conjunction with niche and style, as it was shown to play a significant role in determining what content to post, and how that impacts the construction of their profile, and subsequently their overall online identity.

Niche, style, and motivation are certainly not mutually exclusive concepts. Rather, what was observed was a type of synergy between the three. Overall, it was not found that one element was more important than any of the others in determining the online identity of the influencers. However, what was observed was that certain elements played more of a role within the practices of certain influencers. For example, in the case of the mountain biker, his niche was the most significant determining factor in determining his construction of the profile and online identity. Whereas, for the creators and artists, their own unique style had the biggest impact on the presentation of the profile. And arguably for the influencer interested in promoting body confidence, her motivation was one of the most significant factors that determined her online identity and how she communicated that with her followers. That being said, it was observed that all three themes were present within all of the influencers' approaches

to constructing their online identity. It was just that some elements played more of a significant role in shaping their online identity based on what elements were important to the identity they were communicating.

5.2 Authenticity

Authenticity was the theme that perhaps came up most often in conversation with the influencers. When attempting to understand authenticity in relation to a performative view of identity construction, where characteristics are not essentialist, authenticity becomes something that is not innate to a person, object or performance, but rather becomes a claim made by someone, and is either rejected or accepted by a relevant other (Peterson, 2005:1085 as cited in Williams, 2006: 177; Orsatti and Riemer, 2012: 6).

Authenticity as described by the influencers centred on concepts of being 'true to who you are', and being 'real' on Instagram in order to receive 'real' following. It often times equated success on Instagram with being authentic, and that without being authentic on Instagram, one will never be successful because one will never develop a significant following. This is clearly illustrated in the following statement:

"*I'm okay with taking it day by day, I'm okay to not grow within a year or something, but to be real, that's a big thing, because a lot of people make the mistake of putting this on Instagram, but that is not who they are*" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019).

Authenticity was stressed as a means of ensuring that the interaction one has with followers is meaningful. Coming across as inauthentic could lead to a breakdown in the relationship between the influencer and their follower, thus potentially jeopardising their work as an influencer. There was emphasis placed on the concept of being 'real' online in order to build a meaningful following. This is observed in the following:

"*Once people can actually see that that is really you, even meeting you in person, that is when it becomes even more of a real following… You've gotta be real in order to receive real following and comments and impressions.*" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

As an influencer, your relationship with your followers is that which you leverage for commercial gain. Burns (2016) argues that brands are typically interested in working with influencers who have both a high reach, as well as trust, from their followers. For this reason, building a meaningful connection within your followers was stressed as being paramount.

Expanding on this necessity form being 'real' in order to create a meaningful relationship with one's followers, there was the implication that one need to be open and honest, or at the very least create the impression of open honesty. Influencers did not want to be perceived as a 'sell outs' for working with brands simply because they are being incentivised to do so, but rather, wanted to be perceived as endorsing brands, because they were products they themselves used. The following statement clearly demonstrates this, as there was a tone of disapproval expressed by influencers towards fellow influencers who they believed was simply promoting a product for advertising purposes and their own financial gain: "I saw someone posting a skinny tea ad yesterday, and it was someone I know, and it was so obviously an ad" (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020).

It was heavily stressed that the influencers felt they would only endorse a product to the followers if they actually used the product themselves and believed it was worth it, or a product or brand that seemed to match up with their own brand image. This helped in portraying a consistent self to their followers, ensuring they maintain a perception of authenticity among their followers. By carelessly endorsing multiple products, or even competing products, one would be perceived as inauthentic by followers and peers, and thus lose credibility. These sentiments are no more clearly expressed than in the following:

"*It was a nice way for me to seamlessly integrate my life with the three brands and put out content that was authentic - just like everyday kind of content, not trying too hard putting out superficial posts about how great this one product is. Because I've noticed in the past where an influencer will go from brand to brand, and one month they will be working with brand X, being like this is the best pair of shoes I've ever worn, and then 3 months later they are with another brand being like this is the best pair of shoes I've ever run in. It makes you question the authenticity of what they are doing… You are building yourself as a brand, so across the board you need to have some level of consistency in yourself."* (Interviewee 2, 29 October 2019)

One significant reason for ensuring they come across as authentic is because they understand that operating as micro-influencer, they operate on a peer-to-peer level with their followers, and therefore, believe what they say needs to hold some credibility. As Robinson (2007) argues, a successful identity performance requires and individual being literate in the relevant community values and languages. If they were simply endorsing any products, they would not be able to position themselves as opinion leaders within their niche, as they would run the risk of people not taking what they say seriously, perceiving them as inauthentic. Thus compromising their following, and their position within their niche, resulting in unsuccessful promotion of a certain product or brand.

The following statement by one of the influencers addresses this:

"*I think a lot of the time now where it's heading is people are relating a lot more to micro-influencers, so guys like me, even Pete, just guys they can relate to on a level and they not like extremely massive, they might have like famous friends or do cool stuff, but they are almost at the same level that is attainable for someone that is living down the road from me, and they will relate more to me and the conversion will be much higher than if I'm getting sold something from someone else*." (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 November 2019)

By ensuring they are not perceived as simply endorsing any product that is willing to pay them, they are able to maintain a credible reputation, and avoid being perceived as a sell-out. As one influencer explained, "There is a big stigma with influencers about becoming a sell-out" (Focus Group Participant 2, 21 November 2019). Being labelled a 'sell out' results in a negative brand image for the influencer, and undermines any attempt on their behalf to endorse or promote a product. It not only does not create meaningful endorsement of a product or brand, but can often result in the influencer and brand in question being perceived in a negative light. The perception of inauthenticity not only did not promote growth and success on Instagram, but it appeared to exacerbate negative attitudes towards them.

The influencers often justified their brand deals within the interviews by stating that they were in fact customers of the brands before endorsing them publicly on social media. By highlighting the fact that they used the brand before endorsing it, the influencers were once more attempting to portray their credibility, and avoid being labelled a "sell out". They felt they could not be labelled a sell out if they were in fact users of the brand before the brand started compensating them in anyway. The following two statements by influencers who took part in the interviews throw this into sharp relief:

"I would only post something if it is actually something I enjoy or actually like it. Like I've been buying Cotton On clothing way before, it was literally the thing I spent most of my money on." (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020)

"*The brands that I got involved with were brands that I really wanted to work with, and were brands that I felt fitted well within who I was and what I was doing- trying to live a very active outdoor-orientated lifestyle. So New Balance for instance, way before I was an ambassador for them I had a friend working for them, and I used to always get shoes from him for a good deal, so for maybe like 10 years before I became involved with New Balance I was already wearing New Balance*." (Interviewee 2, 29 October 2019)

Across all of the influencers interviewed, the perception of authenticity was stressed as being central to one's success on the platform. The authenticity referred to was a perception of the influencers by their followers. They did not want their followers or other users to perceive them as being inauthentic. The perception of authenticity was explained as central to one's success on the platform through attracting followers and engagement, but it was also central to successful brand work. The brands influencers collaborate with are concerned about the influencers' relationships with their followers, who are simultaneously the brands end customers, and therefore, a meaningful relationship with one's followers can result in effective brand work. The key to a meaningful relationship with one's followers, however, as outlined by the influencers, was the perception of authenticity.

5.2.1 Creative Freedom

A smaller practical theme that came up in relation to the larger theme of authenticity was that of creative freedom within brand deals and collaborations being important to maintaining their perception of authenticity. The influencers felt that in cases where they were given complete creative freedom over the content that they post, the content was more successful in terms of engagement, as well as being more compelling to their followers. This was due to the fact that when given complete creative freedom their followers would not feel like it was the brand endorsing its own product, but it would come across as being a credible endorsement from the influencer. The following influencer explains how not having creative freedom in the past has resulted in their non-collaboration with certain brands:

"*I've been asked to do a contract with an anti-anxiety medicinal tablets, they are not actually drugs. Literally in the contract it was like you need to be holding the package, in the caption you need to list all the ingredients, and I was like people are going to see right through that. It was literally going to be me saying thanks for my anxiety medication, this is what it does, people see right through that, and if I see something like that I'm like 'NO'.*" (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020)

In the example mentioned above, the influencer was offered monetary compensation in exchange for their posting the content stipulated by the brand. The influencer in this case refused the deal as they felt it amounted to corporate infringement on their feed, and therefore, negatively impacted their perception of authenticity. The rationale for this is that their followers had made the decision to follow that specific influencer, and not the brand. If they wanted to consume corporate PR, they would just follow the brand. Therefore, when an influencer simply posts prescribed content that comes across as inauthentic, followers disapprove of this as to some extent they did not consent to being given corporate branding messages, and many find this frustrating.

The difficulties of meeting the requirements of the relationship with the brand, as well as maintaining an authentic relationship with their followers was expertly outlined in the following statement:

"*So with every brand deal there is a conflict of interest, so the brand wants to get as much reach and as many impressions as they can through you, but you want to give out as little or as few. Because there is a big stigma with influencers about becoming a sell-out. So if I went and did a brand deal with Pick n Pay, Pick n Pay's ideal scenario is for me to post 10 stories a day and just saturate my following with pick n pay, but that would kill my brand and my livelihood, so with any brand deal there is always a negotiation where the influencer wants to do as least posts as possible, and the brand wants as many posts as possible.*" (Focus Group Participant 2, 21 November 2019)

Across the board, the influencers felt the most effective brand collaborations occurred when they were given complete creative freedom. The reason for this is that they have a relationship and a rapport with their followers that the brands do not directly enjoy. In some cases where influencers were prescribed content to post, they were able to predict the success or failure thereof, as they have an understanding of their audience, as well as the practices within their niche.

"*They wanted me to post an instructional video on how to use it, and I knew before I posted it this was going to be terrible, I knew it was going to be horrible, it got like 500 views or something, and I got a video recently that got over 100 000 views, but I knew it before I posted it because it's not what Instagram wants and it's not what my followers want… I personally think that a better way to do it would be to actually… send them an item and say take this item and create a post, because that is a lot more authentic, and it comes from the person themselves, whereas that video, when you see the video you know it has nothing to do with me, they just gave it to me and said post this, and your followers can see that*." (Interviewee 4, 29 October 2019)

The idea of creative freedom on the behalf of the influencer was argued as one way of ensuring the influencer maintains their perception of authenticity. They felt their followers were able to tell when content was prescribed, or not their original content, and therefore did not engage with it as meaningfully. While creative freedom within the relationship between the brand and the influencer came up significantly, it was clearly a subset of the theme of authenticity, as influencers explained that when they were not given creative freedom, and rather prescribed content, their followers could tell that it was not genuine or coming from the influencer themselves, and was thus inauthentic.

5.3 Conclusion

Through conducting a thematic discourse analysis on the interview and focus group transcripts it was found that two main themes emerged. The first theme related to the ways in which the influencers construct their online profiles. It was found that within this first theme there were three sub-themes present. The first sub-theme related to the influencers niche. Niche referred to the online community within which the influencers operated. It was noted that these online communities seemed to form along the lines of particular shared interests. The content posted by the influencers all reflected elements of the interest group within which they were

situated online. In this way niche was perhaps one of the most significant factors in informing the content posted by the influencers.

The second sub-theme that emerged in relation to the ways in which the influencers constructed their online profiles was referred to by the influencers as their 'style'. Their style referred to their own individual unique aesthetic. They personal aesthetic was communicated through the content they posted to their Instagram feed, and was, therefore, fundamentally a question of image selection and editing techniques. The influencers expressed the sentiment that their styles were not only unique and an expression of their online identity, but were also a means with which other users could identify their content. The influencers believed that their followers were able to discern particular content as being theirs through their unique visual style.

The third and final sub-theme that was present within the ways in which the influencers constructed their online profiles was the influencers individual motivation. This theme centred on the influencers individual motivations for seeking out influencer status on Instagram. Their motivations were fundamentally a question about their intentions for doing what they do. Motivations ranged from intentions such as sharing one's art, to inspiring other content creators, to promoting female body confidence. The influencers motivations ranged from tackling fairly serious social issues to more minor intentions, however, it was evident that the intentions of the influencers played a role in shaping the content they posted.

The second major theme that emerged from the focus group sessions and interviews was the influencers concern with presenting their 'authentic self'. This theme evoked notions of being 'real' and being 'true to who you are' on Instagram. An important distinction, however, was that this theme of authenticity and 'being true to who you are' was not about how being authentic impacted the ways in which the influencers felt about, or perceived, themselves, but was rather concerned with the ways in which they were being perceived by their followers. In this sense it was less about being 'true to who you are' for your own sake, but rather it was

viewed as being a tool for success on the platform. The influencers were not concerned within how their online actions lined up with their individual sense of their self, but rather were concerned with how these actions were perceived by their followers as lining up with the online identity they had created.

This chapter also touched briefly on a sub-theme within the broad theme of authenticity regarding creative freedom in collaboration with brands. The influencers all felt that the more creative freedom they were given in determining the collaborative content with brands that they post to their account, the more likely that content would be perceived as authentic by their followers. The influencers, therefore, resisted scripted or prescribed content as much as possible.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

Section 6.1 of this chapter discusses the extent to which a platform such as Instagram is able to act as an extension of the public sphere. It will argue that due to commercial imperatives that have shaped the platform, Instagram needs to be understood as a highly mediated environment, with the purpose of trying to inform consumer purchase decisions. To this extent, Instagram cannot be considered a legitimate extension of the public sphere.

Although some might argue that it does facilitate the increased flow of information, and on these grounds it could be considered a form of public sphere, this paper will argue that even though there is increased transfer of information among users, it is done within a highly mediated manner, where the mediation is informed by the economic imperatives of the platform. Instagram's business model means that it primarily generates revenue through selling targeted niche advertising strategies. In order to do this, the platform is constantly collecting data on users in order to develop user profiles, whereby they can begin to predict which products appeal to which users, and advertise accordingly. The algorithms that collect user data also then inform the flow of information between users in an attempt to keep users engaged on the platform for as long as possible.

The second major flaw for arguments regarding Instagram as an extension of the public sphere that will be presented is the monopolisation of the social media space, whereby a few large companies own the majority of all social media platforms. Instagram is one of many platforms owned by Facebook. As of the end of 2019, it was reported that Facebook owned the four most downloaded apps of the last decade, Instagram being one of these (Shead, 2019). The critical political economy of the media favours a competitive media market as a means of establishing a healthy, well-rounded media industry. Critical political economy of the media examines how media institutions integrate into general market processes of accumulation, how their strategies shape the communications landscape, and how this means they are able to exert both institutional and ideological power (Murdock and Golding, 2016). McChesney (2008),

argued that concerns regarding concertation and commercialisation of the media are going become more pressing with the rise of the internet. What we witness within the context of social networking sites on the internet is not only one company having the monopoly in the market social networking sites, but rather, it would be fair to characterise the market of online social networking sites as being an oligopoly. This means that, according to critical political economy of the media, one institution, in this case Facebook, is able to exercise its institutional and ideological power over almost all social networking sites. This hardly presents the context of a Habermasian public sphere where communication between individuals, and the subsequent flow of information, is considered free.

Section Two discusses the concept of authenticity in relation to the findings of the interviews, focus groups sessions, and content analysis. It will argue that authenticity, as described by the influencers is less a process of one acting in accordance with one's real inner-self for one's own sake and well-being than it is a process of creating a perception of a self among their followers, and acting in accordance with that perceived self. In this sense, the authenticity the influencers refer to is not authenticity present within the self, but authenticity present within the minds of their followers. Perceived authenticity is, therefore, about acting in accordance with the self that one has created in the minds of their followers. Handler (1986: 2) has argued that authenticity is a cultural construct which is closely linked to Western notions of the individual, whereby the concepts the individual is a concept that play a central role in our understanding of reality. Influencers foster a sense of reality among their followers when their actions are perceived by their followers to be in line with the person they online.

The constant pursuit of creating and maintaining an authentic self can be conceptualised as a type of celebrity culture. Dyer (1991: 139) argues that celebrity culture is characterised by an endless quest for achieving the sincere and the authentic. Franssen (2019: 315), takes their description of celebrity culture one step further, arguing that while celebrity culture revolves around talking about authenticity and sincerity, it is in fact a fanciful culture, which revolves

around artificiality and image control. Franssen (2019) has argued that within a culture such as this, it is profoundly difficult to establish what is truly sincere and authentic.

One of the techniques used by the influencer that was central to fostering a perception of authenticity among their followers was for them to maintain consistency across their use of the platform. This was consistency in relation to the different affordances they make use of, as well as consistency in relation to image selection and editing techniques. The influencers all conveyed a feeling of having a unique individual online style that was recognisable by their followers. They felt their style was presented in a type if unique aesthetic signature contained within their content. What was noted from the content analysis was also that consistency across their uses of the different affordances played a major role in how they presented themselves on the platform. There were no major trends across the sample of influencers in terms of affordances used, however, within each individual influencer's sample of images, there were clear trends regarding the use of certain affordances. The influencers appeared to make use of a select few of the multiple affordances available to them, and use their select few consistently.

The third and final section of the discussion centres on arguments relating to the commodification of the self, arguing that the self the influencers construct is fundamentally a self which is based on consumption patterns. Commodification of the self has been expressed by scholar in two distinct ways. Firstly, commodification of the self can be understood as a process within which one relates to oneself as a product with a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). It will be argued that the forms of self-branding employed by the influencers fit into this first conceptualisation of commodification of the self. However, the second form of the commodification of the self relates to arguments constructed which refer to commodification of the self as a process, whereby one's self-definition is constructed through the products that individual consumes (Davis, 2003). This chapter will argue that this second form of the commodification of the self plays the most significant role in shaping the online identities of the influencers.

Davis (2003: 46) argues that, "to the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification, companies can position their goods and images not simply as fulfilling desires, but as meeting a felt need to connection, recognition, and values to live by." The argument constructed here will demonstrate how influencers create an online identity so as to broadcast on Instagram, which appears to have connection, recognition, and individual values to live by, through the overt consumption of certain products.

This argument will also relate this second form of the commodification of the self to Hall's (1996) positioning theory, which states that an individual's identity is constructed through positioning themselves in relation to certain subject positions, which are accessed through communication and public participation, describing one's identity as an ensemble of different subject positions. This chapter will argue that the way in which influencers construct their online identity is primarily visual, through the products they consume. In this sense, it is possible to understand the way in which their identity has been constructed through positioning themselves in relation to certain products and consumption patterns, and can understand influencers identity are being an ensemble of different consumption patterns. This is in line with the argument forwarded by Davis (2003), namely that the second form of the commodification of the self occurs when the marketing scripts associated with the products one consumes begin to operate as points of personal identification. Through presenting evidence from the content analysis portion of the study, this chapter will argue that not only are the influencer identities constructed by the product they consume, but their identities are constructed through the marketing scripts and images associated with brands, and they ways in which they replicate and reproduce these within their own content.

6.1 Instagram as a public sphere

Scholars in the public sphere, and proponents of the internet, believed that cyberspace would revolutionise civic participation within the public sphere. Jones (1997: 22) has argued that the internet constituted a 'new public sphere' built by people, that was able to bring

together narratives of progress with modern impulses for self-fulfilment and personal development. It was also the ability to connect people from different backgrounds across geospatial boundaries and provide a forum for discussion that had proponents of the internet as a new public sphere so excited (Papacharissi, 2002). Papacharissi (2002), however, already saw a potential pitfall for the future of the internet, writing, "Despite all the hype surrounding the innovative uses of the internet as a public medium, it is still a medium constructed in a capitalist era" (2002: 18).

When discussing whether or not Instagram constitutes an extension of the public sphere, one must note that although it is able to do what early internet scholars hoped the internet would do for the public sphere by creating an online space that facilitates engagement between individuals from diverse backgrounds and across geospatial boundaries, it does not do this without its limitations. In fact, Papacharissi (2002: 20), who wrote this long before the advent of Instagram, was possibly correct when he cautioned, "Capitalist patterns of production may commodify these new technologies, transforming them into commercially oriented media that have little to do with promoting social welfare."

The capitalist patterns of production that Papacharissi (2002) warned against have commodified Instagram and its users in two distinct ways: the first being the economic imperatives of Instagram, and the need to generate revenue from a platform that is free for users to use, which has resulted in the development of complex algorithms that filter content aimed at maximising users' screen time in order for Instagram to sell attention to advertisers; the second being the economic imperatives of the micro-influencers. The influencers need to develop distinct online identities that they broadcast to other users, and sell to brands for collaboration in order to earn money through the platform. This means that their online identities are often a highly idealised version the person they want other users to see, as opposed to an accurate representation of who they are outside of the platform.

Instagram falls short of expectations of becoming a new form of the public sphere on these two accounts. Instagram is not a free space where all are equal and have equal opportunity to engage with one another. Rather, it is a content-filtering machine that aims to show users only the content it believes will keep them engaged. In this sense, users are only engaging with a narrow range of content. Secondly, it can hardly be considered a legitimate public sphere for citizens to engage freely and fairly with one another in rational public debate when the identities of the citizens engaging are either fictional, or a highly curated version of what the influencer wants other users to see.

6.1.1 Data collection, advertising and algorithms

Although there is often little known about data collection and the intricacy of online algorithms, what we can extrapolate in relation to Instagram is that it uses a similar data collection process and content algorithm to that of its owner platform, Facebook. Under Facebook, Instagram publishes terms of use, which include their policy on data, and the subsequent use thereof. Their data policy explains that they seek

> [t]o create personalized products that are unique and relevant to you, we use your connections, preferences, interests and activities based on the data we collect and learn from you and others (including any data with special protections you choose to provide); how you use and interact with our products; and the people, places, or things you're connected to and interested in on and off our products. Learn more about how we use information about you to personalize your Facebook and Instagram experience, including features, content and recommendations in Facebook Products; you can also learn more about how we choose the ads that you see [all sic] (Instagram, 2020).

The process is cyclical, where Instagram and Facebook collect data on users interests and traits (Gramich, 2019) and use this data to inform the content that will appear on your timeline,

as well as the advertisements that you will be shown. The more content and advertisements they show a user, the more data they are able to collect on the users, and the more accurate their algorithms get in selecting future content. The platform wants to keep you engaged for as long as possible, and wants to inform your consumer purchase decisions as much as possible, in order to increase their own profits (Wheeler, 2017; Warner, 2018; Ressa, 2019). Facebook even goes so far as to track users' activity when they are not on any official Facebook platforms through Facebook Pixel, which allows Facebook to collect and share users activity outside of their products with their products (Hitlin and Rainie, 2019).

Facebook, and subsequently Instagram, makes their money predominantly through the revenue it generates from advertising. The more accurate it's advertising in predicting consumer purchase decisions, the more money they can make off of the process. Facebook uses the data it collects on users to build user profiles in order to effectively target individuals through niche advertising strategies, as well as keep the user engaged, so that they can continue to show the advertisements.

This process has resulted in Instagram, and other social media platforms alike, being labelled 'filter bubble landscapes' (Pariser, 2018), due to the algorithmic nature of many online platforms, particularly social networking sites, which has been a significant area of concern for media scholars in recent decades. Classic filter bubble arguments often relate to the potential limitation of information due to algorithms, which learn users choices and preferences, filtering the content a user sees, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop presenting the user with an increasingly narrow and homogenous set of options with which to engage (Bozdag and van Den Haven, 2015: 252). Concern has also been raised by scholars regarding the potential limitation of a user's online groups, whereby algorithms connect like-minded individuals with one another,shielding them from encountering contrary perspective (Bruns, 2019).

The concept of filter bubbles remains contentious. A study conducted by Flaxman, Goel and Rao (2016), found that social networking sites, and online search engines are associated

with the recent increase in the average ideological distance between individuals. However, at the same time, their findings suggested that the same social networking sites and online search engines are also associated with an increase in individual's online exposure to content from his or her less-preferred side of the political spectrum (Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016). It seems to be true that, particularly related to the consumption of news online, search engines do facilitate a diversity of voices, as they are able to offer a range of opinions broader than the narrow selection of ones found in one's local newspaper, thus expanding the information available to citizens (Flaxman, Goel and Rao, 2016).

To this end, filter bubble or not, the product that Facebook and Instagram are selling is the end user - or at the very least their attention. For proponents of the internet as being a realm to expand the public sphere, this seems to pose somewhat of a problem. These platforms are not designed to increase to flow of information, as much as they are designed to keep a user's attention and attempt to inform their consumer purchase decisions through niche targeted advertising. Relating this to Habermas's criteria for the existence of a public sphere, we can see a few potential pitfalls for the application. Engagement designed to inform consumer purchase decisions can hardly be considered free engagement between citizens. Papacharissi (2002) who suggested that the internet would not serve as a legitimate extension of the public sphere, due to the capitalist context within which it was created, and thus capitalist modes of operating will appropriate it in pursuit of profits. The attempt to influence consumer purchase decisions through niche targeted advertising on the internet is a prime example of this.

6.1.2 Monopolisation of social media platforms

As mentioned earlier, Instagram is just one of the many products owned by Facebook. Conglomeration and monopolisation of internet platforms is also a significant blow to the utopian perspective of the internet that positioned it as expanding and creating new public spheres. Almost all mainstream social media platforms can be traced back to what are referred as The Big Five technology companies: Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Apple, and

Facebook (Jones, 2019). This results in a multitude of different platforms, being controlled by only a handful of players, thus limiting competition.

Critical Political Economy of the media is a theory that aims to understand the ways in which media products are created in relation to the dynamics of the production, and the ways in which the dynamics of the production affects the media output (Murdock and Golding, 2016). There is a specific focus on privately owned media, and the ways in which these institutions integrate into general market processes of accumulation, how their strategies shape the communication landscape, as well as how they are able to exercise power, both in an institutional and ideological sense (Murdock and Golding, 2016). McChesney (2008) argued that concerns regarding the concentration and commercialisation of the media are in fact more pressing now in relation to contemporary forms of online media.

Patelis (2013) argues that over the last half-decade, the successful operation of social networking sites has resulted in an oligopoly market, with Facebook being the biggest player. The oligopoly, as well as the commercial nature, of social networking sites is, to an extent, a consequence of the way in which the media has been designed by capitalist democracies (Patelis, 2013). Social networking sites have also developed with the context of a globally deregulated field of communications, and they are by design commercial media, thus making them vulnerable to financial power (Patelis, 2013).

The free use of social networking sites has promoted a business model that relies on generating revenue through advertising. However, as opposed to simply providing advertisers with an audience in exchange for remuneration, social networking sites sell the personal data of their users directly to advertisers (Patelis, 2013). This allows for highly effective targeted niche advertising to take place.

In 2012 Facebook acquired Instagram, for the sum of $1 billion (Shead, 2019). As of the end of 2019, according to the BBC, Facebook owned the four most downloaded apps of the

last decade (Shead, 2019). Each of these four apps boasts more than a billion users (Shead, 2019). Taha Yasserie, a senior research fellow in computational science at the Oxford Internet Institute is quoted, by the BBC, as saying: "It's not okay, one company owning four of the most popular social networking and communication apps, at best, can be described as a data monopoly" (Shead, 2019). Yasserie believes a data monopoly is a problem due to the fact that, "…combined, the data from multiple platforms can lead to an extremely high level of precision in modelling our traits and behaviours" (Shead, 2019). Yasserie argues that, "this amount of power should be regulated" (Shead, 2019).

Patelis (2013) believed that the personalisation of social networking platforms is able to conceal the reality that in fact one is dealing with a process of commodification, which slowly but steadily integrates communication and commerce until they become one homogenous entity. What Patelis is referring to here is the fact that social networking sites are not neutral spaces that enable free communication, but rather, that they are highly mediated environments, where personal information in relation to one's interaction and communication data is sold to advertisers as a way of informing your consumer purchase decisions. By developing highly accurate models through the use of the collection of user data, social networking sites are able to integrate niche marketing campaigns that are able to influence consumer purchase patterns.

Critical political economy of the media favours competitive communication environments. As observed, however, the oligopoly market of social networking sites is hardly competitive. What we witness is multiple online platforms that are only owned by a few larger companies. These companies collect user data across the different platforms developing, what Yasserie describes as a data monopoly.

What is also important to note is that as mentioned earlier, each of the four most downloaded apps of the last half-decade, which are owned by Facebook, have over a billion users. These users, however, are not four billion different people only using one of the apps, but rather, those one billion users make use of more than one of the platforms, and in some

cases, all four. This allows for the collection of cross-platform data by one single company, namely Facebook. This just illustrates the extent of Facebook's power in both determining the mediated terms of communication on these platforms, as well as informing consumer purchase behaviour through niche targeted advertising.

6.1.3 Section Conclusion

The two arguments presented regarding the data collection and algorithmic structure of the platform, as well as monopolisation of social media platforms, demonstrate two ways in which Instagram fails to act as an extension of the public sphere. Despite the aspirations of early proponents of the internet as a form of the public sphere, we have witnessed the commodification of social media platforms due to capitalist modes of production.

The purpose of social media platforms has shifted from creating connection between individuals, but focuses on keeping you engaged for as long as possible, in an attempt to inform your consumer purchase decisions as much as possible, resulting in the increase of their profitability (Wheeler, 2017; Warner, 2018; Ressa, 2019). Facebook, and consequently Instagram, makes most of its revenue through targeted advertising. By collecting data on their users, Facebook is able to filter content that will appeal to users, showing them content that is likely to interest them, thus keeping them engaged for longer. This data is also used to generate a profile of the users and engage in niche targeted advertising as a way of predicting and informing consumer purchase decisions. To this extent, users are not using a platform where they are able to engage with one another freely, but rather are using a platform that controls and mediates the flow of content and information between users, with the ultimate goal of generating revenue through targeted advertising, resulting in informing consumer purchase decisions through their platform.

Instagram is also merely a subsidiary product of Facebook. It was acquired by Facebook in 2012. As of the end of 2019, it was reported by the BBC, that the four most downloaded apps of the decade were all owned by Facebook (Shead, 2019). It is fair to say that Facebook

not only holds a monopoly when it comes to social media platforms, but that the social media market could be described as an oligopoly. The critical political economy of the media views the media as a cultural product, and aims to understand the dynamics of production of these products, and the ways in which these dynamics effects media output (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Critical political economy of the media examines the ways in which institutions integrate into general processes of accumulation, how they are able to shape the communication landscape, as well as how they are able to exercise power through doing (Murdock and Golding, 2016). For this reason, critical political economy of the media favours a competitive media environment. However, the environment Instagram finds itself in, is hardly a competitive one. Rather, it is a space regulated by the algorithmic structures of Facebook that aim to exert power by informing consumer purchase decisions. For these reasons, critical political economy of the media would be scathing regarding the context in which Instagram content is created and distributed, and the results this has within the community of users in society.

The two arguments presented here dismiss most notions of Instagram being a legitimate extension of the public sphere. Although one could claim that, like the arguments regarding filter bubbles by Flaxman, Goel and Rao (2016), Instagram still increases an individual's online exposure to new content, it would be incorrect to label this as an extension of the public sphere. The highly mediated context within which Instagram exposes individuals to new content, with the sole purpose of earning revenue through targeted advertising, negates any claims regarding Instagram as being a form of the public sphere that allows for free engagement among citizens.

6.2 Creating the perception of authenticity

A substantial body of literature has emerged extending from the 1960s and 1970s into the 2000s, that reflects on a societal shift that occurred between the 1950s and 1960s, where novel emphasis was placed on the exploration of immediate experience, the satisfaction of personal desires, on finding one's inner voice, and on freely expressing one's intimate feelings (Bell, 1976; Turner, 1976; Yankelovich, 1981; Bellah et al., 1985; Davis, 2003). This has often been referred to as a process of satisfying 'inner impulses'. Coinciding with this trend to fulfil this need was the distancing of individual self-definitions based on one's institutional role within society (Bell, 1976; Turner, 1976; Yankelovich, 1981; Bellah et al., 1985; Davis, 2003). Self-definition based on one's institutional role involves understanding one's real self as something that becomes increasingly recognised through the pursuit of institutional goals (Davis, 2003: 42). A self-definition based on impulse, by way of contrast, understands feelings and actions as expressions of the real self (Davis, 2003: 42). Turner (1976: 992) has argued that the new conceptualisation of the self, emerging at the time consisted of an individual's "deep, unsocialised, inner impulses waiting to be discovered and spontaneously expressed."

In some ways, this new conceptualisation of the self, based on individual inner impulses was echoed in other literature emerging from a similar time period by scholars such as Trilling (1971) and Handler (1986), who focused on the prevalence of the concept of authenticity within society as a means of self-definition. Handler (1986: 2) argued that authenticity is a cultural construct closely linked to Western notions of the individual, where the individual plays a central role in our understanding of reality. Trilling (1971), believed that this conceptualisation of authenticity has to do with acting in accordance with our individual existence, and our true inner self. In this sense, authenticity concerns acting in accordance with one's individual inner impulses. An authentic person would be one whose outward display of feelings and actions exists in line with, or as an expression of, their inner impulses. Trilling (1971) contrasts the concepts of authenticity and sincerity. Sincerity, as argued by Trilling (1971: 9), is demanded not for the sake of the self, but for the sake of others, and is a means to honest social

relationships. In this view, sincerity is expressed here as ultimately public or social. Trilling (1971), argues that sincerity's popularity was ultimately eclipsed by popular notions of authenticity, as sincerity ultimately privileged social relations over the individual selfhood. Sincerity seems to bear more resemblance to concepts of individual self-definitions based on one's institutional roles than it does self-definitions based on impulse. Trilling (1971: 11) believes that, "we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic." Trilling (1971: 93), believes that the concept of authenticity has been ingrained in our daily existence as part of our moral slang, which points to our nature that is our anxiety over the credibility of individual existence.

The shift from self-definition based institutional roles to self-definition based on individual impulse that was characterised by so many scholars from the 1960s and 1970s seems to encompass the shift characterised by Trilling (1971) from the sincere individual to the authentic individual. The sincere individual is one who acts in accordance with one's institutional role, whereas the authentic individual is one who acts in accordance with one's inner impulses.

6.2.1 Authenticity on Instagram

What was interesting to note was that identity construction based on self-definition on Instagram situated itself both in the sincere and authentic definitions of the self. The reason for this was that identity construction on Instagram is performative, and the authenticity of one's identity is measured not by ones reflexive view of oneself, but determined by the perceptions of one's followers. While authenticity was characterised by the influencers as a process of being 'true to yourself', the belief was that this would foster a greater sense of one's authenticity within the minds of ones followers, thus building a deeper connection with one's followers. In this sense the goal of being authentic on Instagram was to build public relationships.

The aim of an influencer was to build sincere relationships with their followers, and the way in which they all believed they would do this would be through being authentic on Instagram. This illustrates the hegemonic notions of Western conceptualisations of individualism. The rhetoric used by the influencers implies a shift, whereby one enacts one's public institutional role of building and fostering meaningful relationships by satisfying one's individual impulses. The individual has become the institution, and their impulses the way in which they enact their institutional role. This is clearly illustrated in the following statement whereby the influencer explains that they need to be 'real' in order for them the receive 'real' following: "Once people can actually see that that is really you… that is when it becomes even more of a real following… You've gotta be real in order to receive real following…" (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

Based on the above statement, the influencer positioning a 'real' following as the goal they try to attain on Instagram, and the way in which they achieve/receive that is through being 'real' themself. They emphasise their success as being predicated on their social relationship with their followers, and their follower's perceptions of them, and the way in which they achieve said success is through portraying what they believe to be an authentic self, in order for them to be perceived as an authentic individual.

One of the biggest concerns expressed by the influencers was for people to believe their actions to be inauthentic. Behaviour that was considered to be inauthentic not only did not promote the influencers' success on the platform, but in fact actively created and endorsed negative attitudes towards the influencers. This is evident in the following comment: "I saw someone posting a skinny tea ad yesterday, and it was someone I know, and it was so obviously an ad." (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020)

The nature of this comment is particularly interesting, as it contains three phrases. However, the second and third phrases are given as evidence to substantiate the claim in the first. The first phrase is a statement claiming that an individual on Instagram posted an

advertisement for the brand Skinny Tea. What we can understand from the implications of the second and third phrases, however, is that the post in question was not labelled as an advertisement or paid partnership, but rather aimed to come across as an authentic endorsement of a product by the Instagrammer in question. These implications are made evident by the supporting claim that "it was someone I know". The inclusion of this piece of evidence serves to highlight the close relationship the influencer had with this individual in question. By highlighting their relationship, the influencer is able to substantiate the fact that they know the individual in question, and they know they are not a natural proponent of the brand. They are implying that through knowing the individual, they are able to credibly say that the only way this individual would post such content would be if they had a transactional relationship with Skinny Tea.

The inclusion of the word 'obviously' in the third phrase, within the context of it coming after the second phrase substantiating the influencer's relationship with the individual, reaffirms the notion that the post in question was most probably not labelled as a paid partnership, but was intended to come across as a natural endorsement of the brand. When looking at the comment in its totality, there are clear implications on the behalf of the influencer, based on the evidence they provide, that they believe the individual's actions to be inauthentic.

There is an implicit understanding on Instagram that what one posts on one's Instagram account needs to be an authentic representation of one's offline self. This is clearly expressed in the following statement:

"*I'm okay with taking it day by day, I'm okay to not grow within a year or something, but to be real, that's the big thing, because a lot of people make the mistake of putting this on Instagram, but that is not who they are*." (Interviewee 1, 29 October 2019)

The statement above by one of the influencers who took part in an interview makes a few assertions through the use of interesting rhetoric. Firstly, perhaps the most prominent assertion the influencer is making is that posting content onto Instagram which might be perceived as being inauthentic compared to one's offline self, is a "mistake." This implies that there is something incorrect, or wrong, about creating a version of oneself online which differs from their offline self. The statement also implies that a person is able to grow their online following by being inauthentic. However, this is regarded as being incorrect or frowned upon. It is also alluding to the fact that inauthentic growth is not sustainable, and if one wants long term success on the platform, one needs to foster real relationships which are predicated on one's true self.

Dyer (1991: 139) writes that, "celebrity culture can be understood as an endless quest for the sincere and the authentic." Franssen (2019: 315) argues that it is a culture that revolves around talking about the values of sincerity and authenticity. This is congruent with the findings in the interview portion of this study, whereby, the theme that emerged the most was one regarding the influencers and their online authenticity. Franssen (2019: 315) also takes it one step further and argues that although it is a culture that revolves around talking about authenticity, it is also a make-believe culture of artificiality and image control, which he argues makes it profoundly difficult to determine what is truly sincere or authentic.

6.2.2 Consistency as a means of creating authenticity

The content analysis portion, which examined the influencers who took part in the interviews accounts, as well as others, shed some light on one of the significant ways in which they develop and maintain their authentic online selves, which they spoke so heavily about in the interviews. The central take-away from the content analysis findings was that consistency is key. When analysing trends in the different affordances available to the influencers that were made use of, it was found that across the sample of influencers, there were no notable trends in terms of which affordances were favoured. Rather, what was observed was that each

influencer made use of a select number of affordances consistently. There were no trends across the influencers in the sample, but within each influencer's sample of posts that were analysed, clear trends emerged.

Every Instagram post contains an image or video and an accompanying caption. Additionally, influencers are able to include hashtags, tag other users in both the comments and on the image, geo-tags, and engage by replying to comments. All of these different affordances were coded for. Within the sample of influencers, there were no major trends in terms of the preference and frequency of use across the different affordances. However, within each influencer's sample of posts there were clear trends favouring certain affordances.

What this means is that influencers did not make use of all of the affordances that they had access to for every post, and across the sample of influencers they did not seem to favour certain affordances as a group. However, each individual displayed a clear preference for a certain combination of affordances, which they then used consistently.

For example, in relation to preference of the use of video or photographic content, it was found that overall, 83% of the posts analysed contained photographic images as opposed to video content. Across the sample of influencers, this demonstrates a clear preference for photographs. However, when looking at the individual influencers a different narrative is observed. This is evident in the fact that out of the 20 influencers, two out of the 20 in the sample, posted videos 70% of the time. It would be incorrect to say that for all of the influencers there was a clear preference for photographs, when the 17% of posts that contained videos were disproportionately held by a few influencers, illustrating that a number of the influencers had a preference for video.

When analysing the comment section, it was found that in 53% of all of the posts the influencer had replied to all of the comments. Again, what was interesting to note was that this 53% was not distributed evenly over the whole sample of influencers. What was observed was

that some influencers replied to all comments by other users on their posts all of the time, some influencers replied to a few comments, and some replied to none - even going so far as disabling the comments section in some cases. For influencers who replied to all comments on a post, it was found that across the 10 posts analysed they consistently replied to all comments, whereas the opposite was true for individuals who did not reply to comments.

What these illustrate was that each influencer had their own unique way of engaging and communicating with their followers. They all had a unique approach to conveying their message to their followers that made use of a number of different affordances, but not necessarily all of the affordances to which they had access. By being consistent in their use of certain affordances, their followers begin to identify the influencers unique 'voice' or digital storytelling signatures.

This also seems to echo findings in the interview portion of the study, where it was found that influencers all felt their online identity had its own unique style. By style, the influencers were referring to the fact that they felt their Instagram profile contained its own unique aesthetic due to their choices in relation to content selection and editing. This is illustrated in the following statement:

"*As an Instagrammer you are known for your type of content, you are known for your feed looking a type of way, you are known for a certain preset on all of your photos.*" (Focus Group Participant 1, 21 November 2019)

While this statement above only makes reference to the visual aspect of their content, and their way of working, fundamentally their selection of aesthetics markers and elements perform the same role as their selection of affordances; to project a consistent persona. Influencers mentioned how they believed that their individual styles made them distinguishable from one another in terms of their own unique aesthetic. This is clearly observed in the following statement:

"*I think what's crazy as an artist is how you can easily distinguish between these two artists just by their noticeable way of working, like their editing, their style, and what their vision is.*" (Focus Group Participant 3, 21 November 2019)

Arguably the influencers' style went further than just the selection and implementation of certain visual aspects in the creation of their content as mentioned by the influencers in their interviews. Based on the content analysis findings, it appears that their style would include the consistent selection and use of certain platform affordances. The end goal of this was to create and maintain a consistent visual and communicative style on Instagram so as to project a consistent self to ones followers, ultimately aiming to bolster one's authenticity within the mind of one's followers. The influencers all expressed projecting a unique aesthetic in their content that made them distinguishable from one another, and the content analysis echoed this in relation to their use of affordances, where arguably, one could differentiate between the different influencers based on their consistent use of a select few affordances.

6.2.3 Conclusion

The goal of all influencers, it appeared, was to develop, and foster, a perception of authenticity among their followers. Authenticity, as defined by Handler (1986: 2), is a cultural construct which is closely linked to Western notions of the individual, whereby the individual plays a central role in our understanding of reality. Perceived authenticity on Instagram was therefore central to the success of a influencer as it determined, in the minds of their followers, the reality of their life. Being perceived as authentic meant that their followers would perceive the online identity, and associated lifestyle, that the influencer constructs as being the everyday lived reality of that influencer. Trilling (1971), on the other hand, contrasts concepts of authenticity and sincerity. Sincerity, according to Trilling (1971: 9), is demanded not for the sake of the self, but for the sake of others, and is a means to honest social relationship.

What is interesting to note in relation to Instagram influencers was that there was the belief that the success of their constructed online identity is dependent on coming across as

both authentic and sincere. Sincerity fosters social relations with their followers, which are predicated on the followers perceiving the influencers identity as being an authentic representation of reality. It was believed by the influencers that being perceived as authentic was more important that sincerity, however, as a perceived authenticity would result in a sincere relationship between the influencers and their followers. What is important to note was that the authenticity the influencers referred to was less a process of them being their 'true-self' for their own sake, but rather creating a perception of them being their 'true-self' within the minds of other Instagram users. In this sense, the authenticity referred to by the influencers would be better described as their perceived authenticity.

It was observed, predominantly from the content analysis findings, that the influencers all demonstrated unique combinations of Instagram affordances when posting. There were no clear trends across the sample of influencers, but within each influencers sample of images there were clear trends, showing a preference for a particular set of affordances, that were then used consistently across their posts. Relating this to findings from the interviews and focus group, the influencers all felt they had their own unique aesthetic style. During the interview the influencers were mainly referring to their image selection and editing techniques, however, based on the content analysis findings one could draw the conclusion that their individual style also included the use of certain platform affordances. When it came to creating the perception of authenticity, consistency was key for the influencers. They maintained this level of consistency through the relentless use of their individual style, comprising of their aesthetic signatures, as well as their consistent use of certain platform affordances.

6.3 Commodification of the self

The previous section stressed the importance of creating the perception of authenticity by the influencers in the minds of their followers. This section argues that the authentic self they create is one predicated on the commodification of the self, and the perception of authenticity they are trying to establish is in relation to this commodified self.

When referring to the commodification of the self, there are two ways in which it has been expressed by scholars. The first form of commodification of the self - centres around viewing oneself as a product that has a market exchange value. Theories of self-branding as a means of standing out from competitors are constructed along this line (Davis, 2003). The second form of the commodification of the self, however, is once again concerned with the shift in self-definition that took place in the 1950s and 1960s from institution to impulse. This shift coincided with the rise in popularity of consumer culture, and brought with it the development of new marketing scripts, which positioned and sold product as instruments of individual liberation (Davis, 2003: 45). The commodities one buys and uses became fundamentally central to one's identity. The result of this shift was that one's identity in terms of self-definition became constructed through the products that one consumed (Davis, 2003).

Davis (2003: 46) has argued that "To the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification, companies can position their goods and images not simply as fulfilling desires, but as meeting a felt need for connection, recognition, and values to live by." This seems to echo processes of individual identification outlined by Hall (1996). Hall (1996: 6), argued through the use of positioning theory, that identities are temporary points of attachment to different subject positions which one is able to access through discursive practices. In this sense, Hall (1996) believes one's identity is made up of an ensemble of different subject positions. What Davis (2003) argues is not dissimilar to Hall's process of identity construction. However, Davis (2003) is arguing is that one's identity is constructed through temporary points of attachment to one's consumer purchase decisions, as an ensemble

of consumption patterns. Davis (2003) believes that as one is transformed into a consumer, one's social identity becomes increasingly shaped by one's patterns of consumption.

The notion of one's identity being constructed and conveyed through the products one consumes was clearly evident in the influencers responses within the interviews and focus groups. The following illustrates this: "Most of the time I end up getting bikinis… a lot of the time I'm bikinis or fitness clothes. And a lot of other girls are pyjama posts, or something like that, so it's up to you to decide" (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020).

The language used in the above statement is of particular interest, as it was blatantly illustrative of the commodification of the self. The phrase "…I'm bikinis or fitness clothes" is poignant, as the language used defines the influencer's identity as being synonymous with bikini swimwear and fitness clothes. This influencer's identity is constructed through fashion, but more specifically she views herself as being a particular type of fashion. The influencer wants connotations that one associated with swimwear and fitness clothing to also be associated with her identity. She also illustrates how other female influencers might be "… pyjama posts… it's up to you to decide". This very clearly demonstrates how ones fashion choices in terms of the particular items of clothing one wears influences one's identity. This statement seems to imply that you 'are' either a "bikini" or you are "pyjamas", but you are not both. It also highlights the feeling of agency on the behalf of the influencers to determine their own self-definition through their particular choices in relation to the clothing they choose to wear.

Of interest is that influencers felt their consumption of certain products also played a role in their perception of authenticity. If they consumed the right products, they could appear authentic. This is clearly outlined in the following statement:

"*The brands that I got involved with were brands that I really wanted to work with, and were brands that I felt fitted well with who I was and what I was doing - trying to live a very*

active outdoor orientated lifestyle… maybe for like 10 years before I became involved with New Balance I was already wearing New Balance." (Interviewee 2, 29 October 2019)

The statement above explains how the influencer wanted to be perceived as living an authentic type of lifestyle, one he describes as 'active and outdoor orientated', and how he used certain brands to convey that. The brand in question is a shoe manufacturer, however, what the influencer clearly illustrates is that to him, and many others, New Balance does not simply represent shoes in a utilitarian sense, but rather New Balance represents a certain type of lifestyle. In the statement above, the influencer explains that to them New Balance represents living an 'active outdoor-orientated' lifestyle. The influencer does not mention the purely utilitarian aspects he gains from wearing the shoe, rather he highlights the fact that wearing this particular brand has connotations for the type of lifestyle he lives, as well as how he wants to be perceived by others. In this sense, the shoes are less about what you functionally get from wearing them, and more about how they play a role in shaping who you are, and how you are perceived.

For influencers, their relationship to products is different to that of ordinary consumers. Ordinary consumers chose products they wanted, and then they pay in order to acquire them. This, in relation to the authenticity referenced in the above statement, makes for a more authentic form of consumption. It is authentic in the sense that there is no outside influence from brands in terms of compensation. For influencers, however, there is almost always some form of remuneration between a brand and the influencers for using and displaying their products on Instagram. Knowing this dynamic exists can result in the perception of inauthenticity among followers. The reason for this is that followers may doubt the influencer's endorsement of the product, questioning whether the influencer is only endorsing the product due to remuneration or not. This can result in the influencer being perceived as, what was mentioned earlier, a "sell-out."

Hence the statement includes two qualifiers, the first being the phrase "…brands that I really wanted to work with…", and the second being, "… maybe for like 10 years before I became involved with New Balance I was already wearing New Balance." The goal of these qualifiers is to try and substantiate the intentions of the influencer as being authentic, as he used the product before any form of remuneration existed within his relationship to the brand. Another example of this is:

"*I would only post something if it is actually something I enjoy or actually like it. Like, I've been buying Cotton On clothing way before, it was literally the thing I spent most of my money on.*" (Interviewee 3, 7 February 2020)

Again, the influencer relies on recounting a past, perhaps perceived as more authentic, relationship with the brand, as a means of justifying his current business relationship that results in the influencer using the said brand's products for remuneration.

What is interesting to note in both statements is that the commodification of the self in not denied in anyway. They do not deny the product constituting a part of their identity. Rather, their concern is with people's perception of their relationship with the brands delivering the product. Influencers are concerned with their relationship to the brand being perceived as inauthentic. Because their identity is constituted through the products they consume, the relationship between the influencer and the brand is scrutinised by followers, and judgement is passed not on the authenticity of the product, but on the authenticity of the influencers identity and online personae.

The concern expressed above is clearly illustrated in the following comment by one of the influencers:

"*So with every brand deal there is a conflict of interest. So the brand wants to get as much reach and as many impressions as they can through you, but you want to give out as little or as*

few, because there is a big stigma with influencers about becoming a sell-out." (Focus Group Participant 2, 21 November 2019)

The comment outline above speaks to the fact that influencers are trying to navigate a conflict of interest whereby their identity is very much constructed visually through their patterns of consumption. However, they want this consumption to come across as authentic - which is difficult when they are being remunerated to show a product.

Attempts to navigate this conflict of interest were evident within the content analysis portion of this study when looking at the photographic content posted by the influencers. Within the 200 images coded in the content analysis, it was found that 182 images contained the influencer present within them. Of these 182 images 156 contained only the influencer, and not other subjects. There is a clear trend whereby the influencers use their Instagram feed as a type of gallery of curated images of themselves. This is not surprising, as they are trying to construct and communicate an online identity, which revolves fundamentally around the products they utilise and consume within their content.

What was noted, however, was the only 107 of the images posted by the influencers contained a brand of product tagged. This further highlights the influencers' attempts at authenticity, where almost all of the images within the sample contained the influencers present, but only just over half contained a brand present. Influencers not only demonstrate the products they collaborate with and consume on their Instagram feed, but they clearly also curate content that attempts to convey their individual identity through the images they select, in order to make the images that do contain brands or products appear more authentic.

6.3.1 Content analysis findings in relation to the commodification of the self

Studying mainstream media and advertising, Goffman (1979), outlined the different ways in which gender was portrayed.

Coding the photographs in the sample for touch, it was found that only 28% of photos of male influencers depicted the male influencer in the act of touching something. This stands in contrast to the 65% of female images in which the female influencers were depicted in the act of touching. Within the images of the influencers depicted in the act of touching, it was found that 88% of the images of females engaged in some form of touch depicted them in the act of touch themselves in some manner, as opposed to the 64% of male influencers touching themselves. What was also interesting to note was the way in which the influencers engaged in touching themselves. Most of the images of male influencers touching themselves consisted of the influencer with their hands down at their sides or placed in their pockets. The touch that female influencers engaged in consisted mainly of the female influencers touching their hips, face, hair, or clothing.

These findings are directly in line with Goffman's (1979) research outlining 'the feminine touch' as a means of displaying gender within mainstream media and advertising. Goffman (1979, noted that within mainstream media and advertising, women were displayed more often than men in scenes within which they are touching something. In most cases involving touch it was found that women would be touching themselves in a manner which seemed to have no apparent functional end (Tortajada, Ariana and Martinez, 2013).

Feminine touch was important to note in this case, as the examples which Goffman (1979) had previously referred in his work to involved the media's depiction of gender as seen by those constructing the images, which in many cases were not the female models within the image. The dynamic on Instagram is different as it is influencers' constructing and publishing images of themselves. In this sense, the images published can be understood as a portrayal of the influencers' self-definition. It is important to note then that it is evident from the content analysis that influencers appear to appropriate mainstream media and advertising depictions of gender, and employ them in the construction of their identity and forms of self-definition.

Goffman's (1979) concept of licensed withdrawal was also coded for. It was found that 61% of female photographs consisted of the female present in the image, but in a state of licensed withdrawal. Only 27% of photographs posted by male influencers were photographed in a state of licensed withdrawal. Goffman (1979) describes this state of licensed withdrawal as one in which the subject appears to be psychologically absent from the social situation in which they find themselves. Goffman (1979) argues that within advertising, women are often depicted to be drifting from the physical scenes within which they are to be found. When they drift psychologically, they appear to be absent from the main course of attention, and sustained within a type of dissociated, unthinking state (Goffman, 1979).

The findings from the content analysis demonstrated that Goffman's (1979), notion of female presenting individuals being depicted within a state of licensed withdrawal was also present within the sample if images collected from the influencers' profiles. Almost 2/3 of the images posted by female influencers consisted of them in a state of licensed withdrawal. This, compared of less that 1/3 of photographs posted by male influencers showing them in a state of licensed withdrawal.

Perhaps, however, the category, as defined by Goffman (1979), within the content analysis that consisted of the greatest discrepancy between male and female influencers was that of the ritualisation of subordination. According to Goffman (1979), the ritualisation of subordination consisted of the different ways in which one is able to lower oneself physically. What Goffman (1979) found was that women and children were often pictured in lower positions. These lower positions could be in relation to other subjects within the image, but also include the ways in which the subject could be positioned which makes it appear lower than the viewer. According to Goffman (1979: 46), the ritualisation of subordination resulted in configurations that "can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement."

Within the sample of images posted by the influencers that were coded, it was found that 68% of posts by female influencers exhibited ritualised subordination, as opposed to only 7% of posts by male influencers. In the case of the female influencers, the ritualisation of subordination was exhibited through their being displayed lying down or in poses where their legs were crossed, their arms bent, and/or their head tilted. What was clearly evident from the content analysis was that this trend of portraying oneself in such positions was hugely prevalent within the sample of female influencers, but hardly occurred within the sample of male influencers. Again, these findings are directly in line with Goffman's (1979) findings regarding displays of gender within advertising.

These findings illustrate another form of the commodification of the self, occurring among influencers on Instagram. Davis (2003) argues that the second form of the commodification of the self, occurred when one began to view one's identity as being constructed through the products they consume. Davis (2003), believed this type of commodification of the self, occurred when marketing scripts began to operate as points of personal identification. What the findings from the content analysis illustrate is that not only are influencers' identities constructed by the products they consume, but their identities are constructed through the marketing scripts of the brands associated with the products they consume, and the ways in which they appropriate and reproduce them within their own content.

Naomi Klein (2000) has argued that fundamentally what successful corporations produced were not products, but images of their brands. Klein (2000), argued that primarily what brands sell are images. Relating this to the findings outlined above, we see a form of the commodification of the self, where the self is not only expressed through the consumption of products, but also through the consumption of mainstream media and advertisings depictions of gender within their content. The ways in which the influencers appropriated and recreated mainstream advertising depictions of gender are indicative of this. In relation to gender, the

influencers made use of already existing images surrounding gender created within the advertising and branding space, and replicated them when constructing their online identity.

This form of commodification of the self takes Davis's (2003) theory one step further, arguing that it is in fact not only about the products one consumes, but the ways in which brands associated with those products are reproduced in the construction of one's identity. Just as Naomi Klein (2000) argued that successful corporations primarily produced images of brands as opposed to actual products, so too do influencers primarily develop an identity based on the consumption and reproduction of brand images, as opposed to actual products.

6.3.2 Conclusion

The previous section argued that central to the influencers success on the platform required them fostering a perception of authenticity. This final section argued that the authentic self they are attempting to establish is one predicated on a commodified self. Theories of commodification of the self were outlined at the beginning of the section. The commodification of the self has been expressed in two distinct ways by recent scholars. It was argued that both forms of the commodification of the self, apply to the processes of micro-influencers on Instagram.

The first form of the commodification of the self occurs when one begins to view oneself as a product with a market exchange value (Davis, 2003). It is along these line that theories of self-branding are constructed, whereby one needs to emphasise their marketable qualities making them more valuable than their peers within a competitive job market. Micro-influencers are constantly employing self-branding techniques as a means of establishing their online identity, and solidifying it in relation to other users as a means of ensuring their success on the platform. The goal is to develop a distinct, and consistent, brand for themselves that they can leverage for financial gain through product and brand deals. In this sense, they are very much relating to their online self as a product with a market exchange value, and attempting to

continuously keep self-branding as a way of making their online identity more valuable and distinct from their peers.

The second form of the commodification of the self, which refers to the notion that one's self is defined by their consumption choices relates to how their influencers brand their online identity that they relate to as a product with a market exchange value. The influencers expressed that their consumption patterns affected the outcome of their online identity. Commodities were not related to in a utilitarian sense, whereby judgement was passed on the actual product itself and the job it performed, but rather, commodities were related to in terms of how their brands play a role in shaping the influencers selves. This meant that, for example, shoes were less about what functionality an influencer got from wearing them, and more about how wearing the shoe brand played a role in shaping their identity, and how they were perceived. What was interesting to note was that influencer felt their online identities were very much constructed through the brands they consume, however, their patterns of consumption needed to come across as authentic. Again, consistency came into play here, whereby influencers expressed that being loyal to a few brands fostered a greater sense of perceived authenticity.

This second form of the commodification of the self was further highlighted through the content analysis, which found that the female influencers adopted mainstream media and branding depictions of female gendered identity, and reconstructed these depictions within the content they posted. In this sense, the images brands use in creating their brand identity were appropriated by the female influencers, and recreated, as a means of constructing their own identity. Commodification of the self here takes it one step further that simple consumption of products as constructing ones identity, but it is about consuming certain products, and recreating the marketing and advertising images associated with those products as a means of establishing their own online identity.

These findings on commodification of the self, highlight them as two distinct approaches, showing how they are intertwined and co-exist, while depending on one another, in relation to

micro-influencers constructing their online identities. Influencers self-brand through consuming products and recreating the mainstream images associated with those products. They use brands and their consumption of brands as a means of self-branding in order to establish their online identity as being more valuable. The forms of self-branding employed by the micro-influencers rely on their consumption patterns. In this sense, the two distinct forms of the commodification of the self are in fact less distinct, and more co-dependent. There cannot be forms of micro-influencer self-branding without consumption, as their patterns of consumption inform the online identity they attempt to establish as a means of standing out compared to their competition within the saturated online influencer market. As demonstrated, both forms of commodification of the self were not only present in how the influencer constructed and employed their online identities, but were co-dependent and acted in tandem with one another.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

The rise in popularity of social media platforms over the past decade has given birth to a new phenomenon in the marketing industry, namely influencer marketing. Influencer marketing borrows elements of traditional word-of-mouth marketing, combining them with different types brand ambassadorship, whereby the brand ambassadors are individuals with significant online following on social media platforms. The fundamental logic behind influencer marketing is that these individuals who have significant online following and online presence – the influencers – partner with brands who remunerate them in turn for the influencers using and speaking about their brands and products online in front of their followers. The belief is that influencers advocating for your brand online is able to have a positive effect on your brand perception, and increase sales through informing consumer purchase decisions. This study undertook to engage with the ways in which micro-influencers operating on Instagram within the Western Cape in the fashion and lifestyle industry, constructed their online identity, in order to create an online persona, which is able to collaborate with brands, employing forms of influencer marketing.

There were four central questions this study undertook to answer: 1. What are the ways in which Instagram micro-influencers operating within the fashion and lifestyle industry construct their online identities? 2. How do they use their branded selves for commercial gain? 3. How do advertising norms affect their identity? 4. What role does Instagram play in the mediation of identity construction and communication on the platform? The particular focus for these questions were how they relate to micro-influencers within the Western Cape.

A sample of 20 influencers were selected to take part in this study. Of these 20 influencers, 10 were male presenting individuals, and 10 were female presenting individuals. In order to comprehensively engage with the research questions above, it was determined that an approach which utilised multiple research methods was needed. For this reason, this study was comprised of a content analysis on a sample of images pulled from the 20 influencers

profiles, as well as individual interviews and a focus group session with a portion of these 20 influencers. For the interview and focus group sessions, seven of the 20 influencers were addressed. This took place in the form of four individual interviews, as well as one focus group session of three influencers. For the content analysis portion of the project, a sample of 10 post per influencer was used, meaning a total 200 images or videos were coded for. The sample of 10 images and videos per influencer comprised of each influencers 10 most recent posts. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the sample due to the fact that in order to considered a micro-influencer, the individuals needed to fulfil certain criteria. The main component the influencers needed to demonstrate was that they had engaged in some type of agreement with a brand that resulted in the receiving remuneration in return for posting content about the brand on their personal Instagram account. Within the sample selected, the influencers had a range of 1,000 to 30,000 followers.

7.1 Findings

7.1.1 Content analysis findings

The content analysis was divided into three distinct sections. The first section aimed to look at the ways in which influencers employ the different affordances available to them on Instagram. Each image was coded for the different affordances it employed. The second section of the content analysis engaged with the photographic content present within the images. This examined whether or not the influencers were present, were there any brands or branded goods presents, and if so, the capacity in which they were presented. The third and final section of the content analysis focussed on the ways in which identity was constructed within the influencers posts. Concepts of gender displays in advertising as outline by Gill (2009), and Goffman (1979), were coded for in this final section of the content analysis.

The first section of the content analysis found that although there were significant affordances available to the influencers at the time of constructing a post, the influencers rather demonstrated a select use of the affordances, as opposed to utilising them all. What was

interesting was that across the sample of influencers, there were no distinct trends in relation to which affordances were utilised by the whole sample of influencers. However, within each sample of influencers posts there were clear trends as to which affordances the influencers preferred. Each influencer displayed a clear preference for a select combination of affordances. It was found that within each of the influencers' samples, the influencer in question made use of a select, unique combination of affordances, and made use of these consistently across their sample of posts. By remaining consistent, the influencers were able to develop their own distinct digital voice, and a unique, recognisable approach to communicating with their followers.

The second section of the content analysis examined the photographic content that was contained within each image. It was found that within almost all of the posts that were coded, the influencers were present within the image as the main subject. In this sense, their feed presented a curated album of images primarily of the influencers. Within the posts products and brands tagged, or overt product placement, present was also coded for. Only half of all of the posts contained a product or brand image present within them. Products were coded for as a means of understanding the frequency with which the influencers engaged in product and brand deals. What this illustrated was that at least half of their feed needed to not contain any product placement or brand collaboration, in order to ensure the focus remained the curated album of the influencer.

Within photographic content, clothing was also coded for. The clothing the influencers were wearing within the images was categorised as either fully clothed, partially clothed, swimwear/underwear, or nude. It was found that in relation to post engagement, for female presenting influencers, there was a significant positive relationship between less clothing worn and higher engagement. The less clothing female presenting influencers wore, the higher the degree of engagement they received on their posts. This positive relationship between engagement and clothing worn was not observed in relation to male presenting influencers.

Within male presenting influencers there seemed to be no obvious relationship between clothing worn and the amount or engagement a post received.

The third and final section of the content analysis aimed to deconstruct the ways in which identity was presented in the influencer sample. To do this, concepts of gender displays within mainstream media and advertising, as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), were employed as a means of understanding the ways in which the influencers communicated their gendered identities. It was found that female influencers seemed to adopt and reproduced the mainstream media displays of gender within their own content, including elements such as the feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination, and licensed with drawl. Within the male presenting influencers, it was found that the gender displays outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), occurred less frequently. However, this is not necessarily a clear indication that the male presenting influencers actively resist mainstream displays of gender in their content, as the gender displays outlined by Goffman and Gill tend to reflect the construction of a female presenting gendered identity. In this case, however, one can say that the male presenting influencers actively resisted mainstream media and advertising displays of feminine gendered identities within their content, actively employing techniques that countered a feminine construction of ones gender identity, in creating the perception of their male gendered identity.

The eroticisation of the influencers' gendered bodies was also prevalent within the sample. This was an active displays of the influencers agency in constructing their online identity, as in all cases where the eroticisation of the body was present, it was used as a deliberate means of demonstrating ones sexual power, and sexual desires. The eroticisation of the body was not intended to the gaze of the followers, be they male or female, but it was intended to demonstrate the influencers own sexual agency in expressing their sexual desires.

7.1.2 Focus Group and Interview Findings

From the thematic discourse analysis, which was conducted on the transcripts from the focus group session and individual interviews, there were two main themes which emerged.

The first theme was concerned with the way in which the influencers constructed their online profiles. It was found that there were three elements important to this theme, the influencers niche, their style and their motivation. The second theme that emerged was concerned with the concept of authenticity on Instagram.

Expanding on the first theme, it was perhaps the influencers online niche within which they operated that played the most significant role in determining what their final profile will look like. Although all of the influencers included within the sample fit broadly into the fashion and lifestyle category, they all demonstrated that they occupied further smaller, and more specific niches online. The main determining factor for the niche in which influencers found themselves operating was their specific interest group. Interest groups comprised of anything from gravity mountain biking, to active wear fashion, to content creation of all kinds. In this sense, the influencers acted less as celebrities, where arguably their personality and public life could constitute an interest group of its own, and more as peers and opinion leaders within a particular niche interest group. It was the influencers understanding of the ways in which their niche operates that played a significant role in determining the final outcome of their content.

The second important element that emerged in relation to this first theme of how they construct their profile, was their individual style. All of the influencers noted that they had their own unique style in relation to content creation. They believed that their style shaped the overall aesthetic of their Instagram profiles, and were not only unique, but recognisable by their followers. The belief was expressed by the majority of the influencers that their followers were able to identify content online as being content publish by them due to their individual style. Style encompassed elements such as photographic content, editing techniques, and storytelling techniques.

The third and final element that formed part of the first theme was the influencers motivation for operating online as they do. This, like the first two elements, ranged in particular detail between the different influencers, however, they all demonstrated having a unique

reason, or motivation, for pursuing their career on Instagram. Motivations such as inspiring other content creators, promoting female body positivity, and sharing their artist work publicly were cited as motivations, to name a few.

In relation to the first theme, the three different elements niche, style and motivation, were not mutually exclusive concepts, but rather operated with a type of synergy between the three, whereby all three were at play all of the time when the influencers were active on Instagram. It was noted for some influencers one of the three elements might play a more significant role in shaping their profile than the other two, however, it was observed that all three played a role in shaping the influencers approach to constructing their online profiles, and subsequently their online identities.

The second major theme that emerged centred on the notion of authenticity on Instagram. The theme of authenticity was by far the most prevalent theme across all of the interview and focus group sessions. This theme attributed success on Instagram to being authentic on the platform. It was often stated that inauthenticity would result in a lack of success on the platform. The influencers all believed your actions online needed to be perceived as authentic by your followers in order to attain success on the platform. Authenticity was mainly cited in relation to consumption patterns. The influencers felt it was of great importance that any brands or products they collaborated were perceived by their followers as natural collaborations, as opposed to staged events. This was most evident in the fact that one of the common ways influencers justified their brand deals, was through stating how they were already consumers and followers of the brand before any form of collaboration took place. This was a way in which the influencers justified their actions as being legitimate, in order to avoid the label of being a ‘sell-out.’

A sub-theme of authenticity saw all participants expressing that in order for their content that contain brand collaboration to come across as authentic, they required full creative freedom in dictating the final outcome of their content. They expressed that their followers were able to

identify when content they were sharing was scripted or staged by a brand, and viewed this as inauthentic. They felt that in order for the branded content to remain relevant to their followers, they needed complete creative freedom within the partnership. Of course, it was often stated that collaborations resulted in a limitation on their creative freedom, due to contractual obligations. However, they did feel the more creative freedom they were given, the more authentic their content was perceived to be.

7.2 Conclusion

The discussion section of this paper was made up of three sections. The first section put forward an argument regarding why Instagram does not constitute an extension of the public sphere, despite the fact that it facilitates the increased flow of information between individuals. The second section comprised of an argument regarding authenticity on Instagram, which argued that authenticity on Instagram is less a process of being true to your inner self, and more a process of being true to your followers perception of who you are. Any authenticity referenced by the influencers was in fact referring to a perception of authenticity within the minds of their followers. The third and final section of the discussion centres on theories of the commodification of the self, and how these apply the online constructed identities broadcast by the influencers. This section argues that the online identities constructed by the influencers are fundamentally constructed around the commodification of the self. Two types of commodification of the self are outlined, and both are applied to the context of the micro-influencers operating on Instagram.

7.2.1 Instagram as a public sphere

Proponents of the internet believed that online spaces provided a new opportunity for the increased flow of information between individuals, resulting in an extension of the public sphere. However, relating theories of the public sphere, as originally outline by Habermas, to the online context of Instagram, this study argues that Instagram does not constitute an extension of the public sphere for two fundamental reasons. The first reason is due to

Instagram's business model, which relies on the collection of user data in order to implement targeted advertising. The second reason is oligopoly structure of the market of social networking sites.

Although Instagram does facilitate the increased flow of information between individuals operating within the space, it does so within a highly mediated manner. This is as a result of Instagram's business models which relies on generating revenue through targeted advertising campaigns. Facebook, and subsequently Instagram, gather user information in order to infer user attributes which cover a user's demographic, behavioural, and interest features (Andreou et al., 2018). For each user in the United States of America, Facebook tracks over 1,100 attributes (Speicher et al., 2018). This user data it used to employ targeted advertising, which is a process that entails showing only a particular subset of individuals who have attributes selected by the advertiser advertisements (Speicher et al., 2018).

Instagram and Facebook do not only contribute user data to targeted advertising. Instagram also filters content on a user's timeline, based on its algorithmic predictions of the type of content that will appeal to that individual. As Instagram explains:

"…*we build systems that try to understand who and what you and others care about, and use that information to help you create, find, join, and share in experiences that matter to you.*" Instagram, 2021

For this reason, even though Instagram increases the flow of information between users, it does so in a highly mediated manner, whereby these platforms collect user data in order to filter content on users timeline and employ targeted advertising, in an attempt to inform their consumer purchase behaviours. The could hardly be described as the 'free' context of communication a Habermasian notion of the public sphere requires.

The second major flaw for Instagram as constituting an extension of the public sphere is the fact that Instagram is owned by Facebook, one of the giants of the social networking

industry. The social media market is highly monopolised, to the extent where the majority of social networking sites are owned by just a few large private organisations. Facebook, for example, owned the four most downloaded smartphone applications of the last decade, as of the end of 2019 (Shead, 2019). Critical political economy of the media favours a competitive market as a means of establishing a healthy, well-rounded, democratic society. This is due to the fact that critical political economy of the media argues that through market processes of accumulation, large companies are able to dictate the state of the communication landscape, thereby exerting both institutional and ideological power over it (Murdock and Golding, 2016). Relating this criticism to Instagram, one is able to draw parallels, whereby through market processes of accumulation, Facebook is able to exert institutional and ideological power through multiple different platforms, Instagram being one of these. This once again illustrates the highly mediated communication environment that is Instagram, and why it falls short of constituting an extension of the public sphere.

7.2.2 Authenticity on Instagram

Authenticity on Instagram was perhaps the most prominent theme that came out of the focus group and individual interviews. Trilling (1971) argues that authenticity is a process that involves acting in accordance with individual existence, and one's true inner self. Authenticity, as described by the influencers, however, seemed less a process of one acting in accordance with one's inner self, and more a process of acting in accordance with the self they have created in the minds of their followers. In this sense, it was less concerned with actual individual authenticity, and more with perceived authenticity. Handler (1986: 2) has argued that authenticity is a Western cultural construct linked to notions of the individual, whereby the individual is a concepts that plays a central role in ones understanding of reality. Influencers foster a sense of reality with their followers when their online actions are perceived by their followers to be in line with their online identity. Influencers believed success on the platform was dependent of developing this sense of reality through being perceived as authentic on Instagram.

To this end, I argued that authenticity, as referred to by the influencers, seemed to be more in line with Franssen's (2019: 315) definition of celebrity culture, as opposed to Handlers (1986) or Trilling's (1971) conceptualisations of authenticity. Franssen (2019: 315), argues that celebrity culture is a make-believe culture constructed on artificiality and image control, which frequently revolves around talking about authenticity, however, within celebrity culture is it very difficult to determine what is truly authentic. When the influencers referred to authenticity, and acting authentically on Instagram, they were fundamentally referring to a process of image control, whereby they aimed to ensure their actions they portrayed on Instagram lived up to, and were in line with, the version of the self they had created within the minds of their followers. Acting authentically seemed less a process of internal reflection, where one engages with one's inner self, and more a process of external reflection, focusing on the perceptions of their followers. This is not to say that the online identities created by the influencers were inauthentic in relation to their true inner, offline, self. However, what was evident was that, just as in Franssen's (2019) celebrity culture, due to the online context of artificiality and image control, it is very difficult to determine what is truly authentic.

Goffman (1959) compares life to a theatre, explaining that just as in a theatre, in life there is a 'backstage' and a 'frontstage'. Goffmans (1959) analogy aims to define identity construction within a performative lens, whereby identity is understood as a performance which is continually articulated and co-constructed, as opposed to something that is pre-given in essentialist terms (Orsatti and Riemer, 2012). Orsatti and Riemer (2012) argue that a performative lens allows one a richer, and more complete, understanding, of identity construction. However, as Svejenova (2005: 969) argues, just as in Franssen's definition of celebrity culture, when studying the authenticity of identity construction through a performative lens, it is hard for one to separate legitimate 'identity expression' (person) from 'image manufacturing' (persona).

A strong trend that emerged from the content analysis, was the intentional exercise of consistency on the platform. This was argued to be one of the ways in which the influencers foster a sense of authenticity within the mind of their followers. Within the content analysis the different affordance that the influencer have access to when posting on Instagram were coded for, as well as the photographic content that was present within the images. Of all of the images coded, it was not that only around half of the images contained any overt references of relationships towards brands through product placement or tagging. Around half of the images posted by the influencers simply contained them as the main subject. This helped to add to their perception of authenticity as, arguably, it gave off the impression that they do not post to Instagram simply to relate or promote brands. Rather, their feed is intended to be a curated album relating to them. In this sense, they avoid being perceived as what some influencers described as a 'sell-out'.

Affordances refer to the different elements a platform gives a user access to when posting and engaging on the platform. In relation to every post, the seven different affordance the influencers have access to were coded for. It was found that across the sample of influencers, there was no clear trend demonstrating a group preference for the use of certain platform affordances. However, within each influencers individual sample of images, there were clear trends in relation to the frequent use of certain affordances. Each influencer seemed to demonstrate a preference for a unique combination of affordances. Every influencer had a slightly different preference for affordances, however, each influencer made consistent use of their select preferred affordances. In this way, each influencer presented their own unique manner in which they communicate with their followers, a type of digital accent of you will. The consistent use of their unique manner of communication as well as then intentional posting of content not related to brands, helped add to and substantiate their perceived online authenticity.

The findings from the content analysis echoed the theme that emerged from the interviews and focus group portion of the study regarding the ways in which influencers construct their online profiles, with what was referred to as their own unique 'style'. The influencers all expressed the sentiment that they felt their profiles, and the content posted on their profiles, contained a distinct, unique and recognisable aesthetic style. The influencers purposeful decisions regarding image selection and editing techniques were central in creating their distinct style. The influencers believed that their style was recognisable by their followers, and that their followers were able to identify content as being posted by them. Just like their use of affordances, their distinct style, used consistently, was a technique used by the influencers which added to the overall creation of their perception of authenticity.

7.2.3 Instagram and the commodification of the self

The final portion of the argument, which is perhaps the most important factor in relation to the influencers' construction of their online identities, is illuminated by theories of the commodification of the self. It was argued that the online identities the influencers create, and attempt to foster perceptions of authenticity towards, are fundamentally constructed through self-branding processes whereby the relate to themselves at products with market exchange values, the display of consumption patterns, as well as the recreation of images associated with particular brands. In this sense, their identity can be understood as a type of commodified self, existing as collage of different brands and brand images. Their online identity is dependent on the existence of certain brands in relation to which they can position themselves. To this degree, we can understand the pursuit of authenticity as being a processes whereby the influencers try to establish the perception of their self as an authentic consumer, whose identity is a performative ensemble of different consumption positions.

The commodification of the self has been expressed by scholars within mainstream literature in two fundamental ways (Davis, 2003). The first form of the commodification of the self occurs when one starts to view oneself as being a type of product which has a market

exchange value attached to it (Davis, 2003). Theories of self-branding that became popularised in the late 1990s and early 2000s were developed according to this logic. Theories of self-branding focused on developing a distinct individual brand that emphasised one's marketable qualities, in an attempt to make oneself stand out from one's competitors. The idea is that by emphasising certain one's marketable qualities, one can make oneself a more desirable employee to prospective employers, as well as assist in receiving higher compensation within one's employment, due to the fact that they are a desirable individual.

The second form of the commodification of the self, examines personal consumption patterns, and the role they play in shaping that individuals identity (Davis, 2003). This second form of the commodification of the self argues that one consumption patterns are central to one's identity. Scholars believe the origins of this form of the commodification of the self to have occurred in relation to a societal shift which occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, whereby one's individual identity, and self-definition, became determined more by the satisfaction of one's individual impulses, and less by one's institutional role within society (Davis, 2003). This societal shift in relation to individuals self-definition brought with it the advent of new marketing scripts, which framed products not simply in terms of their utilitarian value, but began to position them as instruments of individual liberation (Davis, 2003). The purchasing of goods then became a means by which one not only satisfies one's individual desires, but also a means by which one satisfies one's needs for connection, recognition, and values to live by (Davis, 2003).

This paper puts forward the argument that this second form of the commodification of the self seems in many respects to be in line with Hall's (1996) theory of positioning theory. Positioning theory states that one's identity becomes constructed in relation to different subject positions regarding certain matters, which one is able to access through discursive practices and engaging with other citizens (Hall, 1996). Hall (1996) argues that an individual identity can be understood as an ensemble of different subject positions.

Relating this to the commodification of the self, this paper argues that Halls (1996) theory relies on an individual attaching their identity to certain subject positions, whereas the commodification of the self relies on an individual attaching their identity to certain consumption positions, and the brand of the products thereof. Davis (2003) argues that as one is transformed into a consumer, one's social identity becomes increasingly shaped by one's consumption patterns. Therefore, understanding influencers identities requires a combination of Halls (1996) positioning theory, with concepts of the commodification of the self, whereby influencer identities can be understood as an ensemble of different consumption patterns. The influencers construct their identities by positioning themselves in relation to particular brands and brand identities.

The influencers also expressed the sentiment that their consumption patterns had a direct effect on their perceived authenticity. Central to this was the belief that consuming the right products would significantly add to ones perceived authenticity, whereas consuming the wrong brands would foster negative public sentiment towards them, due to their perceived inauthenticity. There were cases where the influencers referenced working with certain brands, and in all of these cases the influencers did not make reference to the utility value of a product of brand, but were rather concerned with how their association with a particular brand affected their followers perception of them. A qualifier presented by numerous influencers when referencing their relationships and collaborations with brands was that before working with the brand, they claimed to be a regular fan and consumer of the brand. In this way, they were attempting to substantiate their relationship with the brand as being authentic, and not simply predicated on economic returns.

The second form of the commodification of the self was also clearly illustrated within the content analysis findings which coded for the representations of gender within mainstream media and advertising in the content posted by the influencers. What was observed was that the female presenting influencers tended to adopt, and recreate, the displays of gender used by

brands within mainstream media and advertising. It was found that mainstream depictions of gender, as defined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009), where present within the construction and communication of the gendered identities of female-presenting influencers, and absent in the gendered identities of male-presenting influencers. The gender displays defined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009) related particularly to the construction of female gendered identities within mainstream media and advertising. Hence, the presence of the gender cues within the sample of female presenting influencers' posts and the absence of the cues within the male presenting influencers' posts demonstrates the influencers adoption of mainstream media and advertising displays of gender in constructing their online identities as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009).

This type of commodification of the self, as observed in the recreation and implementation of mainstream media and advertising displays of gender takes it one step further, where one's identity is not only constructed by the products they consume, but is also constructed through the replication of the brand images associated with the product. Naomi Klein (2009) argues in relation to branding that successful brands do not sell products, but rather they produce and sell images of a brand. To this extent, one could argue that the commodification of the self, present within the online construction of the influencers identity revolves around adopting and recreating the images associated with brands in the process of actively self-branding.

This also highlights the fact that the two forms of the commodification of the self are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather, that they overlap to some extent. The influencers actively self-brand by consuming and reproducing the brands images of the products they consume. Their ultimate goal is to consume and recreate brand images which bolster their sense of online authenticity among their followers. Influencer marketing, from the perspective of the influencer, is a game of walking the line between being perceived as an authentic consumer, or

being seen as a ‘sell-out’, based on recreating the right brand images in the process of branding themselves.

Patelis (2013) argued that the personalisation of social media platforms conceals the truth that in reality, one is dealing with processes of commodification, which integrate communication and commerce until they become a single homogenous entity. Patelis’ (2013) argument is perhaps one of the most apt descriptions of the process of influencer marketing, which is fundamentally a process of the commodification of the self.

7.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Future research could perhaps look at the ways in which micro-influencers construct their online identities across different visual platform. This study looked only at the ways in which micro-influencers construct their identities on Instagram, finding it fundamentally to be a form of portraying an authentic commodified self. Extending this research could look at the ways in which micro-influencers construct their identities on other online predominantly visual based platforms such as Facebook and Tik Tok. Further research in this area could speak to the ways in which the influencers employ platform-specific self-branding in developing their online identity. Combining this with a technical analysis of the platform affordances would allow for a nuanced understanding of how platform architecture impacts online identity construction.

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Reference List

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Individual Interviews

Interview 1

29 October 2019

Interviewer:

When did you start putting time and effort into trying to grow your follower base?

Interviewee:

I would say about three years ago.

Interviewer:

Okay. What was the motivation for that?

Interviewee:

That was the year that I had my biggest dip. And I was like “Nah, I can't carry on like this, so find a way to help yourself”. And that's when I realised for the first time, that helping others helped me, so taking my own advice that I give others. And that's a very difficult thing, especially, because many people would give advice, but they won't take it themselves. And that's when I realised I've got to do something, reach out to people. I saw a psychologist and her strategy or way of helping those who struggle was, if you don't do this, like for instance, if you don't cut yourself, I will give you this. So instead of working through it, made me like, understand why teenagers just go for it because you promise something that you don't get and I wanted to help teenagers in specific because this generation we are in, a lot of parents do not understand what we do go through. Although they are like I understand this, and I know this, but they don’t. I've thought that it would be more appropriate to help a teenager who is suffering, because they would accept it more from someone who's almost their age, and who has been through it. Who has made it through, because we're all almost on the same, mentality

level, if that makes sense. So, kind of just wanting to help teenagers understand that, from another teenage perspective. So that's when I decided I'm going to put an effort, once a day trying to speak to someone or help someone, put on certain posts that encourage them. And then it just started growing from there.

Interviewer:

If you had to kind of describe your approach to Instagram how would you do that? It seems like you main driving force was to help others, is that still the main role of your page?

Interviewee:

It is, but it has changed over the years because people start becoming a bit more distant and not only that, but I've grown, not out of that phase, but my main aim at this stage now would be more woman empowerment, body confidence. I still have those posts in between and everything, but it's kind of changes over time. I've focused on helping others in person rather than over social media. So, I would say at the moment is just with finals being my main goal and working, it would be more to, now and then, promote confidence, because one thing that I have noticed, especially within girls, their main reason for going into depression is because they don't feel happy about themselves. They’re constantly worried about being judged and that brings them down and I would know that because I've been there. So, everything I do is because I've been in that position, and I want to help others improve their point of view of themselves. And it's hard to think that there are so many people out there who want to take their lives because they're not happy with other people's judgement.

Interviewer:

So, your aim is to help?

Interviewee:

Basically, whether it's with depression, whether it's just being happy with yourself, whether it's just normal, I'm here to listen and give you the best advice that I can give. So

obviously, you cannot really help someone, but you can help them change their view. It's like I'd say you can lead the horse to the water, but you can't make it drink.

Interviewer:

Do you do any kind of brand collaboration as well?

Interviewee:

Not at the moment, but I'm kind of working on it. So, the restaurant that I work at Dos Tudo, they are busy developing a lifestyle brand, so I'm looking at collaborating with them with that lifestyle brand and also with the restaurant itself. So, I've incorporated some of the food that we have, and some of the posts that they do post, into my feed which I'm busy building up at the moment, to promote that not only because I work there, but because a lot of people find a lot of accounts because they promote. And then I also have this friend of mine who does bikinis, so she has her own brand. So, whenever I purchase a new bikini, I post a picture wearing that bikini, I promote it for her.

Interviewer:

Does she give you hookups or discounts?

Interviewee:

Definitely.

Interviewer:

When she does that, does she ask for exposure or not?

Interviewee:

She's just happy about having it posted and the support. And then there was also this other clothing brand that this other guy approached me with? He is from Johannesburg. And he started this clothing brand called 'real perspective'. It's kind of like an upside down 'U'. It's all about raising awareness of bullying, because he was bullied as a young person and he could

see what my page was about. He was like, “look, I want to send you some free merch, maybe you can help me sell it” and I was like, “sure, I will do that with pleasure”. It’s feels nice when people approach you, there's certain things I got, the more effort I put in, the more people approached me, the more I promote, the more people will see that I am more for being there.

Interviewer:

What are your metrics for success on Instagram? Do you have them? When you post something do you have any expectations?

Interviewee:

Especially with the whole body confidence thing obviously you show a bit more skin than most posts do and you obviously expect a lot of guys to lust. But the thing is, I've always believed that whether you post normal clothes, whether you post a bikini, lingerie, whatever, you'll always have guys looking at you in the way that they want. But depending on the type of posts, I would say, I would expect people to share it and obviously with a business account, you can see the impressions and activity and all that.

Interviewer:

Yours is a business account?

Interviewee:

Yes, so I see the amount of people that share certain things and it's kind of just getting it out there depending on what I post.

Interviewer:

Do you view Instagram as a business or not really?

Interviewee:

I see it more as a platform for, not exposure, but to show people who you are. Yet because of the fact that many people in different countries and you are exposing yourself to the world.

Especially for those who don't travel. Like you get to see people from there, getting to know people from there. Like it's almost, I would say, like a gathering, people gathered in person before there was social media. Instagram is a platform to gather with people around the world. So, it's more of a personal thing than a business thing, in my eyes?

Interviewer:

And so why do you run it as a business account?

Interviewee:

I run it as a business account to see the activity there. So, let's see what happens, what time I should post, in order to gain a larger viewing on your account, or certain posts, you have to post at a certain time. Due to the new algorithm Instagram is incorporated, which is stupid. If I look at the activity, I get on my account now compared to two years ago, it's completely different. That's because they don't allow your post to be seen on everyone's feed as much as what they did back then, so the percentage has dropped. Which is just sad, but that's why more time and commitment has to be put into these posts, especially now, in order for it to be seen by more people.

Interviewer:

Do you have any tactics that you use to combat algorithms or to try and get algorithms to work in your favor?

Interviewee:

I mostly look at hashtags, those that get us the most. And then obviously the time. So, I go onto my insights option and I go see when people are on my account the most, or when people are on Instagram on this specific day, this hour, and that kind of helps in my favor.

Interviewer:

Okay, so what sort of times have you found on the most effective?

Interviewee:

It would be mostly between 6-9pm? Or in the mornings between 10 and 11.

Interviewer:

And is that the same for every day of the week? Does it change?

Interviewee:

No, it changes, on weekends, obviously, it's more efficient to post between the mornings because people are at home. But during the week, it would be between six and nine because people are lying in bed, especially school students and they're done for the day.

Interviewer:

If you had to think what your most successful post has been? What would it be and why? What would have made it successful?

Interviewee:

I've restarted my feed so I think it is about six posts at the moment. The highest one has got about 1500 likes on it. It's not lingerie, but it's a body suit, so basically, I'm sitting on a couch, in this body suit and you can see the confidence, you can see that I'm comfortable and the caption was about being comfortable in your own skin, being happy with yourself. So that is my most steampunk post at the moment. But if I have to look back when I started my feed which got my followers coming in, I did a post where I was literally just in underwear and I was covering my breasts in my hand, but I had written all over my body about depression, anxiety, what people would call me and I had this long, long paragraph explaining how it is wrong, I was explaining my story and what got me through everything and that, at that stage, was my most viewed post and most liked post. It was the first time I ever reached 2000 likes, I think I had about 2500 likes in that post. And that all happened in one day because of the confidence and that's when I was like, "yeah, we're going to promote this confidence. We're going to carry on that, build on it."

Interviewer:

So, the metrics for success, is that impressions, likes, comments? Do you feel certain posts made more of a difference than others?

Interviewee:

Definitely, because a lot of times, it's hard to keep up a feed that is just about confidence, I feel like people don't want to see the same things over. So, you've got to give it a twist now and then, post something out of the blue. But they are definitely certain points that make a difference, more of a difference compared to others.

Interviewer:

And what made you restart your feed?

Interviewee:

It's very stupid, but it's more, I wanted it to be more eye catching, so that when people go into my feed, they're like, “Oh, this is such a nice feed.”

Interviewer:

Did you feel the overall impression of it was not eye catching?

Interviewee:

Definitely, in a way, less selfies. People don't want to see my face all the time. there's just so much you can do with your face. I don't ever edit my body, I don't edit my skin because it's natural. But I like having editing that is done most naturally, but at the same time, you can see that it has been edited to something that is a bit more eye catching and aesthetically pleasing. Because in this generation, everyone likes something that is nice to look at.

Interviewer:

So, what's your approach now, with making posts? Are you reusing stuff, are you starting from scratch?

Interviewee:

Definitely. I have started using a new app, but I have been using some of the older posts, which I had on my feed before, but I'm also looking at collaborating with a few photographers coming December and creating new content. My main goal is yes, I've got confidence, but to start getting my music going. So, with the singing, more music videos, covers.

Interviewer:

Is that next step, to transition into more music?

Interviewee:

Just because with having to do finals and working, it's hard to get a place to just sit down, sing and post. So, the end goal is to basically get a new camera, get a proper set for music, do know, Timothy De Monk, so we were together for six months and the goal is to get there, actually get equipment and start doing my own thing. He started my age as well, with music production, he signed a contract at my age and look where he is now. So, my main goal is to get there and start performing gigs next year, get my name out there. So, with a feed, it's definitely based on music.

Interviewer:

So, what is often put forward as a criticism of influencer marketing and self-branding through social media platforms, is this notion that, the idea behind branding and building a brand and creating a brand is to allow for a level of consistency. So, going to a Rocomammas or Mugg and Bean in Durbanville or going in Rondebosch is going to be a similar experience. And then with more global brands, McDonald's, Coca Cola, that's the idea when you go and get the product. So, to create something predictable and consistent and ensure that there's continuity throughout the brand. And so, what a lot of people speak about is that when you apply this kind of concept of brand to individuals on social media, it makes it quite difficult because it’s hard to maintain a consistent self. How do you manage that? You've already spoken

about how you transitioned slightly and now you're wanting to transition again, how do you ensure that you keep your same following, but managed to segue into…?

Interviewee:

Well, what I can say is that, obviously as you change, everyone changes, they're wanting to view a certain thing, changes as well. So, if they're not into this anymore, they will unfollow it. But I definitely believe it takes a lot of patience from me, it takes a lot of patience because you will always get people that will unfollow you, or will follow you, and it will never stay the same, especially when it comes to growing even more, you can't expect to grow just like this, within a day or two. It takes a lot of strength not to take anything personally because social media is not your life. it's all about the way that you represent yourself. I'm okay with taking it day by day. I'm okay with not having to grow within maybe a year or something but to be real about me. That's a big thing because a lot of people make the mistake of putting this on Instagram, but that's not who they are and once people can actually see that, that's really you and that's how you really are, even when meeting you in person, that is when it becomes more of a real following than just following because you followed me etc.

Interviewer:

So there's a sort of authenticity you're trying to put forward. You're trying to get people to know you.

Interviewee:

Yeah. I mean, what's the use of putting on an act? And that's sad.

Interviewer:

But do you not think that's what most people do?

Interviewee:

It’s sad, because you are creating this image of you, that is not really you. And that is what leads to many people breaking you down because, now you've represented this whole

image of you, you've got to keep up to that. And that can be really mind blowing at certain times, because it builds up, builds up because if it's not me. And that's when you break.

Interviewer:

Have you found that in your own?

Interviewee:

Yeah, and that's why I started promoting the whole body confidence because I used to be so insecure, I used to edit all my pictures to make me look like slimmer. It was not me. You got to be real. You got to be real in order to receive real following, comments and impressions.

Interviewer:

And I suppose, this is looking at the corporate side of things. If someone came to you and said, “We are looking to grow our following on Instagram, what, based on your experience, what has worked for you growing to 12,000 followers?”

Interviewee:

Well, as I've told everyone, obviously, a lot of people asked me that. You can go to anyone who's got a big following base, especially those who have not bought their followers. But it takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of effort. A lot of patience.

Interviewer:

Effort in what sense?

Interviewee:

Of making sure that it reaches good quality, obviously Instagram quality? Many people refer to certain posts as Instagram ready. It just takes a lot of being you and putting effort into your posts because no one will follow a page if they don't see that. People want to see “this is what you want”, “this is who you are” and you put in time and that's when people think, “this person is really serious about what they do, passionate about what they do.” That's where the

effort comes in. For instance, a music artist, if they see that you post a video of you singing with no effort put in, you're just singing, you don't feel passionate about your music, no emotions, nothing, they won't follow it, they won't like it because they don't know if you're enjoying it. So yeah, time patience, effort, consistency, commitment, basically like a whole relationship.

Interviewer:

A relationship, with all of your followers?

Interviewee:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

And in terms of engagement, how do you engage with it?

Interviewee:

My biggest following is people who know my story, who I've helped and given advice to. I like going on this whole liking and commenting spree, on a day where I really had nothing to do, I would go through my Instagram and just comment on every post that I see, trying to uplift certain girls, I would DM certain girls and just send them a nice paragraph and not because I'm trying to get them to be “Oh, she's so sweet or whatever”. But it's because I go through their feed, I would see what they're struggling, even though they look happy, but because I've been through so much in my life, I can see it from a different point of view. Yet, because of going through psychotherapy, reflective therapy, you look at things from a different point of view than from yourself and it's helped me to see things in so many different ways. Especially with girls, you can see when they are putting on an act, when it is all fake. So, now and then, I like sending nice motivational messages to people, I always like everything that is on my feed. Because obviously they're liking my pictures, I'm going to like theirs. It's showing

your interest, your commitment towards them because that's how you keep a relationship going into it.

Interviewer:

I have created some fictional products, some fictional companies and the idea was to put them to people and say, you're an influencer, you have 12,000 followers, and I am approaching as this brand, I will pay you per post. So, it could be as a monthly contract, a six month contract, a yearly contract, that could be negotiated. And within that contract there be a monthly salary that would require two posts a week. How would you approach this task?

Interviewee:

First, I would make sure that it's a real brand and not just a scam because a lot of people do that, they don't pay you, they don't do anything.

Interviewer:

So, at first make sure that it's real, do you have a lot of people approaching you? How would you go about doing?

Interviewee:

It depends on the way they approach, you know it's fake when they are commenting on your posts, “Hi, love, we like your feed. We like this photo, and we'd like to collaborate with you.” And then they send you these links. So, my way of knowing that it's fake is I send them a message, but something that's completely opposite to what they would expect, it's still saying the same thing, they still send you a link. I know it's rare when people who own that brand DM you from their personal account, not from the branding account.

Interviewer:

This is one of the products. It's an organic honey lip balm, made from bee products, honey, bees wax, that kind of stuff. It's got wonderful nourishing characteristics. So, the idea

behind it, is that it's a consumerable. If I came to you and said, you have free rein as a creative individual to create posts that relate to our product. What kind of approach would you take?

Interviewee:

Firstly, I'm very much about organic natural stuff. I love having moisturize lips, so, I would definitely promote it. But I would, in this case, not be expecting payment, a lot of the cases I would not expect payment if it's about helping either the planet or helping someone raise awareness about something. So, to be more out of helping heart. With something like that I would just be like, "Oh, sure." I love promoting, I love helping, I guess that's where the helping side comes in, if I can help a local business grow their brand, I would do that with love, even if it's just a small bit. So, if someone approached me and said "Hey, would you want to promote this, we're willing to give you free supplies every month?" I would, not because I want free products, but because the fact that they went out of their way to approach me, there must be a reason behind it. Obviously, you don't just approach anyone, not a background check, but you see what they're all about? So, I would do it because they put in their time and effort to approach me, I'll put in my time and effort.

Interviewer:

So, if this was the product, how would you promote it?

Interviewee:

One way, I would like apply it and then with a photo next to it. It would be like a selfie. The other way would be putting it in nature, creating a little post with bees and whatsoever. Or I would also to do a giveaway, so, if someone had to ask me, "would you help me grow this?" I'll do it. I'll do a giveaway on my page, I include these products, but I'd collaborate with another business or brand, bring that in as well. So, people don't buy it, but that person will use the product, enjoy it and refer their friends etc.

Interviewer:

So, in all of them, it would be a more blatant product placement. As opposed to say, advertising phone cases. Would it be a photo of the phone case? Or a photo where you are just chilling, this is the phone case you use, you can obviously see it, but it's supposed to look natural?

Interviewee:

Well, I would do something like that, but more in a group photo, with friends, being on your phone and then just having them see the cover. Where the cover is the main focus, blur out the rest, but because its' the main focus, so seeing that you are using it and that you do like it and that people are interested in that way. So that's where social media manipulation comes in, to manipulate people into thinking, "Oh, this is such a nice product, or they're really enjoying it, they really do look happy having it. I want to try it. Yeah, I want to get it." So especially the phone cover situation. I've posted many photos of this phone cover and I've had a couple of people ask me, where did you get it? It is indirectly promoting certain things, but they still want to know, but I feel if I had to put a brand on it, then that's when people or the brand itself may like you to promote more of this, for payment. And that's where it all starts.

Interviewer:

So you're not interested in the monetary side?

Interviewee:

No, if it's a local thing, no, especially in South Africa.

Interviewer:

And if bigger international brands approached you?

Interviewee:

Definitely. I mean, that's like dollars and stuff, but that's not the case. Because it is more worldwide and if you have to think of a more business point of view, you can't do business without getting paid. But that's why I'm okay with it in South Africa, because it's a local brand, especially in Cape Town. And I want to support locals as much as I can, because I know that's what I would want to return. So, the way I treat people is the way that I want to be treated. So, if I support locals, if I start my own music company or start my own song or whatever, I want people to support me as well. So, it is give and take.

Interviewer:

What are the plans for your platform? Do you want it to grow?

Interviewee:

I want to start doing gigs. I was either looking at next year or the year after, I'd want to go onto the Voice, I know that I'm ready to perform in front of people. I'm very confident when it comes to performing in front of a huge crowd. So, it would either be to go onto the Voice, and just get it going there because I do believe in myself. Or it would be doing gigs, having people recognise you, want you to sign a contract or with a record label or something, but I know that's going to take time. And I'm okay with that as long as I know that I am growing in some sort of way because I know things don't happen just like that.

Interview 2

29 October 2019

Interviewer:

So the kind of first question I've been asking people, (and the weird thing is I've also realized through interviewing, it's kind of like a strange process to ask people to reflect on their strategies, because it's not actually something people reflect on a lot of the time. It's kind of just something people do. Then all of a sudden, you're asking them how they do it), so the first question gets a bit of a mixed reaction; if you could describe your approach to Instagram, how would you describe it? How do you view the platform? How do you interact with it? That kind of thing?

Interviewee:

Okay, so it's probably a good point to make initially, so I was going to say to you, I was very active, a couple years back. I've somewhat slowed down on Instagram a little bit. I've got this love hate relationship with it. So I just found often it got to a point where I was trying to always create content. So I'd focus on content creation and making missions for the sake of creating content. So although I was doing these rad missions, like being outdoors, and going and skating like crazy roads, getting GoPro photos constantly, it was for the sake of shooting content, and I wasn't really - I was losing focus. Forgot why I was there. Like, I just felt like I was doing it a little bit for the wrong reasons. So yeah, I just think now, now, I've really slowed down a lot on the platform. But I think previously, obviously working with - so I worked with three brands. Cos I was working with GoPro, with New Balance, and with Penny skateboards, which were really, like, really linked up well, because, you know, if I was shooting content on my GoPro, it was incorporating, like me being on a penny board and wearing New Balance. So they were very mutually beneficial brands - they seamlessly connected with each other thing. So just having said that, I think, you know, it was a good point to establish off the bat,

that this is kind of reflecting, as you said, like reflecting on Instagram, and kind of what I'll tell you is going to be when I was very much actively involved previously.

Interviewer:

It's also dope to hear your current thoughts and how it may have changed. You know what I mean?

Interviewee:

Yeah, absolutely. If I look at myself now and how I view the platform versus how I did say, three to five years ago, yeah, completely different.

Interviewer:

So what was your perception of it three to five years ago?

Interviewee:

So obviously, I was using Instagram actively, on a very much day to day basis with regards to the brands I was working with, as I said. So creating content, you know, posting short video clips. So I basically dedicated Instagram to shooting on my GoPro. So it was all GoPro generated content, whether photos, or short video clips, or longer edits that I would collab with a friend of mine, ***.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I studied with ***, I know ***.

Interviewee:

Yeah. So *** and I are like really good mates. And a lot of what we were doing, like we both enjoyed, so we're working with the same brand. So there was a lot of crossover. And yeah, she obviously comes from a film background. So I generally left the editing and video creation up to her. So I would just kind of, you know, although we were still repping the same brands, like it was, I knew what she was going to put out would be a lot better than what I was going

to put out. So we would like make missions and shoot content and come up with little edits. And yeah, so I think using it back then, especially like, GoPro-wise I shooting a lot of stills, and then a couple of shorter, you know, 20- to 50-second edits, putting them out on Instagram. And, yeah, I think it was just a nice way for me to sort of seamlessly integrate my life with the three brands and put out content that was you know, like, I say authentic - just everyday kind of content, not trying too hard putting out superficial posts about how great this one product is. And I've noticed a lot in the past, like where an influencer will basically go from brand to brand - so like, one month they'll be working with Brand X and be like, this is the best like pair of shoes that I've ever worn. And then like three months later with another brand going like, this is the best pair of shoes I've ever run in. So it makes you kind of question the authenticity of what they do. And also, I think, on that point, I got to a point where I felt like, the community as a whole and the people creating content, were just always trying too hard. So, yeah, I think I just started getting like, you know, ….the very platform that I was using, that was there for me to use and build the brand was annoying me, and it just made me kind of question as I said the authenticity of it. And I would take these kind of hiatuses, if that's the plural of hiatus, from time to time. So I would sort of voluntary remove myself, like just not post for a while. And then I would kind of be like, actually, I'm not doing enough like for this brand.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I was going say: would that affect your relationship with the brand?

Interviewee:

So I think the relationships with the brands I was working with were quite relaxed. If I want to put it that way, there was never really any pressure. Like, you need to put two posts out a week. For this brand, you need to put X amount or do this. Like there was no real guidelines. I was kind of just left to my own devices, which is really cool. And I think that, in itself made what I was putting out maybe like a little bit more real. Yeah, and then I guess like

towards the end. So like each of those brands, my relationships with them, sort of slowly, like petered out, so GoPro, especially just kind of…

Yeah, I think it just got to a point where we were just missioning so much just for the sake of missioning. I just wanted to be out there like enjoying myself like, missioning to Cape Point, like, you know, I just want to immerse myself in nature and just be there, to enjoy myself and escape the hustle and bustle of life. And then I was just focusing too much on trying to get the best content and it kind of almost took away from my experiences. Don't get me wrong. Like I had some amazing missions with some friends like when I think some of the most fun I had was you know, when we were shooting Penny board missions, like yeah, just going up into the mountains and like kiff roads, and you know, drinking beers and skating and just having a good time. And like, you know, that was a lot of fun. And some of my most cherished moments were making those missions with friends and people that I enjoyed spending time with. And then I also moved to Vietnam in 2017 for half a year. So obviously, that somewhat kind of, you know, because obviously, the idea behind local influences is that you're creating local content. So you know, for a Capetonian ambassador you're largely, creating content in the place that you live, you know. So for me being in Vietnam, I think some of the brands didn't necessarily feel or see eye to eye with me in terms of removing myself from Cape Town. Yeah, like being in an Asian city, creating content, which I didn't necessarily agree with. Yeah, so there was just like a couple of smaller events that happened, I guess that that maybe being one of them that yeah, tainted my possible like relationship with, with one more.

Interviewer:

And your current kind of relationship with Instagram in particular ?

Interviewee:

So I've kind of stopped shooting a lot of GoPro content now just because it's just easier. I've got a phone with a rad camera, and I tend to shoot off my phone or a lot of my content now is like fishing because I've just been fishing a lot. Yeah, over the last year or two. And I guess

the majority of what I put up now is more like story-orientated rather than actual posts. So yeah, I'll put stories up, randomly. But, I guess also now working quite largely involved in the wine industry, a lot of content is around wine too. And then yeah, like wine and fishing. So it's kind of moved away a lot from, you know, the brands that I was working with.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I'm with you. Something you mentioned earlier, which was interesting, was when you said, they work well with building your brand. You didn't use exactly those words, but you were talking about building your own brand through Instagram. That's sort of something I've come across quite a lot in my research, and people regularly talk about the pitfalls of this concept of self-branding. You know, because they talk about this idea that, and you touched on it earlier, that the whole idea behind branding is to allow for some level of expectation from the consumer, or customer, and some sort of consistency. So you can buy a coke here, and you can buy a coke in Vietnam, and theoretically, it should be the same thing. You know, you can go to McDonald's in Claremont and McDonald's in Rondebosch and then McDonald's in London. Whereas when you start trying to apply that element of consistency to an individual, it becomes a lot more complex. Like you're saying, you would see people going, "these are the best shoes I've ever worn." And then a month later they're in another pair of "best shoes they've ever worn." So it's like, consistency and trying to apply that to a person is….I don't know, did you find that was something? Or maybe you just saw it more than experienced it?

Interviewee:

Yeah, I guess, you know, as you said, you're building yourself as a brand. Right. So obviously, across the board, you've got to have some level of consistency within yourself. So it's a bit of a tricky one. Because I mean, obviously, if you're wearing like a pair of shoes A and saying that they're the best, and then in a few months, you're saying a pair of shoes from Company B are the best, I guess, you're still being consistent within yourself? I don't know.

Like, you also got to be careful, because you can't really slate pair A, because, you know, that's kind of like defamation of a brand that you've worked with. It could get tricky here. I guess.

Interviewer:

But, would you feel that the sort of the way you described it, your online presence was very much shaped by you as an individual? And the brands you found filtered into that? Did you ever feel like brands shaped your content and who you were? Do you know what I mean? Did it ever work in the reverse?

Interviewee:

So it was interesting, because obviously, the brands that I got involved with were brands that I also really wanted to work with, and I felt like brands that fitted well, within who I was and what I was doing, you know, trying to live a very active outdoor orientated lifestyle. So like New Balance, for instance, way before I was an ambassador for them, I had a friend working for them. And, you know, I used to always, obviously, get shoes from him, get a good deal. And so for maybe 10 years, before I became involved with New Balance I was really wearing New Balance. If you say to someone like the brand New Balance, what does it mean to them that prior to what they are now, it would be like this sport brand, like sport shoes, running shoes. And very much in that era, like when I first started out, wearing their stuff, like their lifestyle range was not great, you know? And then in the latter years, they really started putting themselves on the map as this premium lifestyle sneaker brand. And it was, yeah, it was interesting, because I kind of I feel like I, you know, from an early age, from when I was at school, I used to play hockey in New Balance trail running shoes, you know. So like, already from then I was kind of exposed to the brand and so it wasn't suddenly, like a brand approached me and was like, “Hey, are you keen to get involved in our brand?” Like, it was the brand that I was well-acquainted with, and already I thoroughly enjoyed their products. Like I’d had a relationship with them far before becoming officially a representative for them, you know?

Interviewer:

So that kind of adds to the, I suppose, the authenticity of it?

Interviewee:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

….which is something that comes up a lot. And people are like, “well, if you don't come across as authentic, you know…”

Interviewee:

Because of that, it just sort of seamlessly integrated into my style that I wore. Because I look sometimes, like, you feel like guys rocking certain sneakers, and it's just like, they look bad, you know, but you just kind of feel maybe they're just trying too hard. Whereas I don't ever feel like that, I mean I’m open to people saying otherwise, but I never feel like yeah, it came across like I was trying too hard. All my friends know that’s just who I am. I'm like, it is what it is. And I've never shamelessly tried to market and be like, “Oh, you should wear these. Look how rad they are, look how great they’d look on you.” It’s just yeah, …and I would always include this in proposals to the brands that never disregard word of mouth and just actual real life representation, because it's always the question that would come up: what is your approach to this year? What are you going to be doing? How are you going to benefit the brand? You know, because obviously, the brand needs something in return. They’re not just going to give you free stuff or nothing, you know? And I would obviously always bring up the social media platform going like, you know, it's obviously great, like content is going to be going out and because I'm with an action camera brand, you know, the product’s always going to get featured. But I would always put as a point that I feel just actual real life marketing or just being present and wearing the product shouldn't be disregarded because I think it's you know, just as powerful. It's social media has just made it easier. And more accessible to everyone. But you see a guy walking down the street rocking a rad pair of kicks and it looks

good. And you're like stuff that looks really lekker. And sometimes a lot of posts online are you know, just these really good looking people rocking a product, and it's just like, "Wow, that's really amazing." And then you get the product and you like…

Interviewer:

It doesn't fit…

Interviewee:

It actually doesn't look so good…

Interviewer:

Yeah. I know what you mean. And I suppose another element I'm interested in is when you were sort of posting regularly for brands, what were your kind of metrics for success? If that makes sense? How would you measure success for posts? How would you feel something was successful?

Interviewee:

I guess, like the easiest (way) to judge the success of something and especially on the platform, like Instagram is the number of likes that you're getting? Which I guess is a direct result of followers. I just also feel like there was always pressure, to get more followers and to get your content out to more people when you know, sometimes you look at …because obviously I feel, as influencers, you're always sort of comparing yourself to another influencer. But sometimes you'd look at a follower ratio to number of likes, and you'd like "something doesn't tie up." So then that's kind of, you know….

Interviewer:

…. they bought followers….

Interviewee:

Exactly, yeah, and then that's where I guess that whole sort of debacle came about with buying followers and you know, you've got 60,000 followers, but you're getting 500 likes. If you look at that as a percentage…. For example, like you know, it doesn't line up…

Interviewer:

Yeah - not even 10% of your followers….

Interviewee:

Exactly. So I guess the easiest would be would be "likes." And I guess it's like a percentage of the people that follow you.

Interviewer:

So do you have a rough percentage that you used to hope for ?

Interviewee:

Jees like, I don't know, maybe like 10 to 20%.

Interviewer:

Okay, that would be pretty good ?

Interviewee:

Yeah, but I guess you're always kind of seeking approval. You're seeking someone else's - what's the word - nod of approval kind of thing. Like, you know, so you putting out something that maybe you dig and you get like 5% likes, so even then you're disappointed, you know, like, Yeah, why is this not getting more traction?

Interviewer:

Yeah. That's something other people I've been chatting to have mentioned as well. They're like you, they would have something that like "this is a killer piece of content I've put

out there" and then it doesn't do too well in terms of traction, and engagement. And then other stuff which they haven't necessarily put that much thought into it…

Interviewee:

No, I mean, like, I've experienced that first-hand. I remember, because obviously a big thing also with GoPro, and Penny, and New Balance I guess, was getting reposted by those big brands. So put a post on New Balance South Africa, for instance, or tag New Balance South Africa. And the rest of New Balance accounts. And then it gets picked up as a rad pick. And then it gets reshared by New Balance South Africa, then it gets shared by a whole lot of other New Balance accounts, like New Balance States etc etc, And then New Balance.com. So that happened. And I got like this re-post from New Balance.com International. And then that's huge. Because then you get traction, because people are looking at it, seeing who you are like they're following you. And then as a result, you're getting double the amount of likes on a picture because people aren't only liking it on the main account, but they're liking on your account. So I guess that was a big thing: always trying to get a re-post or credited by big companies. Because that would generate, like a lot of traction. And as I said additional followers.

Interviewer:

And would your approach to that just be the most polished piece of content? Or the best piece?

Interviewee:

Not necessarily. You made the point, what you've noticed, or like a thread is that creators put a piece of content out and think it's really good. It doesn't do well, you put something out there, like you don't think is necessarily that good. And then it gets traction. So it happened to me with Penny boards. So they've got quite a big presence – they're an Australian company, and I think they've got like, half a million, or upwards of like, half a million followers. And I had shares on their behalf a couple of times before. And then I got a new board and it was a

plain black board. And I was like, Okay, cool. I want to put out a piece of content, because I got these plain black New Balance sneakers. And I was like, cool. I'm going to do this black on black on black vibe, just post a picture of my board. And I just had black jeans on, and black shoes. And this plain black board. And it was a very average photo. It was just my board lying on the ground. I took it from above, all black, and put it on, and then like Penny Boards re-shared it. Re-posted it on their page. And I was like, Okay, thank you, but also, I don't necessarily think it's such a great photo. But yeah, so it's interesting how that happens. I guess the holy grail would also be getting GoPro to share a pic. I was involved in one or two of those, which is really cool. Not my photos, but being involved in, being you know, the person the photo has been taken of – which is epic. At the end of the day, it did feel cool. You know - you're getting a photo posted that millions of people are seeing. It's pretty rad.

Interviewer:

One of the things I've been doing as a portion of all of the interviews - because with some people it can be hard to gauge their kind of creative process - so what I've been doing in all of them is going, “well here are two fictional products. If I came to you as this brand, how would you go about trying to create content for me?” So the first one is just organic honey lip balm. So the idea behind it is it’s a consumable that's pretty generic, you know what I mean? If I came to you and was like, “we will pay you X amount per post, but we give you complete freedom over it”, how would you approach selling something like this? It’s a weird one.

Interviewee:

Where would you put that? With more fashion, or is that more lifestyle? It's like a combination of the two, I guess.

Interviewer:

I've got a second product as well, if this first one’s too obscure.

Interviewee:

I guess a lot of the content that would be around generating material for them, would be more fashion-orientated photos, wearing the product, I guess. Being a lip balm, obviously, I would say it's going to be a little bit fashion-orientated - like close ups of your face and lips, I guess, with the product. Because like also, the name is quite cool. Like, Bee's Knees. I guess it's got a play on being like the shirt. I guess it would be like a lot of outdoor fashion content. Being in the sun wearing lip balm, something along those lines?

Interviewer:

No, I'm with you. And then so this was my second one. I came to you, and I was like, “we produce sunglasses. We're a local brand who recycles plastic bottles and makes plastic sunglasses. And that's our kind of vibe.” If I came to you and was like, “sunglasses is our thing. We want you to rip them” , what would you think would be good content for something like that?

Interviewee:

I guess the idea of recycled plastic sunglasses is quite cool. Obviously nowadays, the whole drive with recycling and single-use plastics and you know, you're obviously actively making a product that incorporates a product that's obviously a massive problem. And yeah, so I would be quite excited about something like that. And I guess if there were other styles of glasses. Like those necessarily wouldn't be my style that I'd go for, but I guess content around that would also be outdoor missions, beach missions, getting involved on the beach, playing ball, going on surf missions. So content around that, maybe even -I'm just thinking of myself - being outdoors. If they had another style, like fishing. I guess skating in shades, like sunset missions, something along those lines.

Interviewer:

And so with all of those - just correct me if I'm wrong - but essentially some subtle product placement as opposed to overt…

Interviewee:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

So as opposed to say, we're holding this beer, as opposed to a photo of Devil's Peak in the product. Like a photo of Devil's Peak and just chilling, wearing the shades, that type of thing. Are you more fan of that style?

Interviewee:

I think like, I would tend to mix it up a little bit. But I definitely prefer I think the subtler approach. I mean, obviously with kicks and stuff I want to have them on, not just take pictures of them like in the box. I want to be in the shoes or in the product, integrating into my lifestyle and showing people, how they fit in with who I am and my life. I guess GoPro was a slightly different one because the product is taking photos and videos. So really I would maybe make a mandatory post each time I got a new camera, of the camera, just to give a shout out to the brand. Just showing off the new camera in a picture of it. But I guess, at the end of the day, it's a product that you're using to take your photos.

Interviewer:

But it's still almost a lifestyle brand to some extent – GoPro – don't you think ? Because what they are still trying to sell is the extreme lifestyle. It's not, "hey, buy a GoPro. You can become a wedding photographer."

Interviewee:

But that's so funny, because I would have discussions with a brand manager and I think GoPro definitely did start out as an action camera. Nick Woodman basically came up with the idea of a GoPro to film himself when he served. That was how GoPro came about. And obviously, subsequently it became used for skiing, mountain biking, etc, etc. But yeah, it was very much marketed as an action camera. But then I think if you watch GoPro launch videos,

circa Hero 1234, maybe, it was very sport driven. And then if you look at maybe from 4,5,6 you'll notice a lot more lifestyle content, people traveling, people shooting videos of their dogs, people with their kids. It became much more than just an action camera. And I think there was a very big turning point where….you know, because how do you sell more cameras? You know, you change your brand, and then that's when I guess GoPro started coming up with different models - so, as a mom, with your child, going to the park and playing with the dogs you don't necessarily need, the Hero 8 Black Edition. You just need the Hero that's going to shoot rad photos, 12 megapixel photos. And I mean, obviously for professional use now, having a camera that shoots 4k at 120 frames a second or whatever, I understand the need for that. But as an everyday person, you don't need that. Having less features on the camera, you suddenly open up a whole other new avenue to clientele, you know. Like, do you need the new GoPro every single year if you're just using it for downhilling, for instance, or dirt jumping? Not necessarily. Hero 3+ Black Edition, for me, it's probably still going to be fine now- even in this day and age. Versus the Hero 8 White or whatever. I guess there's been a lot of developments in image stabilization and built-in gimbals, which is great. But you can relate to this. When you're pointing down a gnarly downhill trail, and it's just like this hyper smooth video, that's not real. That's not how it is. You know, you need to wear a kidney belt because you're shaking around so much. But that's the essence of downhill. Now you've got this hyper smooth - don't get me wrong, I think it's amazing – but are you losing a little bit?

Interviewer:

It's an interesting point, because, relating that to GoPro, I've sometimes found with some of their - I don't exactly what the features called - but it's to do with a gimbal. So it sort of helps stabilize the image. But I find sometimes it means when someone is riding, they can turn super quick or something and it takes a while for the thing to catch up. And I'm like, "oh, I want to see super fast switchbacks."

Interviewee:

I mean, I used earlier models. Obviously, I think the technology going into it now…. I sort of stopped working with them at Hero 5 era so for 6,7,8 there's been a lot of crazy stuff. You know, as I said, the hyper-smooth built-in gimbal technology stability now is off the charts.

Interview 3

07 February 2020

Interviewer:

So any questions off the bat in relation to my projects? And I can, if you want, I can ask you a question if you want to know what other people have said at the end.

Interviewee:

Oh, ja. Are you asking other people as well? Who've you asked?

Interviewer:

Yeah. So far I've done about six other interviews. So it's all with micro-influencers. So the term micro-influencer. I had one person get quite offended when I used it. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewee:

What did you say? Did you use that word? It's true, though.

Interviewer:

Yeah, but people are like "I'm not a micro- influencer- I'm a major-influencer." But so micro-influencers are – you know what they are.

Interviewee:

Ja.

Interviewer:

So, I've been chatting to everyone. Some people are bike specific. Some people are not. So do you know ***?

Interviewee:

Mmm. I know ***, ja. Chilled with him a couple of times.

Interviewer:

Really? So I know *** from Maritzburg. I grew up with ***. And then he moved. So *** and those guys - so I've been interviewing and chatting with them, and some of their friends and stuff. Yes, it's been super interesting. So we can chat about what other people like if you have questions, if you want to know what other people would say to things. So I've also been sort of emailing some people shorter questions. So the kind of initial question I start with is really, really broad, but it kind of gets the conversation going. If you had to explain to us, like if someone came up to you and was like, “what do you do on Instagram?” How would you describe that?

Interviewee:

What I do on Instagram? I guess, well, it started as me just literally - my friends came over, and it was like, “what are we going to do? Ah, let's get all dressed up and take photos”, you know, and you have fun with that. So that's how it started. And then just by like tagging brands and outfits, then they kind of communicate with you and then ask to like do deals and that kind of thing. So I guess I just literally wear clothing, and show it on Instagram. Or bikinis. And yeah, that's what I do. I just wear what brands send me. Not always. Like a lot of the time, it's just I'm out with my friends. We take a photo. But yeah, it's kind of weird, because I'm kind of like, often I'm like, “don't think about taking a photo to post” but then I'm like, “okay, no, I know people are wanting to see something.” So kind of like, my job is creating content that people want to see. From what I can tell over the past, like photos and everything, what kind of photos I want to see. That kind of thing. So it's not my job. Like I don't plan on making my money out of it. But it is nice to get like a little something here. It is like a fun hobby to have. So, I think it's just wearing clothes and taking nice photos that look aesthetically pleasing.

Interviewer:

And in that process, do you collaborate with a lot of people? Would you say you're a photographer yourself?

Interviewee:

No, no. Because a lot of the time I'm in the photos. Most of the time. The other photos would be maybe something I've taken at the beach that most other people can take. Like I do enjoy editing. Like I end up showing my friends: this is how Lightroom works, that type of thing. But I'm not a pro or anything. But I do enjoy that aspect of it, the whole editing part of it. And I think I'm just more in the photos than the actual photographer. Like *** and ***, and all of them are really good at that.

Interviewer:

So they also work together. And so it's like all of them. They're still in the photos but they're taking other's photos. Do you kind of do a similar thing?

Interviewee:

Honestly, I either get my dad to take the photos or my sister, or I'll collaborate with a photographer. Most of my photos are "I need to get this photo done today. Can you help me?". Unless a photographer emails me and wants to do something.

Interviewer:

And so, that kind of thing of like "needing to get the photo done today" – you touched on working with brands? Is that your own kind of guideline or your own content plan or are there external factors?

Interviewee:

Sometimes. Like I'm working with Cotton On. In the contract, the first photo must go out within a week of the drop of the clothing. And after the first photo, not longer than 10 days, a second photo. So with that, I literally have my calendar, first post this day, and then that day. Other photos that don't have to do with brands and stuff, I just post whenever I want to. I kind of have to see how it looks on the feed. If I'm going to post a close-up of me in like, gym wear, and I know Cotton On the next day, then I should probably spread that out. It just looks better.

Interviewer:

Okay, so you don't you don't necessarily only think about that post, but you think about your overall feed. Okay. That's cool. Yeah, I saw you just posted a Cotton On thing this morning or yesterday.

Interviewee:

Yes. I was a day late for that, actually. Because I had photos. I made my friend come with me and take a bunch of photos. And then I realized that I needed to take another one. So I made yesterday my ambition to go and do that. But it was supposed to be posted the day before. They're not too hectic with that, like they'd rather the photo be better, you know?

Interviewer:

So if you don't mind me asking, what were you not happy about?

Interviewee:

The other photos, I post two a month. And they give me a voucher for a certain amount of money to go and buy outfits. So I got a bunch of photos from the first day, but I was wearing the same outfit. And then I still had money left over. And I was like, "No, I need to go get another outfit now." So I was like, instead of posting two, I think they'd rather see two different outfits. It's probably just better for them. It's probably what they want to see. So there's no rules with that. You can post two of the same outfit, but I just thought…

Interviewer:

I suppose that's what I was going to ask next. Do they give you fairly rigid guidelines or not?

Interviewee:

It depends, like, do you know Unframed Ice Cream? They were just like, "we'll give you this amount and just come take a photo and tag us", and that was the only rule. The picture

could have been of the ice-cream, it could have been of me in the store. Anything like that. And there's no date or anything. And then with Cotton On it has to be a colour photo, full body or at least you see like half the pants. No like smoking, drinking anything like that.

Interviewer:

But in terms of the sort of type of photo, do they leave that up to you ? Do you have creative freedom?

Interviewee:

Yeah. Which is nice.

Interviewer:

And the clothing choice?

Interviewee:

And the clothing choice, ja. Some of the other girls…. most of the time I end up getting bikinis, because its Cotton On Body, so they only have bikinis, gym clothes or like underwear, pajamas. A lot of the time I'm bikinis or fitness clothes, and a lot of the other girls are a lot of pajama posts, so it’s up to you.

Interviewer:

So, if you then had to look at when you post something, what are your kind of methods for success for you? How do you know if something is good or bad?

Interviewee:

I mean, sometimes, if it's too posed, like, it doesn't do as well, but I don't really care about the engagement anymore because Instagram’s engagement has gone down. It's just a terrible thing at the moment. Like, I used to, people used to, get like, I used to get, like 18,000 in-sights, like people seeing it. And now it's like 6000 just being shown, it's not even being shown to everyone who follows me. So it's like, it sounds bad. But when I'm on Instagram, I don't think

about tapping. I let you just scroll. Like I've never tapped and it's so bad. But like, it's more just about looking at the photos. At the end of the day, I'm just like, "What do I like?" That type of thing. I don't like it if it's too posed, unless it's like a modelling photo by a photographer. If I'm going to be in gym clothes, I want it to look very laid back, with a smoothie or like sitting at the table or something.

Interviewer:

Yeah. And I suppose this is a tricky question, but why? Why don't you like it being too posed?

Interviewee:

I mean, I think there's a time for it. Do you know ***? So we did a shoot and the photos were very posed, but they were really really nice. I really liked them. So when I posted those I knew like, Okay, this is very much a modelling shot. But I just think the idea of like, putting your hand in your gym clothes, like just just a bit. Yeah, just looks a bit weird. Like especially if you're in gym clothes. So I kind of do something in the photo that has to do with being fit, or whether I'm like going for a walk in the park, and then that's where I'll take the photo. It doesn't look as posed as if I was just standing by a wall, you know? Obviously, I do have those days when it's hard to go for a walk in the park.

Interviewer:

Every day, fair enough.

Interviewee:

Yeah. Just depends, like, sometimes I'll post them, sometimes I won't. I also look at the whole feed, like yesterday, I needed to post Cotton On. And I had a full body one. And then I had a closer, like more fun version of the photo. And I just looked at my previous photo, and I was like, a full length one. So it's like, I'm not going to post two full lengths next to each other. So you just post a close-up fun-looking one.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So the reason I was asking was, does it also have to do with your perception of the platform, as in Instagram? It sort of situates itself weirdly between un-candid, real life, and then a magazine shoot, if that makes sense.

Interviewee:

Yeah, you definitely have the girls whose Instagram is their like modelling portfolio. And they'll post a lot of the jobs that they've done and that type of thing. And I think their following follows them for that, they want to see the editorials, the fashion shots, that type of thing. And just from as long as I've been doing Instagram, I just kind of keep doing the photos that I used to do. And that kind of got me growing. Often like, I'll go out with my friends, and we'll take photos for the night, but I won't post those. But they will be able to post them, but they just don't go with the feed and everything. But from the beginning, I've always had a certain thing with my feed. Like I go for breakfast with my friends, and they're not going to take their phone out, and take a photo of all the food. But literally forever, I've just wanted to do that and take a photo and edit and make it look like nice to the eyes. So I've just kind of carried on doing what I've been doing from the start. Obviously, I've gotten a lot better.

Interviewer:

When did you start?

Interviewee:

Probably, grade eight. I mean, in the beginning, it was like, I remember taking a photo, posting a photo of my Blackberry cover. That was like my first post. My friend was like, "get Instagram." I was like, "okay, what are we going to take a photo of?", and we took our covers off our phones, and then used the iPad, and took a photo of our Blackberry covers. That was the first one.

Interviewer:

I was that kid at school that missed the BlackBerry phase. I had an iPhone…. but like an early iPhone. But at the school that I was at it was like the “not cool” thing. Everyone was like, “Hey, what's your pin?” I was like “Sorry, I only got a cell phone number.” And everyone was like “Yeah, it sucks to be you.” Sorry, that was a complete aside. But so, when did it kind of change?

Interview:

I think it was when I must have been grade 9 or 10. You know Bacon Bikinis? So they asked me to just model for them. I've always been in an agency since I was like small to do commercials and that type of thing. So I was like, cool. It was just get a free bikini and model for us. So we got a lot of photos from that and also became friends with***, who was like, very Instagram girl back then. Now she's like completely not doing that. She’s just using it for her music and business and everything. But I think being with her, she obviously got me into taking the photos, literally going on photo missions and that type of thing. And then a mix of modelling for other brands just because they needed me in the photos and then I managed to get nice photos from them and post those. I'd be reposting and Bacon Bikinis had a lot of followers back then. They do now as well. But back then it was like 15,000 when I was with them.

Interviewer:

Do they have less now?

Interviewee:

No, they have more. They have 50 or 60 or 70. But like, back then, it was a lot.

Interviewer :

Did you see more conversion back then? So you're saying you don't really look at your engagement now.

Interviewee:

It was very high at one point. That was the beginning of last… or actually more like my grade 11 or 12. I'm into my second year out of school now. So grade 11 and matric I saw the most.

Interviewer:

So 3 to 4 years ago?

Interviewee:

That's when I went up the most. Like now it's kind of been very chilled. But I've don't really care. I'm like….

Interviewer:

What is your perception of that? Like, why do you think…

Interviewee:

Why do I think it happened?

Interviewer:

Why did it happen then? Why has it slowed down?

Interviewee:

I don't know. I just remember I was posting a lot of like summer bikini photos back then. I found those are the ones that did the best, like, you know, on a floating unicorn or something like that.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Interviewee:

Yeah, I'm not sure. And I also think Instagram, I know Instagram's engagements change, like over the years and it's annoyed a lot of people. So possibly that as well, like it used to be in order of being posted, like someone's who has just posted at 10 in the evening versus eight, tended to be at the top. Now, I'll see someone who's posted like three days ago, just because Instagram thinks I want to see it at the top. So it's a bit annoying.

Interviewer:

I think it was *** who mentioned he's sort of only, like, evaluated posts after like, two or three days because they've taken that kind of chronological element out of it. Posting at certain times doesn't actually make a difference. The "like" function that they're going to take away? Potentially, what are your thoughts on that?

Interviewee:

I'm happy with that.

Interviewer:

Oh, are you?

Interviewee:

I mean, I don't think brands necessarily look at the likes anymore, when they ask for a deal. It's usually just how many people have seen stuff. So that could be 6000 and you only have 500 likes. Like, they literally don't seem to care about the "like" thing anymore. It's more just like, okay, 6000 people have seen this.

Interviewer:

So is that 6000 impressions? So it's like, popped up on 6000 people's feeds? Okay. And so how do they get that information? Do they ask you for it?

Interviewee:

Oh, yeah, you screenshot and send it through.

Interviewer:

And do people Photoshop those things or not?

Interviewee:

Probably, but I mean, yeah, I never actually thought about that. Like with Cotton On every month, we have to send it through stuff for the month and how it went.

Interviewer:

So that they can kind of have some...?

Interviewee:

To keep track, to see if it's working, like my initial contract was six months. And then after that, they renewed it for another six months. So I guess just to kind of keep track and see like, how things are going.

Interviewer:

Is six months a fairly long contract based on the work you've done?

Interviewee:

I mean, I haven't usually done…., so Cotton On is actually the longest contract like this because they, it's every month, they send me something, whereas like with Daniel Wellington it was, "we're gonna send you this" for two photos. It was like a once-off thing. And then a year later, they asked to do it again. Usually, it's just "gonna send you this. You got to do this."

Interviewer:

Yeah. So when they send you something, is there always kind of a guideline of what they're expecting from you?

Interviewee:

Sometimes it's like, a bikini brand will be like “we want to send you something. It would be great if you could maybe post it.” Like I don't have to do, but I feel I must. Because, you know, they're sending me something for free. So often I will if I do actually like the thing, post it or do a story or something. Otherwise, with Daniel Wellington there was a rule that there was just the date, and everything like that.

Interviewer:

It's interesting, because that's kind of the area where there's the least understanding of how to do it most effectively. Some people of I’ve chatted to say when brands give them super rigid guidelines it’s going to flop.

Interviewee:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I've been asked to do a contract with anti-anxiety medicinal-use tablets, so they're not actually like drugs but…

Interviewer:

…they're supposed to relieve anxiety….

Interviewee:

Ja. So literally in the contract it was like you have to be holding the packet, you have to list all the things and then caption. I was like people are going to see right through….,and like it's actually like going to be me holding this thing: “Thanks for my anxiety medication. This is what it does.” Like you know, people see right through that and if I see something like that, I'm like, no.

Interviewer:

What do you think when you see something like that, about other people? Why do you not like that?

Interviewee:

I saw someone posting a Skinny Tea ad thing yesterday. Someone I know. And it was so so obviously like a paid thing. I don't know. I'd only post things if I actually enjoyed it. Or actually like it - like Cotton On. I'd been buying Cotton On clothing way before I ever thought about it. Like, literally the thing I'd spend most of my money on. So, yeah, if I don't like the idea, or it's not something….

Interviewer:

If it wasn't a product you'd use, would you not…?

Interviewee:

Exactly.

Interviewer:

Ok, cool. Have you ever found any areas of like, conflict - not conflict - but things that have arisen between say (and you don't have to mention brands in particular), but like, things that have come up where it was like you did X, and they were expecting something different?

Interviewee:

Not that I can think of. I mean, the only time was that medicine brand thing. They were like offering me money. And I was like, errr.

Interviewer:

So did you not take it, because it was too prescriptive?

Interviewee:

Ja. That's the only time.

Interviewer:

Okay. Because I mean, I've heard some interesting stories, like a brand who's like, “Hey, we love what you do. Can we send you a T shirt?” Like, we've got this clothing brand? Can we send you a shirt? And then like, Okay, cool. And they get the shirt. They don't like it so they don't post anything. And a month later, the brand messages “can you send it back?”

Interviewee:

Like unless they're going to decide before “cool, this a deal we’ve got going.” Otherwise cool. Send me something. If I like it, I'll post it. But otherwise, thanks.

Interviewer:

Yeah, no, that was outrageous. But it was it was also interesting. So another chap I spoke to was a sponsored cyclist, and he's been a professional cyclist for a while and he's sort of riding less now but he's managed to build up quite a significant following online, and so he works with Volvo as an influencer. But he also mentioned the length of contract, and the contract was six months long and he was like “that was super short.” Because in the sponsored world before, he had a three year contract with brands, but now it's the kind of way influencer marketing works and the length of contract is significantly shorter. Yeah. I honestly think that's answered all of my questions. Do you have any other comments about Instagram? Any thoughts?

Interviewee:

I'm trying to think what would help. If you want you can just send me any other messages. I’m not really sure what else…

Interviewer:

So this is this other thing when I’ve asked people, some people are like “I don’t think I can help.”

Interviewee:

Literally I was like, I don't know if I can help you with that.

Interviewer:

I know. But, trust me, it has really helped towards my research. If you want I can tell you what I've been finding so far.

Interview 4

29 October 2019

Interviewer:

I think you, as an athlete present an interesting case, where, the premise behind sponsoring an athlete and influencer marketing is along the same lines. Before social media, it was to create awareness and credibility around your brand through individuals who were professionals in the field and that mentality is similar. But we've seen the two collide. From your perspective, as an athlete, if you had to describe your approach to Instagram and your perception of it, what would that be?

Interviewee:

People claim they understand it, I don't think anyone really, really understands how it works. People can be better at it or worse at it.

Interviewer:

So what do you think makes someone better or worse?

Interviewee:

First of all, understanding a lot of the talk about the algorithm, and how that works. Do focusing on what Instagram wants you to post, for example, my page is focused on mountain biking. I've realized over the time that when I first started Instagram, I just posted anything related to me. It doesn't necessarily have to be riding related. Now, I do on occasion, post something not riding related, but almost always keep it riding, something to do with a bike, or around a bike or training etc. Your page gets a designated niche. So my page is a mountain bike niche, someone else's page might be a model. What they want is your page to be specific and so if you post something, not in that niche, and now your page is number one your reach will just be killed, they won't show it. So even though you've got how many followers you want they won't allow it to be seen well, because its not the right content. And I've seen that, and

I've tested it with various pictures, I posted a picture of a car and even though I have over 20,000 followers, I'll get 300 likes. If it's a picture of a car and a bike then I'll get 2000. I use analytics and if I look at the reach, I'll see the reason you get a few likes on the previous one is because your reach is literally 10 times less than the other picture and that's Instagram limiting it, even if you use hashtags.

Now they've stated that you should use hashtags and that's not the easiest to figure out. But I've started to see the mass, there's a huge benefit to using hashtags to gain more traction, to gain more followers. And I think using the right ones, it has to be directly related to what you're posting. So if you post a picture of me sitting on a bench, and I used hashtag mountain biking, hashtag this, it's not going to get anything. It's just a total waste of time. I don't know how, but Instagram knows, you'll see suddenly you pop up in the top posts of those various hashtags. I've been watching a lot of YouTube videos and stuff on how to improve, how to make things better ,what people want, it's a bit of trial and error. It takes a while to figure it out. And things change all the time as well. I've tested the hashtag thing, I'll post various hashtags and then you check often, every hour, check on each hash tag and see which one your posts will pop up in, the top posts or whatever the top nine or like the first few pages. And if it's not there, then either the content is not related to that. So you put the wrong hashtag for that, or Instagram doesn't feel that it's in that field or it's not your account. So depending on how big your account is, it will rank in certain tags. So if a tag is say, 15 million posts, if you've only got 1000 followers, don't bother putting that on, is never going to be updated. Because then you need an account that's going to have 500,000 or million followers. Because it won't, it's too big. There are exceptions, my posts sometimes feature in hashtag MTB, which has got 17.6 million posts. Typically, it shouldn't, but I've seen that it actually does on occasion. So it's not only the number, sometimes it can be that the quality of the content, if Instagram feels it is a viral post. This could be a viral post, then they will put it there. So I think it's a very personalized thing and it takes a while to figure that all out, I think creating good content is the key, if you don't have something good to post, don't. If the quality isn't good, it brings down

your health score and the health of your page (if the content is bad, or the images aren't clear, or if could be discrimination or rude videos etc) – anything that goes against their terms of service.

For a while I just wasn't growing, I tried everything and just had hit a wall, I couldn't figure out why, I tried hashtags and I got good engagement, but it didn't help me get followers. Then quite recently I thought to start posting videos and it was unbelievable. As soon as I started posting videos, I started getting followers and growing again. Some people can grow well with images, so it depends on the type of account and what the audience prefers. I think for mountain biking specifically, people like to see more video content. People want to see action and are bored of people with a cool bike. Whereas maybe with lifestyle photography, you see a beautiful mountain and that is going to do well. The type of content you should be posting also depends on our niche. It is also a bit of experimentation and could also be where you are and timezones. So maybe what works in South Africa doesn't work in America or Australia. Basically giving the audience what it wants, otherwise your content doesn't get featured.

Interviewer:

Do you feel it is giving the audience what they want to see or is it actually giving the platform what it wants? Who do you tailor you content for is what I'm wondering, do you create content with Instagram and Instagram's algorithm in mind or your followers in mind?

Interviewee:

Well maybe a bit of both. For me, it's quite tricky. I do it three ways because I've got to take into account my sponsors and they obviously want as much traction as they can get. For example, Volvo in particular, to the I am an influencer, they don't care about results, they get me on board for Instagram and a bit of Facebook, tailored towards the mountain biking market to push the brand. So I've got to create content that is engaging, that Instagram likes and that the audience is going to like plus that is going to showcase the brand. You've got to experiment,

sometimes I'll take a photo and it's rad, it's beautiful mountains and the car is there, but it does terribly and then you learn that isn't the way it is going to work. Then I'll have something else that looks average, but for whatever reason it does well so you can't say for sure. It also depends on when you post, I've seen from analytics that between five and seven in the evening is the best time. But certain days, Friday and Sunday don't do well, so I try avoid posting then. I don't know why that is, but I've seen Monday to Wednesday do the best. So when I make content I have to tailor all of this, which is not easy.

Normally, if you give the audience what they want, it is what Instagram wants as well. So if your account is like mountain biking, then doing lots of videos related to mountain biking it is going to work. Sometimes the videos don't even have to be that impressive, I did one in Leogang when I just got back on the bike, so I wasn't doing anything fancy, I just rode a few corners, did a little manual and it got a lot of views. Then sometimes you have a really cool video and it doesn't do well.

With a video, a lot depends on the image that you chose as the background, the cover. Particularly for using hashtags, if someone is scrolling through and the cover doesn't stick out, they can just scroll past. So having something that really pops and grabs attention while scrolling is important. When I post a picture of the car, I try and include my bike as well otherwise it just doesn't do anything because it is not helping the brand or account. Then you've got Instagram stories, I hate Instagram stories.

Interviewer:

Okay, why?

Interviewee:

It's because you never get a break, doing a post once a day or once per second day I don't mind. You spend 15-20 minutes preparing a post if you've got the content and then it's done. Stories are super important because it creates more traction because people are following your

account all day long, rather than once a day, but you never get a break. You get “What are you doing?” “What are you going to ride?” “You're training?”. It’s like you have always got to have your phone and always having to have a look and ask “what can I post now?”. It drives me nuts, I don’t want to be on my phone all day, but it’s got to the point now where you almost have to.

Interviewer:

Do any of the sponsors that you work with, let’s say Volvo, are they more interested in the influencer aspect of it, because you have almost 30,000 followers, you wouldn’t call that a micro-influencer. Do they give you any requirement, sponsorship contingent on ‘x’ number of posts? And do they include stories?

Interviewee:

No, normally they leave that open. So they'll say two posts a week, stories included. It is a bit of a grey area, but I try post once a week on a normal post and then the rest of the time I’ll just do stories because I don’t want to come across as hunting sponsors the whole time, people get over that. But at the same time, I need to post a certain amount otherwise they get pissed off with me, so it is a tough balance.

Sometimes they’ve got campaigns. A while ago, Volvo had a big campaign to launch the new XC90 and to sell safety, where for two weeks we had to post just about daily. But I can tell the coverage, the reach is not great, because it is not what people want to see. Leatt have just launched their 2020 year, so they ask their athletes to post on their normal feed, but that isn’t too bad because it is related to mountain biking.

Interviewer:

A promotional video?

Interviewee:

Yeah. Which is fine. But because everyone's posting it, it's just a marketing thing.

Interviewer:

Would you say it's more or less effective for the sponsor to come to you, and all the athletes, with a generic video to post or rather them saying they are launching a new catalogue, you come up with a post?

Interviewee:

I personally think the better way to do it would be to send each athlete stock, even just one item if they don't have a lot of stock because it is early, and ask them to create a post, that is a lot more authentic. That comes from the person itself whereas when you see the generic video, the audience knows it has nothing to do with me and I am just pushing product.

Interviewer:

Could you see that with that post particularly, that the engagement with it was significantly lower?

Interviewee:

Yeah, it wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great, at least it was riding related. I had another sponsor for part of the year, Beeline, a bicycle GPS from the UK and they helped me financially, so it was in my best interest to keep them happy. They wanted me to post an instructional video on how to use the product and I knew before posting it, it was going to do terribly. It got 500 views or so, compared to another video I did recently that got 100,000 views. I knew before posting it was not what Instagram want or what followers want. It is a free platform, so you can get around the algorithm by paying to advertise (sponsored posts) then you can get more traction, but that is not really organic. It defeats the purpose. It is tricky, and I don't know how it will work with a general influencer. You can see on massive accounts, some accounts have over a million followers and they will do a post along those lines and they will get very little engagement for the size of the page, 5000 likes but over a million followers.

Interviewer:

If you had to choose one of your most successful posts, what is it and what do you think made it successful?

Interviewee:

My most successful post was a video from Darkfest. I just happened to video Adolf Silver do a double back flip and he crashed, I got that on video and in slo-mo. I got 250,000 views on the video and 30,000 likes, that was by far the best video I've ever had. I videoed and posted it immediately within 10 minutes, so it was the first video on social media of him doing the double back flip, and it was Darkfest so it was a massively trending event which everyone wanted to see. I'm pretty sure that that's why I did so well. It wasn't about me, but it was about mountain biking. And it was something really impressive. It was also now, people want fresh content, people don't want old stuff.

I did another post recently on a pump track. And it was by far, the best post of me personally. It got 125,000 views and I can't figure out why, it was nothing impressive, it was literally just a ride around the pump track and for whatever reason it kept going. I post quite a few pump track videos and a lot of them do quite well. I think the reason was because it applies to a wider audience, it's something anyone can ride. Other than that, I can't really figure out why it did so well.

Interviewer:

And you don't think it was any particular hashtags you used?

Interviewee:

I've figured out hashtags that work quite well, you can use up to 30 hashtags, so I've got about 15 that I just copy and paste, I don't use all of them, but for any mountain biking related post, I've got ones that I use and then I'll add for that particular post, I'll tailor some more that relate directly to that post. But that's the only thing that that I did. The weird thing is, it took

ages, the first couple of days it didn't do that. Then suddenly, I was seeing new follower, new follower, then I saw likes on this post and I went back and it was at 30,000 views, then 50,000 views, and then it just kept going and it just kept going for two weeks.

Interviewer:

So that's kind of interesting there is a formula, but it's also trial and error.

Interviewee:

I've played around a lot after watching videos, especially when I was injured, I had a lot of time to do some research and see how to improve because a lot of the brands, particularly 510. I approached them three times, three years in a row. Every year they said no. They said the reason was that your Instagram accounts doesn't have enough followers, your social media followings aren't big enough. And at that stage, I think I had less than 10,000. As soon as I hit 10k then they're like, cool. And it's kind of sad that it's that's what it comes to with some brands. But you know, it just shows you the power that social media has now.

Interviewer:

Because like athletes, traditionally, it was results that were your leverage right? And so how long have you been racing for, being a sponsored athlete?

Interviewee:

My first year racing was 2010. I got a couple of sponsors in 2011, but I definitely wasn't professional. Probably from 2013.

Interviewer:

So that's 6 years, and I think we've seen significant kind of rise in the world of social media and this notion of influencer marketing. How have you seen that creep into the mountain biking sponsorship world?

Interviewee:

I think it's changed a lot, it's created a lot of opportunities, but it's also taken away opportunities at the same time because it's created opportunities for guys to make a living without racing. Which I think is pretty cool. Guys like Josh Bryceland, they don't have to race now, but he's still making money. At the same time, it's also taken away opportunities because now brands realise that they don't have to sponsor an athletes to get coverage, to get media exposure, they can just get an influencer, which generally is a lot less investment. And it's a lot shorter contract. They would just do something for six months or so. It's easier for them because it is less involved. But then generally, the athlete won't get the full benefit of it because they don't necessarily need an athlete, they just need someone who's got some reach in their market. So that's where those people in the past, a lot of them would have sponsored athletes, because there was no such thing, as influencers, they weren't just famous people. Now there's famous people for just being famous. To get that traction you would have to have been someone who was a celebrity through movies or singing or sports or politics or something like that. So that's also closed some doors. It's a bit of give and take.

Interviewer:

It was an interesting comment you made about the length of contract. Did you find that brands would back you for longer, before social media marketing?

Interviewee:

Exactly that happened to me, I was sponsored before, by Boss sports. I was with them for 2015, 2016 and 2017. Then going into 2018, they changed their whole strategy, and they said, we're not going to have any sponsored athletes anymore we're going to have influencers, but not one influencer. Because that would be essentially like having an athlete. So they were going to have one influencer per month. So just monthly contracts. And obviously, some brands do differently.

Interviewer:

So had you signed yearly contracts with them before, or three years?

Interviewee:

I think I did a year and then two years.

Interviewer:

So it went from doing a two year contract to being monthly.

Interviewee:

Yes. And they use a different person every month and in different sectors. So they used me in the one month as a mountain biker, the next month they used a surfer, the next a rock climber, the next a runner. So there was a lot less investment for them, so it was like a quarter per month what they were offering to pay than what they paid before. I don't know how true it was, but they told me that they have seen a lot more traction doing this rather than having one athlete. So I think that could go both ways. Because I think people also see that, it looks a bit weird, when they're pushing this person and then pushing this person. There's no brand loyalty. And because it takes time, I feel that to get traction, no matter what brand you're working with, this association needs to build. It normally takes years to really get there. When I was with Investec, after a few years, I got this association where people knew me as Investec. But that doesn't happen overnight. Whether it's a good thing or not, I don't know but for the fact that you get this association. It shows when you are with the brand for a long time and you don't get that when it is just a short term thing.

Interviewer:

Mentioning Investec, what has been interesting following your racing career is that you have managed to attract sponsors a lot of other athletes haven't. Particularly, and I don't know if this is correct in labelling them corporate sponsors, but I don't know if they are necessarily related to any bicycle related product. What has your approach been to getting corporate

sponsors involved? Have you put yourself forward to them or have they come to you? What is the process?

Interviewee:

I've definitely gone to them. So when I started looking for sponsorship in 2011. Do you remember Miles Kelsey? He used to write for Bicycling and has been racing downhill for years. He knew a lot of people at that stage and I asked him if he has any ideas for where I could look for sponsorships, because I didn't have any idea and I didn't have anyone to show me how to do it. He said, just look in the bike industry don't bother looking outside the bike industry, you'll never get anyone interested. And that always stuck with me and I was always wondered why. Other athletes from other sports have got corporate sponsorship. So why should it not be possible in what we do, and with the growth in mountain biking. At first, I tried to get industry sponsors that are trying to look for a team, the standard way. Obviously it would have been cool if I had got a team, it takes a lot less work. Once you are in the team, everything postable is done for you, most of the guys get a salary, you are employed by them, You are working for someone and you just worry about your riding. You don't have to worry about searching for more support and organising events etc.

Coming from South Africa, it makes it tough. So the first year I raced, my parents funded it, 2011. They said one year, and after this, you either go and study or you find a way to you fund yourself. The first year I got into a mini team in Austria and that worked out to cover most of my expenses. Then I got injured anyway so I ended up missing most of the year. After that I got no support. I tried the industry, I'd tried all the bike brands and the only thing left was to try corporate. I thought I've got nothing to lose, if I don't get it right, then I can't race anymore, I might as well give it my best go, for three/four months I was emailing people every day. I don't know how many emails were sent, thousands. My approach was offering them the fact that mountain biking is growing so much, offering them to be present at events, to give skills coaching, to do rides with their clients because, particularly with Investec, it's for wealthy

clients and a lot of the wealthy sector in this country, mountain bike. And it's growing every year, it's becoming the new golf, so to speak. So that was my kind of approach, if you sponsor me, I'm not racing cross country, but it's all the same thing, I ride more my trail bike than my downhill bike so going for rides with clients, coming in to do little skills clinics, doing talks, potentially, so taking the association with the brand, maybe not so much results based but more what I can do for them, make their clients and staff happy. That was kind of the premise of how that started. And when that got going it opened my eyes, this is possible to get. I'd been told that you'll never get a corporate sponsor. I still don't know how I got that because I hadn't even won a race yet. I'd got a lot of second places at nationals and second national champs and things. I'd never won. Not even a provincial at that stage, so it was a bit of a risky move for them. But it was just strategic that I approached them because their slogan is out of the ordinary and downhill fits that perfectly. There's always a bit of luck involved with these things. It has to be the right time. They were looking for something new, I came along with this different, interesting idea and it sort of went from there. And I think because I'd gotten them, and I stuck with them for five years, it opened the door to get more, to get others involved because I have that to my credit, it is quite a respected brand. So for example, I got BMW after that and that was directly related to Investec, the guy told me, the marketing manager, the head of the marketing SA actually followed me on Twitter. Because I was sponsored by Invetec, he had seen an advert from Investec and then he followed me. We started chatting on Twitter and that is how that relationship started. Then it would have carried on going, but unfortunately, then they signed a deal with Specialized and then I would have needed to switch to Specialized, because they couldn't promote someone in mountain biking, that wasn't in Specialized. He even told me it was directly related to that. After that, it was tough, with a lot of sponsorships it's who you know. Although both BMW and Investec was just a cold call, but that's quite unusual. I've had some smaller sponsors along the way, which have been connections. I knew like the CEO of Knight Frank who was sponsoring me last year, nothing the size as Investec.

And this year I got Curro on board, its Curro, but Grit is their procurement provider, so they do all the school uniforms and stuff like that. It is sort of a collaboration, they didn't want to brand me Curro because then they would have thousands of sponsorship requests coming through. The only reason that worked is that I went to Curro when the school opened in 2000 to matric. Because they wanted to make a push in mountain biking, it's a private school so a lot of their clients and the kids and the parents are involved in mountain biking, and they want to get an events series going, like spirit schools week. They obviously wanted a bit of guidance for that, then some motivation for the kids, potentially some skills coaching. I didn't know who else to approach because the industry in this country is not doing financially well. What I did is, I went on to the top 10 fastest growing companies in the country and they were on there and then that sparked, I went to Curro so potentially there's a link, maybe they'd be interested in and as it turns out, they were. So it was a bit of a connection, but not a connection to a person as such, more connection to the actual school and because they've got about 70 schools, its' not a school, it's a whole system.

Volvo was just a cold call. It's never easy, but it becomes a bit easier as you go along, because as you get more credits, you've been with Investec for a couple of years, with BMW for a couple of years and so on. If you are with a company for a year, they wonder why it was just a year, but if you were with them for a longer time, there must be a reason they kept you. Because my contracts with Investec were just a year, to start with and then another year and another and so on. It was a new concept. I've definitely found as I've gone along, it is easier to get responses from people now. When I first started, I'd say about 80% of the mails I sent out didn't get a response. Now I would say, 70%-80% get a response, most of the time it is a negative response or they don't have enough budget or this or that, but they respond because now they take me more seriously.

I think a lot of people don't try, I feel like a lot of athletes, could potentially be along corporate lines. First, they don't try, second, it is a lot of work, more than being involved with

a bike brand (you just post pictures, videos, but with corporate you've got to do stuff for them, events, coaching, and I have to initiate it. I've got to come up with plans, whereas with a bike company, you don't have to do that, it all falls into place). Third thing, you have to be a certain type of person to be associated with a certain type of brand. I couldn't be sponsored by Investec and Monster Energy at the same time, Monster is a wild party all the time and Investec is very clean cut. I think a lot of the downhill community is quite rough, which is cool, but at the same time, for me, it wouldn't have worked. I could be way more relaxed if I didn't have corporate sponsors. Same with Curro, I have to be so careful with what I post, whether it is bad language, profanity etc. There are guys like Tao that are very carefree, they just party. Sometimes I would like to be like that, but even when you are at events, you never know who has a camera and is taking a photo. It could be out of context, but you have to be so careful. People talk.

Interviewer:

This notion of self-branding and creating an individual brand around an individual person, that's one of the pitfalls, one of the successes behind building a brand is consistency. You know you can go to any leader and there is an element of consistency. Same thing as McDonalds internationally, you know what to expect. When you start applying that to an individual, it becomes a lot more difficult, how do you reconcile that consistency of a brand, whilst at the same time, trying to be an individual, and trying to grow older, change, mature, any of those things. They kind of seem to be at odds with one another, have you found it challenging?

Interviewee:

Particularly with social media stuff, if you are trying to evolve with the platform, a lot of the downhill community, the gravity orientated community, they want to see wild stuff, which can be quite difficult for me, what I am posting, because I have created a clean cut brand around myself, due to the partners I have. It wasn't intentional originally, it just went that way and now I can't change that, so I don't mind that. So I have to try create content that captivates

people and makes them excited about watching a video. I think if you had some videos where you did some crazy stuff, drank some beers and then did some riding related stuff… But I still have to create stuff that is clean cut. I have to create clean stuff that is entertaining for the audience that is watching.

Interviewer:

If you had to describe your brand, how would you?

Interviewee:

I never thought about that, I guess, I would try to be as professional as I can be, to come across as professional as I can be. Whether it is doing the right thing, not break the rules.

Interviewer:

I suppose you are associating it with what is historically thought of as a professional career, a lawyers, a doctor etc.

Interviewee:

That can sometimes annoy people, I think over the years, some people have got annoyed with the way I have done things, but I think you also learn as you go along and as you grow up. You think you should have done that, but you have got to have these experiences to decide. How things have fallen, just trying to be professional and be clean cut.

Appendix 2 – Focus Group

21 November 2019

Interviewer:

We are speaking in relation to Instagram. That's the platform that I'm looking at within the scope of my study.

Interviewee 3:

They are taking away the like feature, it is going to impact so much. For a brand to reach out, they have to contact me, I have to send them screenshots of my insights from backend because they can't see it, unless you are using third party analytics service, they will be able to just go on my feed. And so I bought 20,000 followers. And then it just saw that, there's no way it can follow if that's real because the likes are…

Interviewer:

That's generally a way people distinguish between fake followers.

Interviewee 2:

Yeah. 100%. So obviously, it's like we've become f*** investigators. It's so easy for us to pick out who's fake and who's real. But in Cape Town, this community, there are a lot of people who just buy followers. The easiest way to tell is, so he's on sitting on 20k. But he's only getting 200 likes. Or videos is even worse, he's only getting like 100 views on this video, but he's on 20,000 followers. Like, your numbers don't add up. When we can't see the likes, and brands can't see the likes, it's going to change the whole dynamic with brand worker, because now you have to dm them and say, "Yo, what's your engagement like?" because there's no way of a brand knowing, and if it's anything like this particular m***f*** does with the story views, he's gonna Photoshop the number and then send it back to the brand. So the brands are just gonna get finessed.

Interviewee 1:

Two quick things. Um, bro, there is a way, if the likes are taken away, so it will say like "Interviewee 1 and others." If you click on the others, there is a way you can individually count them. Which is tiring.

Interviewee 3:

I can imagine all agencies getting a new employee – "like counter."

Interviewer:

An intern's job…

Interviewee 1:

That's nice. But like, the other thing is Instagram as well. It's so weird. Like, normally, as far as I understand your engagement should match up to your views, right? So I used to post the video and my engagement would have like 16 to 20,000 engagement, but my views…

Interviewee 2:

Okay, okay. So this is the two completely different things. So you get impressions, reach…Wait, what are they? Okay, so impressions is always going to be your biggest number, because impressions is how many times anyone has viewed it regardless of if they viewed it once or 10 times.

Interviewee 1:

So, okay, so what is that? Impressions? So my impressions would be like 16 to 20,000? But my view count would be like 7, 8, 9000.

Interviewee 2:

Because what that's showing you is that people are just scrolling. So if you just scroll it doesn't count as a view but it counts as an impression, bro. If I go on my feed and I just scroll like that. That's counting as an impression on everything.

Interviewee 3:

The only platform that does it like it should be, how you want it to be, is TikTok. On TikTok that will count as actual views. Not impressions.

Interviewee 1:

But isn't the same as SoundCloud? Even if you click on it, and then you stop, and then you click on it and click and click and refresh it, it still goes up. That's why it's so easy to get some complaints.

Interviewee 2:

Okay. But Instagram doesn't have that. So only one individual person can view a video, I think. I'm 90% sure. But impression - if I go back to your post 10 times, that's 10 impressions. Yeah, and reach is the amount of accounts. So if I go back 10 times, that only counts as one reach.

Interviewer:

Because are they planning on doing that soon?

Interviewee 2:

One of my friends who's a film maker was staying here last week, and on his phone, it's all gone. So they split tested. They tested with different batches of accounts.

Interviewer:

And do people really message you and say, "Can you send us a screenshot of that?" Not yet?

Interviewee 3:

Not yet. It's very early stages, but they will start doing that.

Interviewee 2:

But like, okay, I don't do brand deals. And I haven't really yet, in the times that I've been in communications with brands, they ask you for screenshots of your insights all the time. So you can go on to your business account and see your audience: what percent male or female, where they're from, all of that. They'll always ask for that.

Interviewee 3:

But they also there's also obviously third party…, so you can literally just check any accounts.

Interviewer:

So that at least ensures that Photoshop isn't…

Interviewee 2:

…..going to help them verify it.

Interviewee 3:

That's going to be very interesting how it all affects…

Interviewee 1:

They say they're trying to work around how, what do they say? What's the statement saying? The reason - mental health.

Interviewee 1:

It's not. That is what their cover is. I just think they realize that too many people are making money that Instagram isn't. So like, yeah, they stand back and watch the influencer market grow for the last two years with them making zero cents off it.

Interviewee 2:

Because the influence of marketing your market - like all of it was built by Instagram, and literally, they didn't get any of that money.

Interviewer:

It's expected to grow from now, but it's actually 25 billion US dollars in the next few years.

Interviewee 2:

Literally it is. That's actually fast. Because if it was about mental health and all of that they would have taken the like function, they would have taken away numbers of followers, you wouldn't be able to see any of that.

Interviewer:

Yeah, surely they also would have stopped things like the algorithms that dictate who sees what?

Interviewee 3:

As well people are being self-conscious about posting because they feel they'll get to see less likes on certain days or this, but it's only because they changed the algorithm. It's not chronological.

Interviewer:

In my understanding the algorithm changes regularly.

Interviewee 3:

Nobody actually knows what's happening with the algorithm. We'll just playing guessing games basically.

Interviewee 1:

I don't know anyone that's a success. So they'll probably reverse it - like they updated it last year with the changing everything sideways. And they were like “Oh, sorry, got someone in office probably like f*** up.”

Interviewer:

And then so you're saying no one really knows how the algorithms work. You’re trying to learn.

Interviewee 2:

What is in my mindset is it's gotten to the point where I don't give a f*** about whenever I post. I post whenever. I post whatever.

Interviewee 3:

What I do know about the algorithm is that no matter what the majority of the people are going to see your post. So if I post something now on Sunday people see it in two days. It’s like the period they’ve given me.

Interviewee 2:

Also, from my point of view, everybody that I know that's tried to gain the algorithm it's ended up biting them in the ass for longer. So okes used to run bots, so like automatic liking of posts. A lot of people who run bots, their Instagrams just got completely shut down like blocked-off type of vibes. Very few people who are over-analytic about algorithms and when to post and all of that nonsense are successful in social media. I think the people who are successful on social media tell a good story and that gets organic push, because no matter what the algorithm is, if you post a wack photo of you flexing…okay, here's an example: a photo of you on a yacht versus a video explaining how you ended up on the yacht and it's just congruent to who you are and everything. Posted perfect time, everything with the algorithm versus everybody loves the video, and they're gonna send it to their friends. That's always gonna do

better. So I think I see it as people use the algorithm as an excuse not to put more time into their content.

Interviewee 1:

I honestly don’t even have a game plan. My captions sometimes don't even make sense.

Interviewee 3:

I will go down in history for saying this: Interviewee 2 is the worst influencer to interview ever. He breaks all of the rules. None of the rules apply to this dude at all.

Interviewee 1:

I love that I get to do this. But like, a lot of the time the more you overthink it, and you make it a thing - I'm an Instagrammer, it becomes more of a stressful thing. And then you start worrying. Like he said, there are algorithms and you think you're not doing well not because you compare yourself to this. Like, at the end of the day, most of the kids that have more followers than us in this country, we’re still doing some of the same jobs. No one's like above anyone really. Like for actual influencer clout. I don't say it's because I know I've got like, the least amount of followers in terms of like instagrammers. I'm just saying it doesn't really matter.

Interviewee 3:

Like, hands down, I can just straight up say this. I have more followers than Interviewee 1, and he has got a much stronger fan base. Like he has dude's hitting on all the time, like “when are you dropping another video?” and stuff like that. And I think that's just goes back to people that are shouting for a larger following. I think a lot of the time now where it's heading, is that people are relating more to micro-influencers. So guys, like me, even Interviewee 2, just guys that you can relate to on a level that they're not like, extremely massive. They might have famous friends or do cool stuff. But they're almost at the same level that's attainable for someone that's living on the road for me. And they know that they will relate more to me and the conversion will be much higher.

Interviewee 2:

That's very true. Like, I think there's this much more of a wow factor of seeing, like, me and Greece at 8000 followers or Interviewee 2 in a villa at Camp's Bay at 5000 followers when you're on 2000. And you're similar age, and numbers-wise, this guy is just a bit above me. Like I can get there, versus a dude with 500k like trying to sell you an online course about how you can get there.

Interviewee 3:

So they build that personal connection, because they also feel like they are on this journey with you, like they did it with you, just before you kind of blew up or they've seen your journey from the beginning. That's why my fan bases, or not even my fan bases, but the kids that follow me, feel like they could be me. And they relate on that level like, "dude, this kid's like my age, with a couple more followers than me, doing cool stuff. Like I can do that too." And then they can follow that journey to see where I go next, versus like someone else who really made it trying to sell them s***.

Interviewer:

What would you say for you personally has worked? Because you're saying you just posted whatever you want. How did you get to where you are, if that makes sense?

Interviewee 1:

So I think in the beginning - I don't know.

Interviewee 2:

I think from an outside perspective – obviously I'm not going to speak for Interviewee 1 here, but I mean, me and him looking back on what influenced us to get into content creation and stuff like that. I'm thinking particularly like Justin Escalona, that we watched very similar stuff. It was just people documenting their lives. There was nothing fancy about it. And we kind of got in at a time where we saw like, things starting to pick up, kids making money from

it, and exponentially from the first video I watched with Justin Escalona to the 10th video I watched, his life had increased at such a weird rate. then we were like, all we have to do is document what we already do. And your life just slowly increases and gets cooler in Instagram's eyes. So I'd say like what's worked for him? He just does whatever he thinks is cool.

Interviewee 3:

For me, what I like doing is predicting what's going to be cool next. It's always been that for me. When I first saw YouTube before Instagram, even when I posted on Instagram, no-one had really had. All my friends were on Facebook and stuff and I got this new app. I've always tried to do that. When I was starting YouTube, I was watching youtubers in the UK doing sit down videos like comedy stuff. And I was like, yeah, this is somebody cool. I like watching this. No-one's really doing it here. Let me do this. And that's what I think it was like (to go back to your question) what's gotten me this far is just like innovating on the app. Everyone was posting on Instagram, in 2015, 2016. But there weren't any content creators. I mean, yeah, I was already making YouTube videos. So I would actually enjoy that and like Justin Escalona when I started watching him, and I saw how he used his feed looked and like people overseas and people I aspire to be. And I was like, I want to be the first person doing this here. And I started going out and taking photos like with a professional camera. It was weird on Instagram at that stage, like why's he posting selfies or why's he posting photos from the club. why isn't he posting this? And I moved out to Cape Town, when I was literally just shooting and taking photos every single day with my roommates, trying to get a new Instagram photo that looks cool that no-one really has. No-one really got it at the beginning. What's this kid doing? Does he think he's a model? Like how many photos are you going to post of yourself on a mountain in the sunset and stuff? And for me, I was just like, this is the new wave like this is gonna be next. This is gonna be next. I want to always be doing it before anyone else kind of catches on. And then I was just doing so much at the stage and then eventually now the content-creator

community has grown exponentially. It's what everyone wants to do. It's like the coolest job ever. For kids growing up now. Whereas it was DJs in the past.

Interviewer:

So were you kind of betting on content creation as being the thing, if that makes sense? As opposed to say betting on the platform where it was like this: This is what people want in the long run. So what I mean by that is not like, "this is a photo in the club, this is a photo is a selfie," it's actually like, "this is what in the long run is going to be popular on the platform." Maybe I'm misunderstanding what you mean by content creation. Or could you describe that for me? If you guys could explain that.

Interviewee 3:

Content creation can be as simple as literally taking a story with your friends out at a party or even a sunset. It has levels. It's like the term "influencer."

Interviewee 1:

Yeah, it's how much influence you actually have. Like how much of a content creator actually are you?

Interviewee 3:

Yeah, I mean, it's, it's up to interpretation, I think.

Interviewee 2:

I mean, like a writer is a content creator. A musician is a content creator. That's just the fact. I think it kind of just got coined that because, like, if you look at what we actually do, it's very weird, because I'm in the photos. I'm not taking the photos. But I'm getting someone else to take the photos of me in a cool situation that I think looks good. And then I'm most likely editing. Like my videos, like everybody says, I'm such a great videographer, but I'm in my own video.

Interviewee 1:

He doesn't even own a camera. He doesn't own a camera,

Interviewee 2:

I get asked to do photoshoots, videography jobs. I will get freelance jobs. Photos of myself on Instragram. And it always f*** with my head cos what is the client thinking? Just go and put up a tripod and then what's the timeline? I think content creation is almost just taking…like you wouldn't be able to do it by yourself. Like it's going out with other people. At least for me, content creation is going out with other people, documenting everything. And then I think the real creating is throwing your own spin on it and post like in storytelling. But the thing is content creation can live on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube. That's the thing. We just, in terms of like Instagram, a lot of the content we have on there was because other kids can't really attain whatever you've done or replicated. And it's funny because content creators, like an influencer, doesn't have to do that, like big time influencer. They can literally post a photo and get 1000s of likes. And that's purely based on personality. There's so many different… like there's Instagram content creators, there's comedians, there's so many niches to it. Someone that's like an influencer from another platform on Instagram can literally post whatever they want. But someone that's an Instagrammer, you're known for the type of content, you're known for your feed looks a certain way, you will have this certain pre-set on all your photos, you're known for that.

Interviewer:

You used the word "niche." I like that term. If someone asked you to describe your niche, would you be able to? Do you have a description for it?

Interviewee 1:

Let me let me have a look at my Instagram.

Interviewee 3:

For me it's very much Lifestyle, Fashion

Interviewee 2:

I'd say for me, it's definitely probably Lifestyle and Adventure. I mean, if you scroll down mine, I just look like a party guy. Travel, Lifestyle and Adventure for me.

Interviewer:

He's been going to Rage since he matriculated.

Interviewee 1:

I think what's crazy as an artist is how you can easily distinguish between these two artists, just by the noticeable way of working, like their editing and their style and what their vision is. Like, you look at content creators…it's easy because like, if you look at content creators in general, whether it's like music, like everyone is doing very similar things. The difference is though the amount of skill and talent that these guys have and the hard work as well. You can see it even for the way they change the colours of the video or edit it or make it match the song. That's sort of like their niche, it's like what they're doing. But I think that's like how visually appealing the video is to the audience.

Interviewee 3:

I think it also comes down to your personal brand and what like people latch on to. Like me and Interviewee 2 can go to the same place and have similar content, whatever. But you'll know it's an Interviewee 2 video and you'll know it's my video. Like me and Taun have got like the same vlog. You'll know this is a Taun style video. This is how he is.

Interviewee 2:

And that's actually a very good way of looking at the different layers because me, Interviewee 1 and *** are all roommates and most of our videos this year have been at exactly

the same place. Filmed with exactly the same footage. But we all put out different versions of it. And our fan bases each like….. ***'s followers know, “okay, I'm watching ***'s video. Like, I don't f*** with Interviewee 2’s video”. And Interviewee 1’s followers are the same. They're like, no, Interviewee 1 definitely did a better job. But then there's some people who watch mine and they're like, dude, like, I love this one. Yeah, like, it's, it's just your personal take on it, I guess.

Interviewee 3:

And I like to see it in a way that I'll get to almost put into reality, the way that I see it in my mind. Like, if that makes sense. I go out there and I document what's happening, like, in real life, because like, all of the s*** that happens is real. Like, I'm not editing myself into a photo. But then when I look at that, and post, I don't go okay, how can I make this look way cooler than it actually was? It's like, no, in my mind, it's like Yo, it would actually be sick if this happened and then this and then this went into this like this shock went into that. Yeah. I don't know.

Interviewer:

Is that what you mean by personal brand? To some extent, like your way of seeing the world?

Interviewee 3:

Yeah, literally, like I think that my Instagram is pretty much how I've designed my lifestyle. That's always been the goal for me like I wanted, I wanted to design my life, that does not conform to like, what it's supposed to be. A lot of the people that follow us are like, “you’re 21. And you're in college. You’re not supposed to be doing this. Where do you find the time? How? And when you have that in your mind, that I want to be doing this, and you design that for yourself, by surrounding yourself with people and connections, doing this, just finessing. Then that's pretty much what I think my feed is actually when I think about it. Just like, finesse

and design to make my life look like how I dreamed it would be. And my Instagram is like 10%, not even, 5% of what is actually going on.

Interviewee 2:

It's like, the stats, it's a top 1%. The top 1% of everything. And I think everybody's Instagram is the reflection of the best moments of their life, regardless, and that shows to what levels your life goes to. Because nobody's gonna post about, like very, very few people. It's becoming a thing now where there's a lot of transparency and stuff like that, which I actually like, but not everybody's gonna post the highlights of their life. But some people's highlights are a lot more memorable and a lot more engaging than other people's, you know, like, someone could go to the same villa I went to and literally just post having breakfast.

Yeah, I could go ahead and post, like with me outside with a Lamborghini with a hot girl, and it's like "Oh, he had a much better experience" The other guy might've also had that, but he just didn't show that.

Interviewee 2:

But I think the most important part is that compound , because if you look back at how me and Interviewee 1 started, I'm pretty sure we have similar stories, like when I was in Pietermaritzburg, taking photos with my girlfriend, like, everybody was laughing at me. I was going to the same places as everyone else. We're just going to get lunch at Botanical Gardens, whatever. And I'd take my photos, and we'd be like, okay, that's cool. Let's take a photo there. Let's take a photo there. Then slowly like I started getting known as a photographer, then like, that just compounds over time to you getting given better opportunities, because people are like, well, there's a influencer, who's just going to take a story or whatever, versus this dude is going to put a shitload of effort into a video which we can then use that's going to make our service look a lot better. So I just see it like that.

Interviewee 3:

That ties up incredibly with the whole likes thing. I think that's what differentiates these artists from people that are worried about their likes, they don't care about that. It's more about this is my passion is what I love to do. Like he said, like people will often get in but he didn't care. He was more focused on this is what I like, this is what I enjoy this what I'm going to do as compared to someone who's going to be like, Oh, this is cool, and it can make me money. And that's when you start to stress them out.

Interviewee 2:

And also, I think it's weird because I didn't count myself an influencer. Okay, like, I don't think I've ever done a brand deal.

Interviewee 1:

You have. We did one with Red Bull.

Interviewee 2:

Oh yeah. Never mind.

Interviewer 1:

And you've done it with Corona as well.

Interviewee 2:

So there's brand deals and there's collaborations.

Interviewer:

Okay, so what's the difference?

Interviewee 2:

In a brand deal you get paid. Collaboration is like a trade agreement. They say, we'll give you free entry or free whatever, merch.

Interviewee 3:

So I did a brand deal with a company, but it was just them trading an R800 shirt for a couple photos. So the value was in the product or the service. And then a brand deal is above and beyond that.

Interviewee 2:

Okay. So the way that my Instagram has come about is most of the s*** that I'm flexing on my Instagram is come about through freelance work. Okay, so I bank off the content. I don't bank off the like, which is why I don't really care if Instagram goes away because I can still make content for businesses to use on YouTube and stuff like that. And then I use getting into those situations to leverage for my own personal brand. So like Greece. Greece is a good example. Because everybody knows I went to Greece. It's on my Instagram, ok. I went to Greece to film parties for a party company. Now I didn't post any of those parties on my Instagram. I used that work opportunity to go travel Greece and do all of the other s*** that you saw on my Instagram. So I think that's where I'm very different to an influencer because I don't get paid for likes or any of that s***. So I couldn't care if it goes tomorrow. I just like the fact that people like this. So this is looking good right now.

Interviewer:

Okay. And Interviewee 1, would you say you're the same?

Interviewee 1:

Well, I don't do freelance work. For me…. like you're talking to, I think, some very mature Instagrammers.

Interviewer:

Yes. Don't worry. I know that.

Interviewee 1:

Like, we are very different from the majority of the kids doing the same thing. We're dealing with way more followers and yeah, different situations, different settings, in the sense that like he said, he doesn't care.

Interviewee 3:

I mean, we do care. Especially, like instant gratification, like likes, it means your photo did well, people like what you do and stuff. And I think we are mature enough to understand that this s*** can go at any time. Like a lot of other kids that do the same thing, even like models, swimsuit bikini models, for them Instagram is everything. And they spend the majority of their time making stories and polls and engaging with their audience and ask me this and ask me that. That is their life. And for us, it's a bit different in the sense that I don't see myself as an Instagrammer.

Interviewer:

Okay, what do you see yourself as?

Interviewee 3:

As a creator, an artist. So like, if another platform comes on, that I can pull my audience to, and I enjoy that. Like, for me, I've always wanted to be a YouTuber. That's where my passion is. Instagram allows me to share my life from YouTube on Instagram. And from audience, you're watching YouTube videos, especially what Instagram is for me. For other people, it could be the jobs. But for me, it's the sheer platform that I get to play around with, which is why I don't really care. Like my YouTube videos, for me, it's like my pride and joy, which is also another whole field. And nowadays it's crazy down there. Instagram allows me to be more free, I think, with what I post, with what I create, and allows me to engage more with my audience. Whereas like, obviously, on Youtube it's like, "That's not my best work." That's what I want to make money with one day. So I see how kids – well, how I see Youtube as like that's what I want to be, that's where I am. I see them having that same thing with

Instagram. So that's why when he says stuff, like, for me, that for us, that it doesn't really matter, we have other passions and stuff like that. But for some influencers, this is it.

Interviewee 2:

I also think that the big thing with us is that we have outside goals, which aren't associated with Instagram. If you chat to a lot of influencers, they've become so ingrained in Instagram that if Instagram goes away, they f***, because that's the only thing that they're doing. Whereas like, I'm very entrepreneurial, I want to build a business. And I will leverage my knowledge and my content creation skills and everything inside that business. But if I don't get 10,000 likes on a photo, it doesn't affect my paycheck, it doesn't matter. Whereas a lot of people are, like I said, they're screwed if they don't hit those numbers or everything like that.

Interviewee 3:

And also, influencers on Instagram, the ones that I do know….. It's the best life to have. Let me tell you that. It's amazing. You get to literally do whatever you want, whenever you want. And people love you for it. You literally get a lot. I mean, they literally like that your life isn't real, you know? Well, from what they see, from what you put out, they like that.

Interviewee 2:

Are you talking about other people? Or us?

Interviewee 3:

Other people. So like even my friends that I consider influencers that are massive, for them. Their life is just like my life. They have the same problems. Exact same bills to pay. Exact same things to worry about. Except they have 100,000 kids that are wanting to sleep outside their door to meet them. That gets you places. Yes. Whenever I think of major influencers, they're always looking for a way out, a way to do something that's there. I'm gonna go…this audience is cool. I'm gonna take them and do this. I want to try and use this to build this business. I wanna be an artist now and use this audience to do this because like, Instagram

life is a hard life to keep up. It's fact and no one can tell you different. Even doing nothing is hard on Instagram, just being that guy who does nothing – it's hard. It's either gonna reverse it, or ….

Interviewee 2:

Are we still on the like story? We're rambling on?

Interviewer:

No. This is perfect. The thing is we were touching on a lot of questions. Some interviews I have to use questions to prompt people, but then there's lots of times when I'm like, "Oh, they've answered that one."

Interviewee 3:

I think it's just interesting how Instagram makes people feel different.

Interviewee 2:

Just going back to what Interviewee 1 was saying about his friends who are big. Like, I think we both pretty much have first-hand experience of seeing the other side of Instagram fame.

And my experience with that, like, this interview turns to talking s*** on other instagramers I've traveled with a couple who are very, very big in the Italian Instagram space for probably four months last year. Yeah. So that's how I did majority of my traveling last year was I was a photographer for this Instagram. So she has like 800,000 followers and he has 200,000 or 400,000 I can't remember. Italian couple and crazy. I've watched this dude because obviously Nick….used to ride. I knew him from riding. And then I injured myself in mountain biking and he kind of transitioned to the more Bali lifestyle content creation vibe while I was injured, and I was picking up a camera. So I was like, this is sick. I can go from riding to being in Bali with a bunch of people in a pool. So I got more involved in that project. And I became a massive fan of his, and then he came out South Africa so I was, me and Bjorn, were all in his

DM like, yo, let's link up. Ended up meeting with him and I shot photos of whatever. Long story short, I ended up being like, F*** uni - I want to go travel and booked a one way flight to London and I was like, cool. I'm gonna make this work somehow. I sent him a DM - oh this can go on a whole 'nother tangent about the power of DMs.

Interviewee 3:

Yeah, that's why I love Instagram for them. I'm forever grateful. I think Instagram changed my life.

Interviewee 1:

I sent him a DM literally just saying, Yo, going to be in Europe, if you need help on any shoots. And he was like, cool. We're going to Italy and we're thinking of bringing on a photographer. Do you want to come to Italy for two weeks? So I was like, F*** yes. Like, of course. He booked me a flight. Travelled with them for two weeks. Sardinia, Italian Alps, went riding, went to Milan, like everything was insane. And I was just their photographer, and they paid for everything. I didn't get paid anything. But yeah. Then me and him started building a relationship. He wanted start some presets, I helped him build a lot of that, like I was just helping him wherever I could, just because I had so much respect for this dude and everything he'd done and he kind of was what brought me into content creation. Fast forward, we went on a trip to Egypt for a week and then Bali for a month. And their entire brand is how strong their relationship is. And they are like, couple goals. And in Italy it happened at least twice a day, we got stopped in the mall because someone wanted to take photos of them. Like that level. But the amount of fights that I witnessed, dude, I felt like I was a kid whose parents were getting divorced. Like, those two hate each other. But they built such a brand around each other. And that's their entire business. That's their entire income stream. They can't go public about it. But they fight like you can't believe every single night to the point I left Bali two weeks early, just because I hated being around them.

Interviewee 3:

Reality on Instagram. There's that side as well. It's definitely whatever you want it to be. It's what pays the bills, and that's what the kids like. And that's what your followers like . You've got to keep it up in terms of living though. Because you're addicted to this way of life. And if that means Yeah,

Interviewee 2:

I mean she used to edit her body in all of her photos. So I wasn't allowed to post photos on my Instagram without checking with her first because I'd give her my edited photos and then she'd edit her body and post. Okay. And if there was any difference because people were looking at my account now and they saw a difference between bodies she would have been outed. But then it got to the point that she's been doing it for so long, that it's ingrained into her subconscious that she actually used to look that good when she took those photos. So we'd be taking photos, and she'd be like, looking amazing. She's a beautiful girl. And then she looked at photos and she'd be like, I'm getting so fat now, I don't look that good. I'm like, What are you talking about? She pull up a photo from her own Instagram from six months ago that she's edited and say, no, look at this, look how skinny I was. Like I'm not joking with you. Remember that you edited that photo? You think that was actually you? It's all fake.

Interviewee 1:

That's so real. That's slapping you in the face. That's crazy.

Interviewee 2:

Yeah, and not to mention all the chicks that are getting eating disorders looking at her content being like, I don't want to be that skinny - when it's all fake and edited.

Interviewee 3:

There is good influence and there is bad influence. That's one of the bad influences - that people might think that a lot of what they see from their favourite influencer is actually real.

They look at their lives like, Oh, my life sucks. Someone's paid for this. Someone is putting blood, sweat and tears to make this guy's life look like this. A good example is Crea Tyler who literally sold a lifestyle and a dream life that someone else was paying for. He sold it as, this is what I've built, and this is a dream life. And I dropped out of college to do this. And I bet you 1000s of kids drop out of college just from seeing that video. And he sold it like that.

Interviewee 2:

But then again, there are two sides to it though, because I see it all the time in people who message me, so I'm always like, I'll always want to help people as much as I can in teaching s***. And wherever I can, I'll answer questions and stuff like that. And straight up, you get two types of followers, you get the ones that will look at your posts, and think oh my god, your life's so amazing. My life sucks. I'm gonna go eat a bowl of ice cream now. Or you get the guys that catch a snippet of your content. They're like, How is he doing this? And that sends their life in a whole different trajectory. Which is what happened to us. My life, hands down changed. And I got into content creation, based off the people I was watching two years ago. But you still get people who look at that. And they get sad because of it. They don't get motivated.

Interviewee 3:

Kind of like us. Like we have kids that messaged us like, yo, you're the reason I'm buying a camera today? And the reason that I'm doing this or I'm coming to Cape Town. It does have an effect. People like actually move. We actually move people.

Interviewee 2:

Case in point. I was at Rocking the Daisies and had a dude come up to me in the crowd and pulled me to the side sort of chatting to me. He's like, ja, I know you from Instagram, looks me dead in the eyes. He's like, you stopped me from committing suicide. He was like, I was in a really, really bad place. And just what you're doing so young has showed me that like, I can

actually make my own way in life. Like, you don't have a degree, you don't have any of that. All you have is a camera. And now he was actually filming Rocking the Daisies or something.

Interviewee 3:

And just like replying to that message to the kid, just making that connection can change both your lives. That's kind of what happened with me. That's why I said like, Instagram changed, DMs changed my life..

Interviewee 1:

The fact that you can contact anyone in the world at any time, no matter how big or small they are, and they can like respond is crazy. I think that influencers having that platform, it's cool that they can change kids like us's lives because for me, messaging made a big influencer. And then being able to meet them and like learn from them and like, grow from that, like changed the meaning for me. I think having that impact as an influencer is like dope and sending them hope. Like you wouldn't have gone on that trip to Egypt. You wouldn't have gone to Bali if he just didn't reach out.

Interviewee 2:

I mean, me and Interviewee 1 met through Instagram.

Interviewee 1:

This whole house came about through Instagram DMs.

Interviewee 3:

Even though it's not like messaging is new.

Interviewee 1:

It's just it's more the fact that it's so publicly accessible.

Interviewer:

It’s removed barriers.

Interviewee 3:

I have more in common with a kid my age in LA than I do with someone 10 years older than me in South Africa because we follow the same people and we like the same stuff. And we follow each other and that's what Instagram has done. And that's what influencers do as well. So I've got so much in common with my favourite influencer overseas, than I do with a celebrity here. So like when I meet him one day, or like, when I'm that big, I’ve been following in their footsteps almost.

Interviewer:

And then to kind of segue the conversation, I guess. It's backtracking a bit. But the one thing I wanted to just pose - in sort of “brand deals”/ “brand collaboration” - What do you guys find the most effective way of going about it is? Let's say it has it has been agreed upon that it's going to happen, whether there’s monetary value, or monetary compensation, or just product. What would you say is the best way of ensuring both you and the people working with you get the maximum value out it?

Interviewee 2:

You’re never gonna get that. With every brand deal, there's a conflict of interest, because the brand wants to get as much reach, and as many impressions as they can through you. But you want to give out as little as few. Because there's a big stigma with influencers about becoming a sellout. So if I went and did a brand deal with Pick n Pay, just because you mentioned them, earlier, and Pick ‘n Pay’s ideal scenario is for me to post 10 stories a day and just saturate my entire following with Pick ‘n Pay. But that would kill my brand and would kill my livelihood. With any brand deal there is always negotiation where the influencer wants to do the least posts possible. And the brand wants as many posts as possible.

Interviewee 3:

The more organic, the better. Straight up like, you don't want them giving you captions, which aren't you. You don't want to be very forceful, because I know for a fact I can pick it up straightaway. And I know my followers can pick it up as soon as it is happening. Whereas for me, I always vouch for making sure that whoever you're selling to is benefiting just as much as you are. At the end of the day, I'm not going to participate in something if you're selling it to me if I don't benefit. You can try and sell me…. Or you got these glasses from where ever and I don't like the glasses, and I don't like the glasses. Or oh, look, you get a voucher or you get this if you participate in this. If I'm dealing with a brand, it's like, Okay, cool. I've benefited too. Let me see what you actually doing. So like, brands just need a name like that, maximizing it. Three parties are in it: the audience, the creator and the brand. And that way everyone will win and it will kind of make sense.

Interviewer:

I'm playing Devil's advocate. Is there a scenario where everyone can win though? I think a lot of people would argue there isn't.

Interviewee 3:

I think if you look at David Dobrik, for example, it's a situation where pretty much everyone wins. A brand reaches out to David Dobrik that has nothing to do with his content and sells tickets. Right? They say look, we have this… for you to shout us out. And we're willing to give you 500,000 dollars. And he's like, that's a lot of money. How can I just use this in my video? So what he does is he'll take the money and buy his friend a car and he'll give someone in his videos, he gives his friend the money he would be getting in partnership with the brand. So the audience's like when they see that David's partnering up with the brand they know, oh, someone's getting gifted a car today, someone's getting tickets to something really cool, I'm going to carry on watching the video.

Interviewee 1:

This is heartwarming when someone gets given a Ferrari.

Interviewee 2:

It's become a thing on David's content that all of his videos where he gives away a car gets the most views. People enjoy seeing a random person being given a Ferrari. Obviously the person who's getting a Ferrari loves it. David's being paid and the brand is getting a ton of exposure.

Interviewee 1:

Ideally there's no real monetary value, but I mean, if you look at his audience, the majority is from like age 10 to 25. What 10 year old is going to go buy tickets?

Interviewee 2:

No, you know what he’s making money off? Not the brand deal. The merch that these kids are gonna buy.

Interviewee 1:

For everyone to win, the most ideal thing would be for the brand to be incorporated in your actual style. So say you are a skater and all your people who follow you just follow you because of that.

Interviewee 2:

This is what I was gonna say is that the brand deals that you're doing need to be very very in key with your audience. So in my situation, let's talk mountain bikes. It wouldn't make sense for me to go into a mountain bike brand deal here because my audience doesn't ride. But it makes sense with sponsorships; that's exactly how sponsorships work. Nobody complains that Kurt Sorge gets sponsored by Specialized, but people throw up a massive fuss when an influencer tries to sell you something you don't want.

Interviewee 1:

What I will never understand how Seat Geek are just promoting….?

Interviewee 3:

I think it's the smartest move any brand has done.

Interviewee 1:

Have you ever paid money towards Seat Geek?

Interviewee 3:

It doesn't matter. Advertising is not always about: Yes, you want to convert to sales. Yes, you want to get brand awareness.

Interviewee 1:

If it wasn't worth it, they wouldn't be here.

Interviewee 3:

I don't know any other ticket sellers like Seat Geeks in anything.

Interviewee 2:

You need to think about that kids become really really, really hardcore fan. They will use Seat Geek just because David owns it.

Interviewee 1:

If they're buying his merch the way they're buying his merch, they will use Seat Geek.

Interviewee 2:

If you're a David Dobrik fan, and you are buying a ticket to something and the two options are Seat Geek or a competitor, you're going to use Seat Geek just to support your creator.

Interviewee 1:

Who’s to say they're going to go to a stadium in the first place?

Interviewee 2:

Look, I'm done with David. If it wasn't working, would they still be doing it?

Interviewee 3:

The biggest thing is conversion. It depends what your brand wants, maybe they don't want sales. There’s exposure sales, and purely content and brand deals. So you want exposure you're going to a guy that has a large following and can reach a lot of people. Conversion - the engagement rate’s high, people buy stuff. Content, you come to people like me and Interviewee 1, purely content, we might not even have to post with whatever arrangement we got with you, you’re just paying us to use our skills. So for Seat Geek it might be just exposure.

Interviewer:

Can I just ask a question on that? And this is not necessarily related to anything we've been speaking about. How does it work with intellectual property and intellectual property rights around something like that? Do you have to agree to the terms of use for the photo before you create content for them? Do you know what I mean by that.

Interviewee 3:

I’ve never done that.

Interviewee 2:

I can say that because I just signed an NDA with a company. Obviously I can't speak about it. But basically, let me think about what I can say. I can say that I've given a company a load of my old footage. And now they are repurposing that for their marketing, but I'm not getting any name for it, but they are buying that footage from me.

Interviewer:

I suppose that's a more traditional route of stock footage. But like say, for example, it's a smaller company as well. And they're like, "bru, here's a shirt." Do you know what I mean?

Interviewee 2:

We shot one of these the other day, we shot two of these the other day.

Interviewer:

For sure. So now you've gone out and shot that. Technically, the content is yours. But they've given you the products. Does that mean they have some claim to it?

Interviewee 3:

I've been finessed in terms of like, the brand has been like, yo, we like your stuff. Can we send you a product? Let us know. They sent me the product and I hated it. It was s***. The quality….And then I hated the product. So I kind of did a story or two saying thank you, obviously, everyone check them out. But I wasn't wearing it out. And then a month went by and they contact me like, Yo, listen. We think that you haven't given us no value. So if you're not going to post a picture in the shirts or whatever, can you send the product back? And I was like, yo, like, What? Are you serious? You sent me the stuff, you said you liked my stuff. You said here's a T shirt. So like, stuff like that. And I've also been finessed in terms of - like - you just learn while you're doing this. Like there's no rulebook. The brands don't know because they're new to it. It's only been around for a couple years. Especially in South Africa, the brands don't know it. There's probably some old head in an office saying: we should use this guy. We should do this. So for instance, I did a collab with Office London, which is a shoe retailer brand, to make a video for them in their stores and stuff, to post on social media and stuff. I think it was just one store. That s*** went nationwide. They then use the video. And I didn't know they were going to do that, until I got videos from all my friends, yo, dude, you're in the store. And I was like wait, what?

Interviewer:

That's kind of what I was asking about.

Interviewee 3:

Or even them posting it and then not tagging me on the feed.

Interviewer:

There’s no reciprocation or acknowledgement.

Interviewee 2:

Like, as much good as it's done, there’s also a s***load of creatives who have been taken advantage of. We’ve all. You will get taken advantage of in this industry. Hands down.

Interviewee 1:

And you'll just learn by experience. But like, now we know from experience we can tell our peers, like dude, make sure you get 50% upfront for this. Or make sure that other agreement is sorted for this.

Interviewee 2:

Obviously, I'm not talking as much from like an influencer point of view, but dealing with social media marketing and social media content, just everything needs to be laid out upfront. There's no standard operating procedures to influence a post. I think every unique interaction has its own rules. But you need to get those sorted beforehand.

Interviewer:

So then everyone's on the same page. Expectations are clear.

Interviewee 3:

I think it's also that it’s a curse, and we’re lucky that we live in South Africa, whereas in the UK and England, if you're an influencer, or if you're an Instagrammer and you're getting

paid to do something, and you're getting compensated, you have to have hashtag ads or pay them, and those type of things, make rules, like we say, set up in the beginning because a brand can't post a sponsored video without giving out. Whereas here, it's like brands don't have to go through those procedures. Brands don't have to go through the same procedures as they do overseas.

Interviewer:

Do you think it's a good or a bad thing? Because a lot of people have disagreed with that legislation. Do you think we should see more or less regulation?

Interviewee 3:

I don't live in those countries, so it's hard to know how it benefits them and how it doesn't. I just know that that here it's good and bad. We don't have to necessarily tell our audience that this is sponsored, that this is a hashtag ad. We don't have to do that, which kind of like makes it more organic for us. But overseas, this hashtag ad is – well, you have to.

Interviewer:

Thanks. I think we've covered all my questions.

Appendix 3 – Code Book

For the sake of data processing, binary questions that entailed a 'yes' or 'no' answer were recorded in the coding sheet as either a '1' or a '0', respectively.

Part 1.1 - The Post

Part 1.1 aimed to code the use of the different affordances the influencers had available to them when posting to Instagram.

1. Is the content shared in the post, a Photo (1) or Video (0)?
2. Does the Instagrammer tag other users in the post (within the image and/or the caption)? Yes (1) or No (0)
3. Is the tagged person a: a) Brand; b) Influencer; c) Friend; d) Photographer?
4. Does the Instagrammer use Hashtags in the post caption? Yes (1) or No (0)
5. Does the Instagrammer include a Geo-tag on the post? Yes (1) or No (0)
6. If a Geotag is included, is it a) Tagging a real location or b) Tagging a fictional location?
7. Did the influencer reply to all comments on the post? Yes (1) or No (0)

Part 1.2 – Post Engagement

Part 1.2 aimed to assess the level of engagement the different posts received, in order to be able to distinguish posts with a higher level of engagement from posts with a lower level.

1. How many likes did the post receive at the time of data collection?
2. How many comments were there on the post at the time of data collection?
3. What was the Engagement ratio on the post (likes/number of followers)? An engagement ratio was designed that took the number of likes a post had, and divided it by the number of followers the Influencer had on their profile at the time of collection. This allowed for a ratio to be used when comparing engagement across

all of the influencers' posts, despite the fact that the influencers each had a different number of followers. While this is not necessarily an exhaustive metric of engagement, it did allow for systematic comparison of post engagement.

4. What was the Comment ratio on the post (Comments/Likes)? The comment ratio was developed by taking the overall number of comments on a post, and dividing it by the number of likes that post had received at the time of data collection. This aimed to be illustrative of a second layer of engagement, as the action required to like a post is not necessarily the same as the action required to comment on a post. Arguably, commenting requires more time and effort than simply liking a post.

Part 2 - Photographic Content

Part 2 simply aimed to engage with the content that was present within the posts from the perspective of the subjects present. The goal was to uncover the relationship between the level of branded content and non-branded content within the influencers overall profiles. The influencers who were included in the sample broadly fitted into the fashion and lifestyle industry, and therefore, included in photographic content, was their level of clothing worn/presented in the posts.

1. Is the Instagrammer present in the photo?
2. Is there a brand/product visible in the post?
3. Are they a) Fully Clothed b) Partially clothed c) in Underwear/swimming costume d) Nude
4. Does the photo appear candid or staged?

Part 3 - Identity Construction Redone

Part 3 aimed to looks at some of the ways in which identity had been constructed in the images by the influencers. To do this, theories of gender representation within mainstream media and advertising as outlined by Goffman (1979) and Gill (2009) were coded for in the

analysis. Literature expanding on the relevant questions has been included below the Part 3 questions, outlining Goffman (1979) and Gill's (2009) concepts.

1. Relative Size and functional ranking:
   1.1 Is there another person in the photo? Yes (1) or No (0)
   1.2 Are they of the opposite gender? Yes (1) or No (0)
   1.3 Is the influencers' relative size a) bigger than, b) smaller than, or c) equal to the other person's?
   1.4 Is the influencer the main executive role? Yes (1) or No (0)
2. How is touch present within the post?
   2.1 Are they lightly touching something for no apparent reason? Yes (1) or No (0)
   2.2 Are they touching themselves? Yes (1) or No (0)
3. Is the influencer in a pose of Ritualisation of Subordination? Yes (1) or No (0)
4. Is the influencer captured in a state of Licensed Withdrawal? Yes (1) or No (0)
5. Eroticisation of the Body: is the influencer's pose presenting their body in an erotic manner?

Part 3 Literature:

The first 4 concepts, including relative size, touch, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal were taken from a content analysis conducted by Goffman (1979) in which he analysed photo advertisements and categorised six main gender stereotypes that were present. The final concept of eroticisation of the body was taken from a study conducted by Gill (2009), where they identified practices within mainstream advertising that included the eroticisation of the male body, as well as explicit displays of women's sexual desires.

Relative Size

Goffman (1979), argued that one way in which concepts such as authority, power, rank, importance etc. are communicated in images, is through relative size of the subject present

within the image. Relative size refers to the size of the subjects in relation to one another. Goffman (1979) found that within advertisements, male superiority over their female counterparts was often depicted through the male having a greater girth and height. Goffman (1979), argued that within advertisements a subject size could often be correlated with their social weight.

Touch

Within Goffman's (1979) book, "Gender Advertisements", he identified a gender stereotype he referred to as 'feminine touch'. Feminine touch referred to the fact that Goffman found that women were more likely to be depicted in scenes that involve them touching something with no apparent functional end, than their male counterparts (Goffman, 1979). In many cases it was found that women were not only photographed touching objects, but were photographed touching themselves in some manner with no clear apparent end function significantly more frequently than their male peers (Goffman, 1979; Tortajada, Arauna and Martinez, 2013). Goffman (1979) argued that feminine touch consisted of giving off the effect that one is just barely touching a surface, which should be distinguished from other, more utilitarian, forms of touch, such as grasping or holding.

Ritualisation of subordination

Goffman (1979), observed that within mainstream media and advertising, women were more frequently depicted in positions where they were lying down, with folded limbs, crossed feet, or in childlike body positions, than men. Goffman (1979) argued that ritualisation of subordination contained the physical lowering of a subject through some form of prostration. Women were also more likely to be photographed in poses that contained them 'clowning', or playing around (Goffman, 1979). Goffman (1979) referred to this gender stereotype as the ritualization of subordination, and argued that mainstream media and advertising favour the ritualised subordination of women.

Licensed Withdrawal

Goffman (1979) refers to a gender stereotype within mainstream advertising where we witness the subject appearing to be mentally absent, as licensed withdrawal. Goffman (1979), found that women are more likely to be photographed in poses where they appear to be absorbed in thought, often appearing as if they are disoriented or distracted and in need of protection. Goffman (1979) observed that licensed withdrawal often appears to be combined with feminine touch, whereby women were photographed appearing to be mentally elsewhere, as they touch something they pay no attention to.

Eroticisation of the body

The concepts of eroticisation of the body builds off of Gill's (2009) work, in which they identify a series of representative practices within mainstream advertising which include the eroticisation of the male body, as well as the explicit display of women's sexual desires. Gill (2009) argues that these representational practices are often used by women as a self-presentation resource in which they display themselves not simply as sexual objects for the make gaze, but rather as an empowered sexual individual deploying their sexual powers for their own pleasure. Gill's (2009) eroticisation of the body implies a high level of agency on behalf of the subject within the photograph, whereby they are in control of the presentation of the sexualisation of their body.

Appendix 4 – Post Examples

Post Examples:

Below are 10 examples of images selected from the sample that aim to illustrate the application of the code book in coding the sample of images.

Ethics for including these images:

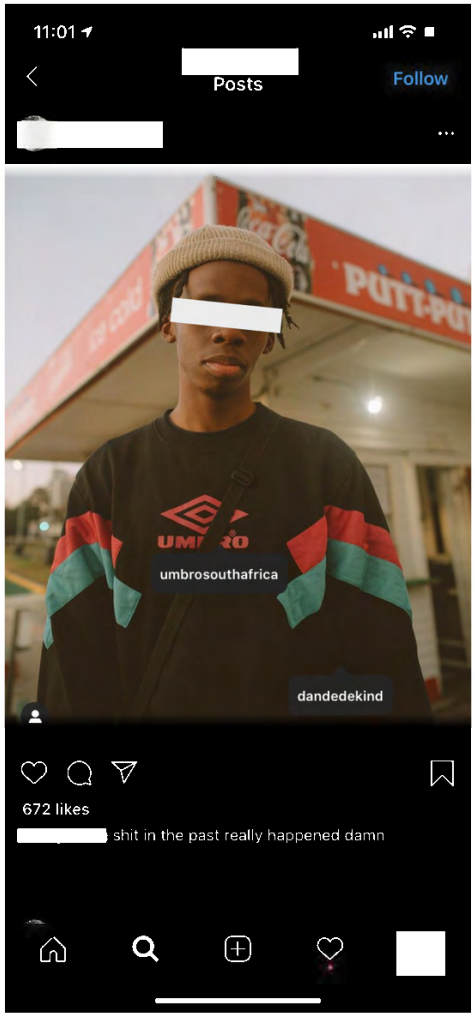
The ethics of the inclusion of 10 of the 200 images within the appendix of the final paper was considered on a few grounds. Given that social media research is a rapidly evolving field, there are no clear ethical frameworks for researchers entering the field to follow (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). As referenced within the ethical chapter of this paper, debates around whether or not one can classify online social media spaces as public or private are still highly contested. However, Townsend and Wallace (2016) put forward an argument regarding privacy, which does not center on definitions of whether or not social media is public or private, but rather seeks to engage with the practical applications of these online spaces. Townsend and Wallace (2016), argue the central question it comes down to is whether or not the social media user is able to reasonably expect their content to be viewed by a stranger. If the user can reasonably expect that their content could be viewed by a stranger, Townsend and Wallace (2016) would not consider that content or information to be private. On these grounds it was decided to include a small sample of image within the appendix as a reference for readers to understand and interrogate the coding process.

However, with that being said, there were a few significant qualifiers to the images included in order to alleviate any minor potential harm caused to influencers through the inclusion of their images within this index. Firstly, although the sample included micro-influencers with following of less than 3000 people, only influencers who had a following of greater than 10 000 people were included in the example below. This reinforces the argument used to justify the inclusion of the images, as individuals with more than a following of 10 000

can reasonably expect strangers to view their content, and therefore, their content should be considered published within the public domain. While this also hold true for influencers with a following of 3000, influencers with a following of 10 000 can have a greater expectation of strangers viewing their profiles. Secondly all influencers had their profiles set to public as of the date of submission of this paper. Finally, any and all information pertaining to the influencers' Instagram profiles has been blocked out, and in cases where their faces are clearly visible, there has been an effort to obscure them.

Male:

1.

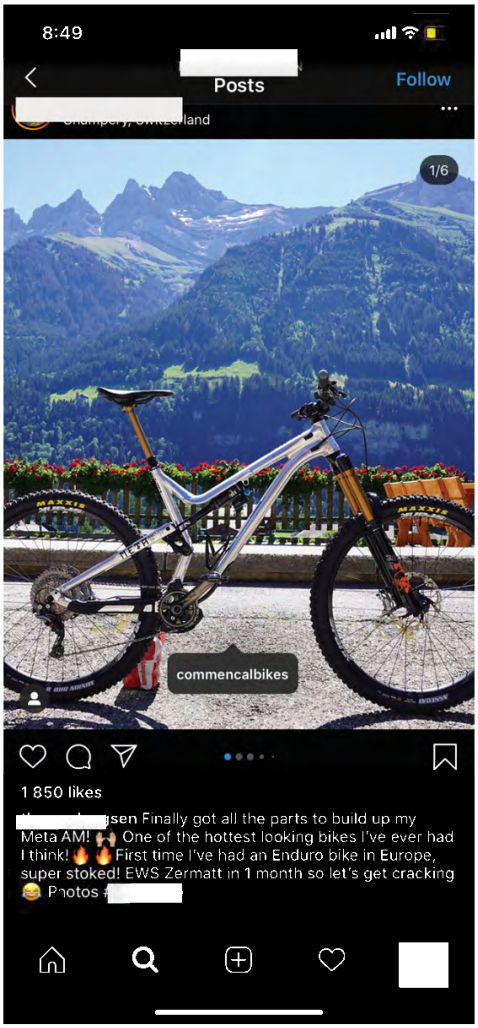


The above image features a male influencer wearing branded clothing. The influencer is facing the camera front on and looking directly into the lens. The clothing that the influencer is wearing has been tagged to the official brand Instagram account. This creates the impression within the minds of the viewer that there is some link or relationship between the influencer photographed above and the brand they are both wearing and have tagged. This is an example of an image where there is both the influencer and a brand present within the image.

2.

The above image consists of a male influencer who has taken a selfie in the mirror. There is no obvious form of product placement or branding visible, and there are no brands tagged. The focus of the image is his unclothed torso as he flexes his abdominal muscles in a show of eroticisation of the male body as defined by Gill (2009).

3.



The image above consists of a bicycle photographed in front of a picturesque mountain vista. The image aims to illustrate the role niche plays in content creation. This influencer is taking a photograph of the beautiful natural surroundings, however, due to codes and conventions of their niche, they include their bicycle in the foreground, as a means of making the content relevant to their audience. They have also tagged the bicycle brand indicating some type of relationship with the brand.

4.

The above image is of an influencer who appears to be engaged in some form of exercise. They have tagged the various brands they are clothed. This indicates some link or relationship with the brand, as well as contextualises the influencer's identity with the context of the tagged brand identities. We are aware of the fact that they are about to engage in some form of exercise due to their clothed appearance, as well as the connection the brands they have tagged have to sports and exercise.

5.

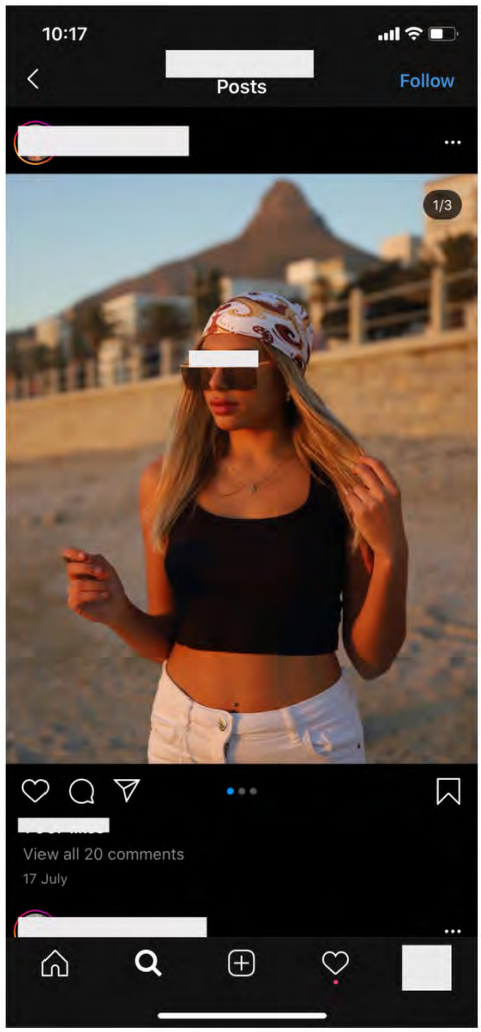
The above image 5 consists of a male influencer sitting beside a pool with their legs submerged. The influencer has tagged the brand of clothing they are wearing. This is the same influencer and brand that were present within image 1. Within their sample of 10 images, more than 2 images associated with this same brand were found.

Female:

1.

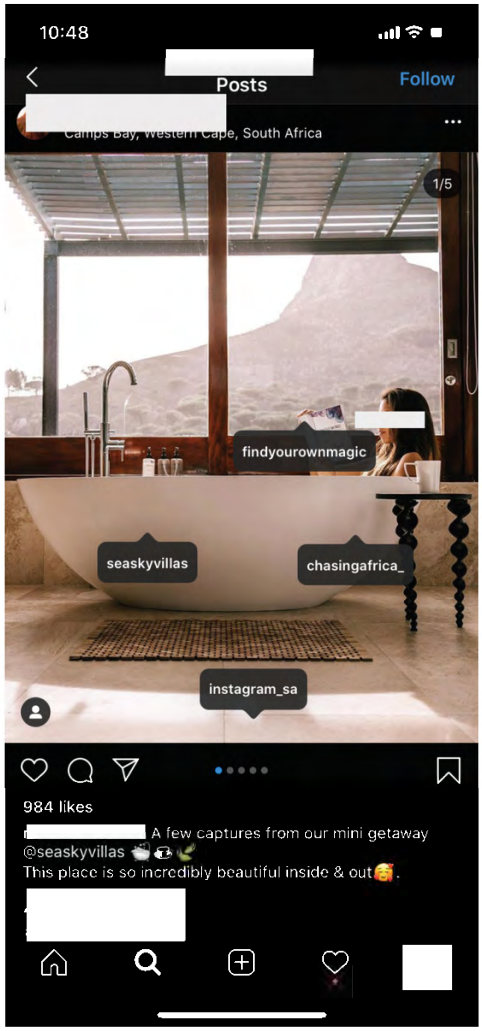
The above image posted by one of the female influencers consists of a type of photo collage, where the photographs contained in the collage are all of the influencer shown wearing underwear. They have tagged the underwear brand in question. These images within the post are examples of female agency in relation to the eroticization of the body, as defined by Gill (2009). The influencers act of tagging the brand implies some kind of relationship or link to the underwear brand photographed.

2.



The above image is of a female influencer looking out of frame and touching her hair. Although her eyes have been blocked out, we can see she is engaged in a state of licensed withdrawal, whereby, she gazes out of frame and appears to be mentally absent. She is also photographed lightly touching her hair, an example of Goffmans (1979) feminine touch. Both arms are also bent indicating some level of ritualized subordination as defined by Goffman (1979).

3.



The above image depicts a female influencer within a bathtub taking a bath. Although we cannot see how she might be dressed, the implication is present that she is nude, due to the fact that the image intends to imply that is has captured a moment whereby the subject is not aware that they are being photographed, and are engaging in a luxury bath. The influencer has tagged multiple brands associated with the space and activity they are engaging in. This creates a link between the influencers current activity and the brands tagged.

4.

The image above is of an influence posing on the floor in active wear. Although their face is blocked out, they are peering out of frame, as if absorbed in thoughts. They are sitting on the floor with bent limbs and a slightly tiled head. This image is an example of Goffman's (1979) concepts of Licensed withdrawal and the Ritualisation of Subordination.

5.

The image above is of a female influencer looking directly at the camera. Her pose is intentional, and she appears to be aware and present. Her head is tiled and her limbs are bent. This is once more an example of Goffman's concept of (1979) ritualization of subordination.

Appendix 5 – Data Collection

Part 1.1 – The Post

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.1.1	Q1.1.2	Q1.1.3	Q1.1.4	Q1.1.5	Q1.1.6	Q1.1.7
1	Female	1	0	1	a	0	0		1
		2	1	1	a	0	0		0
		3	1	1	a	1	0		0
		4	1	1	a	0	0		1
		5	0	1	a	1	0		1
		6	1	0		0	0		0
		7	1	1	a	0	0		1
		8	0	0		1	0		1
		9	1	1	a	0	0		0
		10	1	1	a	0	0		0
2	Female	1	0	0		0	1	1	0
		2	1	0		0	1	1	0
		3	1	0		1	1	1	0
		4	0	0		0	1	1	0
		5	1	0		0	1	1	0
		6	0	1	a	1	1	0	0
		7	1	0		0	1	1	0
		8	1	0		0	1	1	0
		9	0	0		0	1	1	0
		10	1	1	c	1	1	1	0
3	Male	1	0	1	a	0	0	0	1
		2	1	0		1	0		1
		3	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		4	1	1	c	0	1	0	1
		5	1	1	c	0	1	1	1
		6	1	0		0	0		1
		7	1	0		0	1	1	1
		8	0	0		0	0		1
		9	1	0		1	1	0	1
		10	1	1	c	1	1	1	1
4	Female	1	1	0		0	0	0	0
		2	1	0		0	0	0	0
		3	1	0		0	0	0	0
		4	1	0		0	0	0	0
		5	1	0		0	0	0	0
		6	1	0		0	0	0	0
		7	1	1	d	0	0	0	0
		8	1	0		0	0	0	0
		9	1	1	b	0	0	0	0
		10	1	0		0	0	0	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.1.1	Q1.1.2	Q1.1.3	Q1.1.4	Q1.1.5	Q1.1.6	Q1.1.7
5	Female	1	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		2	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		3	1	0		1	1	0	1
		4	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		5	1	0		1	1	1	1
		6	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		7	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		8	0	1	a	1	1	1	1
		9	1	0		1	1	1	1
		10	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
6	Male	1	1	1	a	1	0		0
		2	1	1	a	1	0		0
		3	1	1	a	1	0		0
		4	1	1	a	1	0		0
		5	1	1	d	1	0		0
		6	1	1	a	1	0		0
		7	1	1	a	1	0		0
		8	1	1	a	1	0		0
		9	1	1	a	1	0		0
		10	1	1	a	1	0		0
7	Male	1	1	1	a	0	0		0
		2	1	1	c	0	0		0
		3	1	1	a	0	0		0
		4	1	1	d	0	0		0
		5	1	1	a	0	0		0
		6	1	1	a	0	0		0
		7	1	1	a	0	1	1	0
		8	1	1	a	0	0		0
		9	1	1	a	0	0		0
		10	1	1	d	0	0		0
8	Male	1	1	0		0	1	1	0
		2	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
		3	1	1	b	0	1	1	1
		4	1	0		0	1	1	1
		5	1	1	b	0	1	1	1
		6	1	1	b	0	1	1	1
		7	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
		8	1	1	b	0	1	1	1
		9	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
		10	1	0		0	1	1	1

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.1.1	Q1.1.2	Q1.1.3	Q1.1.4	Q1.1.5	Q1.1.6	Q1.1.7
9	Female	1	1	1	a	0	1	1	0
		2	1	1	a	0	1	0	0
		3	1	0		0	1	1	0
		4	1	1	a	0	1	1	1
		5	0	1	a	0	1	0	1
		6	1	0		0	1	1	1
		7	1	1	a	0	1	0	1
		8	1	1	a	0	1	1	1
		9	1	1	a	0	1	0	0
		10	1	1	a	0	1	0	1
10	Female	1	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		2	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		3	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		4	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		5	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		6	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		7	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		8	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		9	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		10	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
11	Male	1	1	1	c	0	0		0
		2	1	1	c	0	0		0
		3	1	1	d	0	0		0
		4	1	1	c	0	0		0
		5	1	1	a	0	0		0
		6	1	0		0	1	1	1
		7	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
		8	1	1	c	0	1	1	0
		9	1	1	d	0	0		0
		10	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
12	Female	1	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		2	1	1	a	1	0		1
		3	1	1	a	1	0		1
		4	1	1	a	1	0		1
		5	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		6	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		7	0	0		1	0		1
		8	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		9	0	0		1	1	1	1
		10	1	1	a	1	1	1	1

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.1.1	Q1.1.2	Q1.1.3	Q1.1.4	Q1.1.5	Q1.1.6	Q1.1.7
13	Female	1	1	0		0	1	1	1
		2	1	0		0	0		0
		3	1	1	d	0	0		0
		4	1	1	a	0	0		0
		5	1	0		0	0		1
		6	1	0		0	1	1	0
		7	1	1	a	0	0		0
		8	1	0		0	0		0
		9	1	1	a	0	1	1	0
		10	1	1	a	0	1	1	0
14	Male	1	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		2	1	1	c	1	1	1	1
		3	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		4	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		5	1	0		1	1	0	1
		6	1	0		1	1	1	1
		7	0	1	a	1	1	0	1
		8	1	1	b	1	1	1	1
		9	1	0		1	1	0	1
		10	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
15	Female	1	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		2	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		3	1	1	d	1	1	1	1
		4	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		5	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		6	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		7	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		8	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		9	1	0		1	1	1	0
		10	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
16	Male	1	0	1	c	1	1	1	1
		2	1	1	a	1	0		1
		3	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		4	0	1	a	1	1	0	1
		5	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		6	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		7	1	1	a	1	1	0	1
		8	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		9	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		10	0	0		1	1	1	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.1.1	Q1.1.2	Q1.1.3	Q1.1.4	Q1.1.5	Q1.1.6	Q1.1.7
17	Male	1	0	1	a	1	1	1	1
		2	0	0		1	1	1	1
		3	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		4	0	0		1	1	1	1
		5	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		6	0	0		1	1	1	1
		7	0	0		1	1	0	1
		8	0	0		1	1	1	1
		9	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		10	0	0		1	1	1	1
18	Male	1	1	1	b	0	1	1	0
		2	0	1	b	0	0		0
		3	1	0		1	1	1	1
		4	0	1	a	1	1	1	1
		5	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		6	1	1	a	1	1	1	1
		7	1	0		0	0		1
		8	1	0		0	1	1	0
		9	0	1	a	1	1	1	1
		10	1	1	b	1	1	1	0
19	Male	1	0	0		0	0	0	0
		2	1	0		1	1	1	0
		3	0	1	a	0	1	1	0
		4	1	1	a	1	1	1	0
		5	1	1	a	0	1	1	0
		6	0	1	a	0	0		0
		7	0	1	a	0	1	0	0
		8	0	1	a	0	1	1	0
		9	0	1	d	0	1	0	0
		10	0	1	a	1	1	1	0
20	Female	1	1	0		0	0		1
		2	1	0		0	0		1
		3	1	1	a	1	0		1
		4	1	0		0	0		0
		5	1	0		0	0		1
		6	1	0		0	1	1	1
		7	1	1	b	0	0		1
		8	1	0		0	0		1
		9	1	0		0	0		1
		10	1	1	a	0	0		1

Part 1.2 – Engagement

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.2.1	Q1.2.2	Q1.2.3	Q1.2.4
1	Female	1	267	60	0,03	0,22
		2	686	0	0,09	0,00
		3	310	0	0,04	0,00
		4	531	89	0,07	0,17
		5	199	54	0,02	0,27
		6	276	21	0,03	0,08
		7	452	76	0,06	0,17
		8	175	42	0,02	0,24
		9	303	14	0,04	0,05
		10	154	21	0,02	0,14
2	Female	1	597	1	0,04	0,00
		2	765	8	0,06	0,01
		3	1012	11	0,07	0,01
		4	623	7	0,05	0,01
		5	1010	13	0,07	0,01
		6	1510	25	0,11	0,02
		7	1463	11	0,11	0,01
		8	1260	10	0,09	0,01
		9	717	5	0,05	0,01
		10	2026	70	0,15	0,03
3	Male	1	369	70	0,12	0,19
		2	663	16	0,22	0,02
		3	698	48	0,23	0,07
		4	486	5	0,16	0,01
		5	772	16	0,25	0,02
		6	437	14	0,14	0,03
		7	575	14	0,19	0,02
		8	727	222	0,24	0,31
		9	603	20	0,20	0,03
		10	556	16	0,18	0,03
4	Female	1	1175	8	0,11	0,01
		2	997	8	0,10	0,01
		3	906	13	0,09	0,01
		4	1072	20	0,10	0,02
		5	726	7	0,07	0,01
		6	1076	16	0,10	0,01
		7	1338	14	0,13	0,01
		8	1184	14	0,11	0,01
		9	1442	30	0,14	0,02
		10	1406	18	0,14	0,01

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.2.1	Q1.2.2	Q1.2.3	Q1.2.4
5	Female	1	186	44	0,03	0,24
		2	221	50	0,03	0,23
		3	244	64	0,04	0,26
		4	284	62	0,04	0,22
		5	261	50	0,04	0,19
		6	317	82	0,05	0,26
		7	320	76	0,05	0,24
		8	133	63	0,02	0,47
		9	352	47	0,05	0,13
		10	316	126	0,05	0,40
6	Male	1	776	8	0,04	0,01
		2	925	12	0,05	0,01
		3	1352	30	0,07	0,02
		4	754	8	0,04	0,01
		5	688	6	0,03	0,01
		6	712	10	0,04	0,01
		7	85	0	0,00	0,00
		8	334	4	0,02	0,01
		9	330	5	0,02	0,02
		10	919	12	0,05	0,01
7	Male	1	681	8	0,11	0,01
		2	701	19	0,11	0,03
		3	736	9	0,12	0,01
		4	934	13	0,15	0,01
		5	924	9	0,15	0,01
		6	708	15	0,11	0,02
		7	1104	19	0,18	0,02
		8	961	25	0,15	0,03
		9	1153	36	0,18	0,03
		10	1063	32	0,17	0,03
8	Male	1	429	10	0,16	0,02
		2	425	20	0,16	0,05
		3	515	24	0,19	0,05
		4	466	39	0,17	0,08
		5	321	13	0,12	0,04
		6	515	32	0,19	0,06
		7	498	7	0,18	0,01
		8	331	17	0,12	0,05
		9	285	3	0,10	0,01
		10	322	17	0,12	0,05

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.2.1	Q1.2.2	Q1.2.3	Q1.2.4
9	Female	1	1764	0	0,12	0,00
		2	2685	0	0,19	0,00
		3	2616	181	0,18	0,07
		4	1847	153	0,13	0,08
		5	1177	80	0,08	0,07
		6	2320	144	0,16	0,06
		7	1392	71	0,10	0,05
		8	2143	134	0,15	0,06
		9	1746	82	0,12	0,05
		10	1925	165	0,13	0,09
10	Female	1	353	18	0,03	0,05
		2	349	31	0,03	0,09
		3	336	14	0,03	0,04
		4	329	38	0,03	0,12
		5	340	40	0,03	0,12
		6	375	42	0,03	0,11
		7	331	23	0,03	0,07
		8	314	25	0,03	0,08
		9	629	40	0,05	0,06
		10	533	28	0,05	0,05
11	Male	1	664	5	0,06	0,01
		2	701	6	0,06	0,01
		3	849	16	0,08	0,02
		4	710	4	0,06	0,01
		5	545	5	0,05	0,01
		6	652	38	0,06	0,06
		7	540	3	0,05	0,01
		8	411	12	0,04	0,03
		9	842	15	0,08	0,02
		10	980	15	0,09	0,02
12	Female	1	742	61	0,06	0,08
		2	802	42	0,06	0,05
		3	720	35	0,05	0,05
		4	636	41	0,05	0,06
		5	988	51	0,08	0,05
		6	842	31	0,06	0,04
		7	128	33	0,01	0,26
		8	773	32	0,06	0,04
		9	755	43	0,06	0,06
		10	762	43	0,06	0,06

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.2.1	Q1.2.2	Q1.2.3	Q1.2.4
13	Female	1	1189	56	0,06	0,05
		2	157	3	0,01	0,02
		3	1242	30	0,07	0,02
		4	689	25	0,04	0,04
		5	128	2	0,01	0,02
		6	1115	33	0,06	0,03
		7	1305	33	0,07	0,03
		8	144	0	0,01	0,00
		9	1259	44	0,07	0,03
		10	1266	60	0,07	0,05
14	Male	1	728	69	0,07	0,09
		2	1000	13	0,09	0,01
		3	650	0	0,06	0,00
		4	739	35	0,07	0,05
		5	985	75	0,09	0,08
		6	724	40	0,07	0,06
		7	479	78	0,04	0,16
		8	580	32	0,05	0,06
		9	791	32	0,07	0,04
		10	755	28	0,07	0,04
15	Female	1	872	27	0,07	0,03
		2	938	40	0,08	0,04
		3	1196	44	0,10	0,04
		4	747	20	0,06	0,03
		5	680	27	0,06	0,04
		6	907	15	0,08	0,02
		7	663	34	0,06	0,05
		8	918	20	0,08	0,02
		9	458	14	0,04	0,03
		10	798	55	0,07	0,07
16	Male	1	1304	114	0,03	0,09
		2	1570	69	0,04	0,04
		3	2666	95	0,07	0,04
		4	2750	140	0,07	0,05
		5	3830	180	0,10	0,05
		6	2217	77	0,06	0,03
		7	2673	152	0,07	0,06
		8	3496	85	0,09	0,02
		9	4275	114	0,11	0,03
		10	1688	134	0,04	0,08

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q1.2.1	Q1.2.2	Q1.2.3	Q1.2.4
17	Male	1	2412	25	0,08	0,01
		2	5032	35	0,17	0,01
		3	2325	24	0,08	0,01
		4	1028	4	0,03	0,00
		5	3615	17	0,12	0,00
		6	6943	43	0,23	0,01
		7	3018	15	0,10	0,00
		8	1354	7	0,04	0,01
		9	1021	5	0,03	0,00
		10	2677	17	0,09	0,01
18	Male	1	777	7	0,05	0,01
		2	458	27	0,03	0,06
		3	1199	11	0,08	0,01
		4	570	34	0,04	0,06
		5	1053	30	0,07	0,03
		6	1070	32	0,07	0,03
		7	763	7	0,05	0,01
		8	1126	35	0,08	0,03
		9	662	38	0,05	0,06
		10	1177	6	0,08	0,01
19	Male	1	827	19	0,06	0,02
		2	2027	16	0,14	0,01
		3	857	20	0,06	0,02
		4	1853	30	0,13	0,02
		5	2468	34	0,17	0,01
		6	1996	109	0,14	0,05
		7	1152	14	0,08	0,01
		8	772	6	0,05	0,01
		9	1076	18	0,07	0,02
		10	1036	12	0,07	0,01
20	Female	1	997	81	0,11	0,08
		2	1052	79	0,12	0,08
		3	1204	69	0,14	0,06
		4	1313	108	0,15	0,08
		5	1213	98	0,14	0,08
		6	1080	103	0,12	0,10
		7	1302	97	0,15	0,07
		8	1345	121	0,16	0,09
		9	1112	87	0,13	0,08
		10	1107	88	0,13	0,08

Part 2 – Photographic Content

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4
1	Female	1	1	1	b	0
		2	1	1	a	1
		3	1	1	a	0
		4	1	1	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	0	a	0
		7	1	1	a	1
		8	1	0	a	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	1	a	1
2	Female	1	1	0	d	1
		2	1	0	e	0
		3	1	0	c	0
		4	1	0	a	0
		5	1	0	a	0
		6	1	1	c	0
		7	1	0	c	1
		8	1	0	a	0
		9	1	0	a	0
		10	1	0	d	0
3	Male	1	0	1	e	1
		2	1	0	b	0
		3	1	1	b	0
		4	1	0	a	0
		5	1	0	c	1
		6	1	0	a	1
		7	1	0	c	0
		8	1	0	c	1
		9	1	0	a	1
		10	1	0	a	1
4	Female	1	1	0	a	1
		2	1	0	b	1
		3	1	0	a	0
		4	1	0	b	1
		5	1	0	b	1
		6	1	0	b	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	1	0	b	0
		9	1	0	b	0
		10	1	0	a	1

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4
5	Female	1	1	1	a	0
		2	0	1	e	0
		3	1	0	a	1
		4	0	1	e	0
		5	0	0	e	0
		6	1	1	a	0
		7	1	1	a	1
		8	0	1	e	0
		9	1	0	d	0
		10	1	1	a	0
6	Male	1	1	0	a	0
		2	1	1	b	0
		3	1	1	b	0
		4	1	1	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	1	b	0
		7	0	1	e	0
		8	1	1	a	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	1	a	0
7	Male	1	1	1	a	0
		2	1	0	a	0
		3	1	1	a	0
		4	1	0	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	1	a	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	1	1	a	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	0	a	0
8	Male	1	1	0	a	0
		2	1	0	a	0
		3	1	0	a	0
		4	1	0	c	0
		5	1	0	a	1
		6	1	0	b	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	0	0	e	0
		9	1	0	a	1
		10	1	0	a	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4
9	Female	1	1	1	b	0
		2	1	1	c	0
		3	1	0	c	0
		4	1	1	b	0
		5	1	0	b	0
		6	1	0	b	0
		7	1	0	a	0
		8	1	1	b	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	1	a	0
10	Female	1	0	1	e	0
		2	1	1	c	1
		3	1	1	a	1
		4	1	1	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	1	a	1
		7	1	1	a	1
		8	1	1	a	1
		9	1	1	b	1
		10	1	1	b	0
11	Male	1	1	0	a	1
		2	1	0	b	1
		3	1	0	b	1
		4	1	0	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	0	a	1
		7	0	0	e	0
		8	1	0	a	0
		9	1	0	a	1
		10	1	0	a	1
12	Female	1	1	1	a	1
		2	1	1	a	0
		3	1	1	a	1
		4	1	1	e	0
		5	1	1	d	1
		6	1	1	b	0
		7	1	0	e	0
		8	0	1	e	0
		9	1	0	a	0
		10	1	1	a	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4
13	Female	1	1	0	a	0
		2	0	0	e	0
		3	1	1	b	0
		4	0	0	e	0
		5	1	0	b	0
		6	1	1	b	0
		7	0	0	e	0
		8	1	1	b	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	1	b	0
14	Male	1	1	1	b	1
		2	1	0	c	0
		3	1	1	a	1
		4	1	1	a	1
		5	1	0	b	0
		6	1	0	a	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	1	1	b	1
		9	1	0	a	0
		10	1	1	b	1
15	Female	1	1	1	b	1
		2	1	1	c	0
		3	1	1	c	0
		4	1	1	a	1
		5	1	1	b	1
		6	1	1	c	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	1	1	b	1
		9	1	0	a	0
		10	1	1	c	0
16	Male	1	1	0	c	0
		2	1	1	b	1
		3	1	1	b	1
		4	1	1	b	0
		5	1	1	c	0
		6	1	1	b	1
		7	1	1	a	1
		8	1	1	b	0
		9	1	1	c	0
		10	1	0	a	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q2.1	Q2.2	Q2.3	Q2.4
17	Male	1	1	1	a	0
		2	1	1	a	0
		3	1	1	a	0
		4	1	0	a	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	0	0	e	0
		7	1	0	a	0
		8	1	0	a	0
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	0	a	0
18	Male	1	0	0	e	1
		2	1	1	a	0
		3	1	0	a	1
		4	1	1	a	0
		5	1	1	a	1
		6	1	1	a	0
		7	1	0	a	0
		8	1	0	a	1
		9	1	1	a	0
		10	1	1	a	0
19	Male	1	0	0	e	0
		2	1	0	a	1
		3	0	0	e	0
		4	0	1	e	0
		5	1	1	a	0
		6	1	1	a	0
		7	1	1	a	0
		8	1	1	a	0
		9	1	0	a	0
		10	1	1	a	0
20	Female	1	1	0	a	0
		2	1	0	b	0
		3	1	1	c	0
		4	1	0	b	0
		5	1	0	c	0
		6	1	0	a	0
		7	1	0	c	0
		8	1	0	b	0
		9	1	0	c	0
		10	1	0	a	1

Part 3 – Identity Construction Redone

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q3.1.1	Q3.1.2	Q3.1.3	Q3.1.4	Q3.2.1	Q3.2.2	Q3.3	Q3.4	Q3.5
1	Female	1	0				1	1	1	0	1
		2	0				1	1	0	1	0
		3	0				0	0	0	1	1
		4	0				1	1	0	1	0
		5	0				1	1	1	1	1
		6	0				1	1	1	1	0
		7	0				1	1	1	0	0
		8	0				1	1	0	0	0
		9	0				1	1	1	1	1
		10	0				0	0	1	1	0
2	Female	1	0				1	1	1	1	1
		2	0				1	1	1	1	1
		3	0				0	0	0	0	1
		4	0				0	0	0	0	0
		5	0				0	0	1	1	1
		6	0				0	0	1	0	1
		7	0				1	1	1	0	1
		8	0				1	1	0	1	0
		9	0				0	0	0	1	0
		10	0				1	1	1	1	1
3	Male	1									
		2	0				0	0	1	1	1
		3	0				1	1	1	1	1
		4	1	0	b	1	0	0	0	0	0
		5	1	1	a	1	0	0	0	1	1
		6	0				1	1	0	1	0
		7	0				0	0	0	0	1
		8									
		9	0				1	1	0	1	0
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
4	Female	1	0				1	1	1	1	1
		2	0				0	0	1	1	0
		3	0				1	1	0	0	0
		4	0				1	1	0	1	1
		5	0				1	1	1	1	1
		6	0				1	1	1	1	1
		7	0				1	1	1	0	0
		8	0				0	0	1	0	1
		9	0				1	1	1	1	1
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q3.1.1	Q3.1.2	Q3.1.3	Q3.1.4	Q3.2.1	Q3.2.2	Q3.3	Q3.4	Q3.5
5	Female	1	0				1	1	0	0	0
		2	0				0				

		3	0				0	0	1	1	0
		4	0				0				
		5	0				0				
		6	0				1	1	0	0	0
		7	0				0	0	1	1	0
		8	0				0				
		9	0				0	0	0	0	1
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
6	Male	1	1	0	c	1	1	1	0	0	0
		2	1	0	c	1	0	0	0	0	1
		3	0				0	0	0	0	1
		4	1	1	a	1	0	0	0	0	0
		5	1	0	c	1	0	0	0	0	0
		6	1	0	c	1	1	1	1	0	1
		7									
		8	1	1	a	1	1	1	0	0	0
		9	0				1	1	1	1	0
		10	0				1	1	0	1	0
7	Male	1	0				0	0	0	0	0
		2	1	1	c	1	1	1	0	0	0
		3	0				0	0	0	1	0
		4	0				1	1	0	1	0
		5	1	1	c	1	0	0	0	0	0
		6	0				0	0	1	1	0
		7	1	1	c	1	0	0	0	0	0
		8	0				0	0	0	0	0
		9	0				0	0	0	0	0
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
8	Male	1	0				0	0	0	1	0
		2	0				1	1	1	1	0
		3	0				0	0	0	1	0
		4	0				0	0	0	0	1
		5	1	1	a	1	0	0	0	1	0
		6	0				1	1	0	0	1
		7	1	0	a	1	0	0	0	0	0
		8									
		9	0				0	0	0	0	0
		10	0				1	1	0	0	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q3.1.1	Q3.1.2	Q3.1.3	Q3.1.4	Q3.2.1	Q3.2.2	Q3.3	Q3.4	Q3.5
9	Female	1	0				1	1	1	1	1

		2	0				0	0	1	0	1
		3	0				1	1	1	1	1
		4	0				1	1	1	1	1
		5	1	0	c	1	0	0	0	0	1
		6	0				1	1	1	1	1
		7	0				1	1	1	1	1
		8	0				1	1	1	0	1
		9	0				1	1	1	0	0
		10	0				1	1	1	1	0
10	Female	1									
		2	0				1	1	1	1	1
		3	0				0	0	0	1	0
		4	0				1	1	1	0	0
		5	0				1	1	1	0	0
		6	0				0	0	1	1	0
		7	0				0	0	1	1	0
		8	0				0	0	1	1	0
		9	1	0	c	1	1	0	1	1	1
		10	0				1	1	1	1	0
11	Male	1	1	0	c	1	0	0	0	0	0
		2	1	0	c	1	0	0	0	1	0
		3	0				1	0	0	0	1
		4	0				0	0	0	1	0
		5	0				0	0	0	0	0
		6	0				0	0	0	1	0
		7									
		8	1	0	b	1	0	0	1	0	0
		9	0				1	1	0	1	0
		10	1	1	a	1	0	0	0	0	0
12	Female	1	0				1	0	1	0	0
		2	0				0	0	0	1	1
		3	1	1	c	0	1	0	0	0	0
		4	1	1	c	0	0	0	0	0	0
		5	0				1	0	1	1	1
		6	0				1	1	1	0	1
		7	1	1	b	0	1	0	1	0	1
		8									
		9	0				1	1	1	0	0
		10	0				1	1	1	1	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q3.1.1	Q3.1.2	Q3.1.3	Q3.1.4	Q3.2.1	Q3.2.2	Q3.3	Q3.4	Q3.5

13	Female	1	0				1	0	1	0	0
		2									
		3	0				1	1	1	1	1
		4	0				1	1	1	0	1
		5									
		6	0				1	1	1	1	1
		7	0				1	1	1	1	1
		8									
		9	0				1	1	1	1	1
		10	0				1	1	1	0	1
14	Male	1	0				1	0	0	0	1
		2	1	0	c	1	1	0	0	0	1
		3	1	1	c	1	0	0	0	0	0
		4	0				1	0	0	0	0
		5	0				1	0	0	0	1
		6	0				1	1	0	0	0
		7	0				0	0	0	0	0
		8	1	1	c	1	0	0	0	0	1
		9	0				1	0	0	0	0
		10	0				1	0	0	1	0
15	Female	1	0				1	1	1	1	1
		2	0				1	1	1	1	1
		3	0				1	1	1	1	1
		4	0				1	0	1	1	0
		5	0				1	1	0	1	1
		6	0				1	0	1	1	1
		7	0				1	1	1	1	0
		8	0				1	1	1	1	0
		9	0				1	1	0	1	0
		10	0				1	1	1	1	1
16	Male	1	0				0	0	0	1	1
		2	0				1	0	0	1	1
		3	0				0	0	0	0	1
		4	0				0	0	0	0	1
		5	0				0	0	0	0	1
		6	0				0	0	0	0	1
		7	0				1	1	0	1	0
		8	0				1	0	0	1	1
		9	0				0	0	0	0	1
		10	0				0	0	0	1	0

Participant Number	Gender	Photo Number	Q3.1.1	Q3.1.2	Q3.1.3	Q3.1.4	Q3.2.1	Q3.2.2	Q3.3	Q3.4	Q3.5
17	Male	1	0				0	0	0	0	0
		2	0				0	0	0	0	0
		3	1	1	c	1	1	0	0	0	0
		4	0				0	0	0	0	0
		5	0				0	0	0	0	0
		6	0				0	0	0	0	0
		7	0				0	0	0	0	0
		8	0				0	0	0	0	0
		9	0				0	0	0	0	0
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
18	Male	1									
		2	0				0	0	0	0	0
		3	0				0	0	0	1	0
		4	0				0	0	0	0	0
		5	0				0	0	0	0	0
		6	0				0	0	0	0	0
		7	0				1	1	0	1	0
		8	0				1	1	0	1	0
		9	0				0	0	0	0	0
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
19	Male	1	0				0	0	0	0	0
		2	0				0	0	0	0	0
		3									
		4									
		5	0				0	0	0	0	0
		6	0				0	0	0	0	0
		7	0				0	0	0	0	0
		8	0				0	0	0	0	0
		9	0				0	0	0	0	0
		10	0				0	0	0	0	0
20	Female	1	0				1	1	1	1	0
		2	0				1	1	1	1	1
		3	0				1	1	1	1	1
		4	0				1	1	1	1	1
		5	0				1	1	1	1	1
		6	0				0	0	0	1	0
		7	0				0	0	1	1	1
		8	0				0	0	1	1	1
		9	0				0	0	1	1	1
		10	0				1	1	1	1	1