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**THE INFLUENCER EXPERIENCE: IDENTITY PERFORMANCE,
COMMODIFICATION, AND AGENCY IN YOUTUBE INFLUENCERS**

By

Aysha M. Vear

B.A. University of Maine, 2017

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

December 2020

Advisory Committee:

Judith E. Rosenbaum, Department Chair and Associate Professor, Advisor

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THE INFLUENCER SPECTRUM: AGENCY IN FLUX IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

By Aysha Vear

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Judith E. Rosenbaum

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in Communication)
December 2020

In recent years, the social media usage of young adults has seen exponential growth. This growth, both in numbers of users and time spent on various platforms, creates a greater opportunity to market lifestyles, goods, and behaviors to the masses. Corporations have taken to allocating more time and attention to reach those masses and utilize the quickest means to that end. One example of these means is the influencer, i.e., social media users who monetize their online performances through practices of self-branding, or developing a public image used for commercial and capital gain (Abidin, 2016). In this study, I focus specifically on YouTube influencer. The decision for this was in part because of a lack of relevant research which investigates the platform; current literature focuses most heavily on other social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. In addition, the use of a video-sharing platform in the research allowed the researcher to observe the actual behavior of influencers, which is important to this study.

In order to explore the intersection between identity performance, commodification, and agency among YouTube influencers this study looked at agency, a person's ability to act and make meaning in the environment which they operate. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) is the theory that explores the role agency plays in societal processes: It looks at structures, the rules and resources available to people to operate in society, and systems, the repeated interaction of people operating within the structure.

Individuals online communicate and internalize their sense of self through interaction, and the uptake in networked communication has complicated the need for impression management. The size and variation among potential audiences online further complicates the expression of self. There exists a perceived blurring of the public and private sphere where users use public channels as if they were private (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This results in a blurring between the front stage, a concept of the dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1959) which relates identity performance as a stage where an actor is conscious of being observed and acts according to social conventions, and the backstage, or more private matters shared with select others.

Social media complicates the interactions that take place online; this is because its text, image, and video-based representation has accelerated communication among large and differing audiences and changed the nature of interactions between users. These platforms have led to a debate about what this means for our understanding of online agency. This is because social media platforms operate through technological affordances that influence how we view agency, and the understanding that social norms and rules also inform one's sense of agency online. This begs the question of just how one separates the rules which guide one's behavior (the structures) from their actual behavior (the system)? Online agency, because social interaction doesn't exist outside of the structure of platforms online, has proven to effectively collapse systems and

structures. Online structures also deeply inform culture, or the shared norms, values, and expectations among people living in a society (Deuze, 2006). Digital culture is considered the democratization of online behavior because people take part in the creation of culture online, but user labor is taken up and commodified by corporations. As algorithms, or “disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms” (Cotter, 2018, p. 896), increasingly shape user behavior their power over systems and ultimately the structure come into question. Because influencers are concerned with their visibility and the reach of their capital in the accrual of social and capital gain, they are more likely to choose to alter their identity performance as a result of algorithms constraining their behavior. Authenticity and entrepreneurship were found as core tenets among influencers in performing online (Cotter, 2018).

User activity on social media sites has impacted digital culture and resulted in the performance of labor online by users who use their emotions, lives, and subjectivity in service of the platforms (Maragh, 2016). Prior to the birth of Web 2.0., the creation of culture was heavily influenced by culture industries. Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944) concept of culture industries equates popular culture to a factory producing cultural goods that are taken up by the masses and in their popularization, people drive the consumption of those goods. The tendency to consume goods to convey different elements of one’s identity is also known as commodification, defined as a reflexive project of the self which “is intimately linked to the process of consumption” (Hearns, 2012, p. 25). This means that individuals use consumer goods as signals to convey their identity to others. Influencers thus face the question of which brands to partner with and what that means for their identity performance as influencer habits increasingly move toward the spectacle (Debord, 1984), or the idea that images replace reality and are more ‘real.’ To stand out

and retain audience attention influencers must, to some extent, move toward the spectacle. This tension between performance, identity, and the need for capital gain is the focus of this research.

This project explored YouTube influencer identity, commodification, and agency through a combination of in-depth, qualitative interviews and a content analysis of nine influencer YouTube videos. Social constructivism allows one to test structuration theory in reality and to render it operational; this is because it seeks to explore the role processes play in society which limit or enhances individual agency, and method. Because both work from an understanding that reality is socially constructed, they are perfectly paired. The data was analyzed from a social constructivist perspective, which privileges the co-creation of reality between researcher and participant, using grounded theory.

Results indicated that identity creation online for influencers affords them varying levels of agency. Agency was most constrained with respect to social expectations and enhanced when circumventing the rules of the structure. Influencers expressed enhanced agency when using the structures to effectively “cheat the system.” Further, influencer habits like the “vlog,” video blogs which take viewers through their entire day, result in the perceived blurring between the front stage, the part of yourself you show to others, and the backstage, which consists of more private matters. The final finding highlighted the complication of identity performance online: It revealed the tendency to commodify but the awareness that this was not attractive to audiences. Influencers acknowledged the need to make money sometimes being at odds with audience expectations (Interviewee 1), or those for whom they must perform.

This thesis provides a starting point for ongoing research which explores identity performance, commodification, and agency online. The key take-away from this research is that structuration theory no longer holds up in a Web 2.0 context. This research served as a case

study to better explore how agency works in an online setting. The findings indicate a necessity for future research to reconsider understandings of structures as these findings highlight the ability for structures to exist outside of knowledgeability. It also highlights a need for more research which explores how influencers with varying degrees of success navigate various other platforms. This research underlines the need to continually question the democratization of online activity: One is led to believe that influencers are in control of their activity online but this study's findings on agency reveal that this is instead multi-faceted and ever-changing.

DEDICATION

For my partners in crime: Matt and Chance. I wouldn't have been able to do anything of this were it not for your bad jokes, puppy snuggles, and laughs to keep me going.

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I am so thankful to my advisor, Dr. Judith Rosenbaum for her invaluable guidance, support, and patience through this entire journey. Thank you for talking through every concept, drawing out every diagram, challenging my every argument, and asking every question. Sharing this writing with you and having you as an advisor has contributed greatly to my growth as both a writer, a professional, and a friend. I will miss our first-thing-Friday-morning meetings.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In an era where trends come and go as quickly as they were introduced, the VSCO girl, defined as a “manic pixie ecowarrior” or an “annoying, white, hopeless romantic” (Spellings, 2019, para. 3), has established her presence. These girls are identified by their affiliation to saving the environment and an effortlessly “undone” look, replete with scrunchies, oversized t-shirts, Birkenstocks and a Hydro Flask (Urban Dictionary, 2019). In the last few months this aesthetic has become popular across the internet reaching platforms ranging from VSCO, to TikTok, to Instagram, and YouTube. What makes a VSCO girl and her rise to popularity unique is that she exists in both the real-world and the meme-world, but she is also an “aesthetic clique” (YPulse, 2019, para. 1), a community that helps young adults find themselves in a vast sea of group identities. But these cliques are not the same as the Valley Girls and Skater boys from generations before – as the prevalence of VSCO girls on VSCO, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube grows, so does the understanding that these aesthetics and group identities have the power to reach larger and larger numbers of individuals than ever before. Furthermore, these aesthetic cliques are not just yet another form of identity performance, their presence is also inexorably intertwined with the increasing commodification of people’s behavior in online spaces.

As users spend more time online, businesses and corporations increasingly rely on data created by users who continuously create and upload artifacts. In addition, users have been found to engage in a variety of like-seeking behaviors (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, & Giuletti, 2017), such as the popularity of the selfie, “follow-for-follow” practices, collaborations between users, and others, in the online presentation of their actual or ideal self. Such practices are

popularized, in part, by *influencers* i.e., a type of micro-celebrity with a large number of followers on social media who use the platforms to amass social capital and financial resources (Cotter, 2018). In addition, what could be argued to be the landmark items of a VSCO girl, i.e., her Vans, Birkenstocks, and Hydroflasks, are commodified artifacts that help users and influencers alike convey certain identity markers. As influencers popularize and promote products, ordinary users consume influencer's messages and, in an ideal situation, purchase these goods. This phenomenon highlights how influencers' identities, made up of products they are paid to endorse, are both an integral part of online corporate efforts to attract young adult consumers through the use of influencers; influencers are paid to endorse products online (Abidin, 2016; Cotter, 2018) and are an almost natural by-product of online behaviors and interactions. In this thesis, I aim to add to existing knowledge on agency, identity, and commodification online through an in-depth examination of YouTube influencers' choices, habits, and motivations in their online performances in an effort to investigate the tension between user agency and commodification.

The Modern Influencer

Influencers are defined as “people who built a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches” (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2018, p. 569). Influencers thus start out as ordinary Internet users who gain popularity among users and are looked to as opinion leaders, ultimately (or at least in some cases) gaining sponsorship. The rise of online influencers started with reality television in the 1980s (Gamson, 2011), where people with no special talents or achievements were filmed and made celebrities simply “out of nothing” (p. 1064). Reality television was created because of the rising costs of network program production and more competition for advertising revenue: Reality television was quicker,

cheaper, and it fascinated audiences. From the likes of *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Big Brother*, *The Real World*, and *Survivor*, viewers saw people just like them – interactions, relationships, and conflicts that look just like theirs – play out on the television screen. These shows are a testament to the ways in which ordinary people become celebrities who are “explicitly transformed, commodified, and marketed” (Gamson, 2011, p. 1064). Through reality television’s showing of ordinary people becoming ‘media people,’ it has thus transformed our understanding of the celebrity, which was previously understood as “a distinct social position marked by an exclusive and privileged distance to the mundane and ordinary” (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5236). Reality television has expanded the understanding of celebrity by bringing representations of the ordinary to consumers, and in this case, media interest in a person moves from the public space to the details of their private life, a process that can also be used to describe influencers.

Like reality television, the advent of the Internet extended the reach of ordinary people online. It has established a ‘do-it-yourself’ celebrity production process with lowered barriers to entry, and the collaborative and participatory nature of these sites allows anyone with a basic understanding the opportunity to ‘make it big.’ With a computer, a niche, entrepreneurial gumption, and an understanding of how to play the ‘visibility game’ (Cotter, 2018), the belief that almost anyone can eventually reach influencer status has become widely accepted.

Today, online performance by celebrities, micro-celebrities, and influencers look very similar. The micro-celebrity is the self-made star who is famous within a small circle of people and who share information about their everyday life (Gamson, 2011). This is a particular online performance defined as “the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention” (Jerslev, 2016, pg. 5239), characterized by viewing followers online as a fan base,

managing this group through various techniques, and constructing an image that can be consumed by others (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Influencers, defined as ordinary users who “have accrued a large number of followers on social media and use this social capital to gain access to financial resources” (Cotter, 2018, p. 896) are very similar to micro-celebrities but distinct. They are almost always micro-celebrities because they are self-made, famous, have fans, and narrate their daily lives, but unlike micro-celebrities, they are driven to monetize their online activity – this aspect is what turns them into an influencer. This thesis will define an influencer as ordinary internet users who have amassed a large following online through the textual and or visual narration of their lives, define themselves as an influencer, and leverage their followings for capital gain.

Influencers today are highly popular. In fact, 67% of marketing and communication professionals use influencers for content promotion and 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers report to relating to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020), highlighting the popularity of the group among businesses and corporations as well as followers. The reason that influencers today are so popular is people’s inherent tendency to cluster, which highlights the proclivity to form cliques, or groups online that are representative of groups of friends or acquaintances in which every member knows every other member (Kiss & Buchler, 2008). People are drawn to influencers through social attraction which is fed by similarity and shared interest among members – if they didn’t have anything in common, they wouldn’t cluster. Social media networks, because of their tendency to encourage this kind of clustering, are perfectly situated to allow the rise of otherwise ordinary users with a strong narrative and attractive identity to become the hub of such clusters. This is because social media’s affordances allow people to connect more easily, and the searchability online allows

users to seek out content and other users that are of interest to them. Fans, those who subscribe to influencer's channels or follow their social network pages, are particularly important to this process as influencers can go 'viral' overnight today through the active involvement of their followers or subscribers forwarding links, photos, and videos as well as liking, commenting, and reposting posts (Gamis, 2011). Attracting followers requires a strong emphasis on networking, engaging with the audience, and remaining relevant and attractive, with the idea that one's online identity will be consumed by others (Khamis, 2016).

In addition, influencer success is dependent on social media platforms' technological affordances. The focus of social media platforms on the visual, combined with audio- or text-based features, allow for different types of interaction. Different platforms have different affordances and each appeal to different kinds of users, which in turn appeals to different audiences (Abidin, 2016). For example: YouTube's affordances, because it's a video platform, appeal to the creation of videos, where Instagram is image-focused, and LinkedIn, a site for professional networking, encourages users to connect professionally and present themselves in that way. This requires influencers to craft their identity in such a way that resonates with an audience and then market themselves as a personal brand, defined as "impression management and more or less strategic practices for the purpose of projecting a desired impression which will be consumed and affected by external others" (Chen, 2013, p. 335). This development of a distinct and unique public image used for commercial or cultural capital gain (Khamis, 2016) creates a social identity that aims to gain attention and bring consumers in to interact with it. Previous studies have found that consumers interact with personalities "as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship" (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5754), mirroring that of real-world friendships, so consumption of these identities results in a social relation exchange, i.e., an

interaction that looks like a friendship, even though consumers and influencers don't interact outside of social media. This need to interact with followers through a real and genuine display of personality highlights the need for influencers to be relatable to their audiences. This is apparent in their online performances, where influencers are known to consciously alter them or produced ““filler” content wherein everyday routines of domestic life are shared with followers as a form of “calibrated amateurism”” (Abidin, 2017, p. 1). By showing their identity in a way that appears to be highly amateurish but is yet highly curated, they can craft their performance in a casual way that aims to build relationships.

What social media in particular can do for influencers' self-branding practices is allow these influencers, through platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, to package, perform, and sell their brand across multiple channels with different audiences. The 'brand' is furthered by the activities of the audience: As they like, share and comment on influencer content they solidify the performances carried out by influencers, with the potential for these users to spread influencer content within their *own* networks, exponentially furthering the brand's, or influencer's, reach. The popularity of this practice of a mass-communication of the self, carried out via self-branding by influencers online, allows businesses and corporations vying for attention and monetizing connectivity the ability to pay them for that work.

The YouTube Influencer

One such social media platform that enables influencers to gain a large following and popularity is YouTube, a video sharing site which hosts a range of content including but not limited to home movies, to video blogs or “vlogs,” music videos, short films, and clips from popular media (YouTube, 2018). The Pew Research Center Survey of social media use in 2018 found that 94% of Americans aged 18-24 years old use social media platform YouTube (Pew

Research, 2018). With a majority of users using YouTube, a study of popular videos on the site found that “seven-in-ten [...] videos mentioned other prominent social media platforms such as Instagram or Twitter in their description” (Kessel et. al, 2019, para. 15). This adds to the “star system of YouTube” where success or failure as an influencer on the platform is “immediately readable by the number of followers, likes, subscribers and so on” (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5240) across the internet. Registering success in this way speaks to new platforms which influencers capitalize on. This is evidenced by Instagram’s “Swipe-Up” feature, which allows YouTubers to directly link new videos through their Instagram story: With a quick swipe upward, followers are guided off of the influencer’s Instagram, onto their YouTube, and directly to the video. The co-mingling and cross-utilization of platforms evidence the ability for influencers to promote new videos and streamline content. This shows the vast amount of labor influencers must put into their online performances by performing across platforms and promoting themselves in different ways; popularity on one platform alone is not sufficient to guarantee success. This level of cross-platform performances works to further compound the importance of identity performance and the curation of self-image online, illuminating a need for more research in the field.

Creators on YouTube generate and upload videos to their so-called channel, a personalized landing page. The user’s landing page houses all of the content they have uploaded and is often organized into playlists. Playlists allow creators to group their content by specific categories or topics and allow users to play these related videos consecutively, making it easier for them to find and consume content for lengthy viewing sessions, increasing the monetary gain for the YouTube channel owner. YouTube also aids in this effort categorizing videos and publishing viewer responses and ratings. Consumers can watch any video on the site at random and not interact with the content at all, but they can also “subscribe” to a particular creator and

be notified whenever they post a new video. Similarly, some subscribers (or anyone with a YouTube account) can rate, tag, flag, comment, or like a video and its comments. Other features allow users to create their own playlists, subscribe to a particular YouTuber, and subscribe to a tag, similar to that of “following” a hashtag or specific topic online. In this sense, users can actively seek out and pay attention to the content of a specific producer.

Having a YouTube channel facilitates self-branding, which involves individuals developing a public image needed to make them money, that is pivotal to influencer identity (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016). In fact, a YouTube tutorial, created by YouTube’s “Creator Academy,” urges YouTubers to create “a set of unique characteristics that separates your channel from the rest” (YouTube, 2019), advising them to be consistent, and comparing their channel to a storefront, encouraging people to view themselves as a brand.

Some YouTube users have amassed large followings by creating videos about products they use or about their personal life and others have been known to be featured in offline media, including television and print (Burns, 2009), and in some cases, have crossed over into traditional media and reached some level of ‘celebrity’ status. This is true of eighteen-year-old YouTuber Emma Chamberlain, whose claim to fame is a viral YouTube video titled “We all owe the dollar store an apology.” (Schwartz, 2020). Today she boasts 8.5 million followers, huge numbers of YouTube views, a fashion partnership with Louis Vuitton, and a cover of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* (Schwartz, 2020). Influencers such as these show how easy it can be to reach worldwide audiences across platforms and now genres. In addition, YouTube’s program “YouTube Partners” gives creators a share of some of the advertising revenue, and some receive compensation through product placement or brand deals. For Chamberlain, whose views on each video averages multi-millions, this business is a lucrative one.

Influencers on YouTube can be separated into two broad categories: Those that are highly curated and those that are not. The former film videos as studio productions. In their videos, you won't see a lot of their house, or gain insight into their real-life. The latter engage in a documentation of their real, every-day life "as lived" (as much as it can be in recorded videos). Those influencers not highly curated are a part of a large online phenomenon which consists of video bloggers, or *vloggers*, who regularly post videos on their personal channels that fall into some niche category, such as make-up, food, or fashion. The most-watched vlogs consist of users filming themselves playing video games and provide commentary on what's happening; other highly viewed categories include comedy and satire, as well as beauty and style vlogs, where lifestyle influencers offer advice and share their everyday lives (Jerslev, 2016). These vlogs are rife with an "intimate and here-and-now way of addressing [...] followers" (p. 5234), which constantly creates the follower as fan, attempts to differentiate the influencer as authentic and true to themselves without caring about the size of the following, and lastly by "performing connectedness." This is similar to the practices of the microcelebrity, particularly the act of *celebrification*, "the general tendency to frame social encounters in mediagenic filters" (Jerslev, 2016, p. 52356). This means that influencers tend to treat and interact with their followers as if they are fans. This communication practice is inherent to vlogs, and important to the unique relationship between the follower and the branded and commodified YouTube influencer.

The presentation and curation of one's identity with the expectation that one's performance will be consumed by others, popularized by influencers, is in itself nothing new as identity performance has always centered on understanding of 'the other' (Tajfel, 1978), but YouTube has laid bare the mechanisms that underpin how we work with our ideas of others to present ourselves. When people see themselves in this way, as a subject that is part of someone

else's gaze, they model their performances to the expectations of others, and act as though the other is watching and or judging that performance. Goffman (1959) explores this through the dramaturgical approach, which compares front stage, one's public persona, and backstage, which consists of more private matters. So, while people have always had private spaces to be alone with or without the presence of others, now online the separation between these spaces is blurred. This tension is seen in the blurring of the boundaries between public and private within YouTube influencer's videos (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5240) as they increasingly show the more intimate details of their lived lives and present them for fans' consumption. Some examples of these intimate moments include sharing the details of highly private matters such as a mother's birth story (Interviewee 1), or the details of an eating disorder (Video 1), among others.

Influencers' represent themselves as ordinary people, and through the showing of their 'real' life in vlogs, they present elements of their backstage performance which allows them to gain a following and access to brand deals. To do this, influencers become commodified, which is defined as a reflexive project of the self which "is intimately linked to the process of consumption" (Hearn, 2012, p. 25). Influencers use commodities, as discussed earlier, to convey certain identity markers about them to audiences and they in turn make money from the brands which they promote. In this process, they "premise their accrual of influence on entrepreneurial gumption" (Cotter, 2018, p. 897); where anyone can be entrepreneurial and the responsibility for viability in making money lies on the individual and not businesses or corporations. This means that influencers, when considering themselves as a product or brand, draw on this entrepreneurial gumption to make their living. Collaborations between brands and influencers are often made through sponsored content: The influencer creates, publishes and shares a recommendation or testimonial about a product, often drawing traffic from their content to an affiliated link, and the

influencer is then paid for the posting. Research has shown that many of the users who consume influencer content are often annoyed and confused by the advertisements and the influencer's inclusion of such (Stubb & Nyström, 2019), creating a need for influencers to navigate the line between what's attractive and acceptable to followers and what will make them money. The annoyance and confusion on the follower's part further highlight the tension between personal, corporate, and fan expectations. Influencers in recent years have found other increasingly lucrative ways to connect and stay relevant with fans (Bloom 2019), including merchandise fulfillment, and the creation of the influencer's own product lines, books, and beauty lines as some examples of influencer business ventures. Modern social media, like YouTube, allows creators and users the ability to develop stronger bonds *because* of this personal branding which allows for a wide range of interests and social connections to exist, facilitating connection between and across an increasing number of users.

Ethics of the Modern Influencer

As evidenced by the rise and popularity of influencers, consumers have begun to increasingly use social media to source information on products (Stubb & Nyström, 2019, p. 109). However, when considering that influencers may intentionally or unintentionally promote unsafe or inaccurate information to consumers, this raises questions as to how ethical these practices are. The need to protect consumers from fraud and false advertising became painfully evident after the epic failure of the Fyre Festival (Kleinman, 2019). The disconnect between the advertising for the festival and the actual delivery (Eyal, 2017, para. 2) resulted in a 2017 class-action lawsuit by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). This led to the implementation of legal requirements for influencers to disclose any endorsements for products they present through social media (Federal Trade Commission, 2019, p. 2). In spite of the creation of these new FTC

rules, the guidelines are still ambiguous and lack policing, thus allowing brands and influencers to push the boundaries of what is allowed (Eyal, 2017).

YouTube's platform also boasts a wide audience of viewers ranging in age, and for this reason, in 2019 the FTC and New York's Attorney General announced their settlement with YouTube for violations of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act Rule or COPPA (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). COPPA requires content creators on the platform to treat their channel as though it is its own website or application outside of YouTube: When and if they collect personal information from a child, they must obtain parental consent and comply with the law's statutes. YouTube's own ad policies state that "creators and brands are responsible for understanding and fully complying with legal obligations to disclose paid promotion in their content" (YouTube Support, 2018). This is typically carried out through a disclosure of the nature of the sponsorship in the video description, and then within the video itself through text overlay and the accompaniment of the statement "This video is sponsored by (brand name.)" The guidelines of the FTC don't specifically define fines for violations of the disclosures, but in some cases, influencers must give up the money they received from their violations (Risch, 2015).

Popular Culture's Role in Creating the Spectacle

Discussion thus far has touched on the rise, popularity, and prevalence of influencers in today's consumer society from the perspective of group identities and marketing. However, influencers also play a central role in shaping a society's culture. Culture can be described as the sum of the behaviors, norms, and practices of its members. Swidler (1986) furthers this definition, noting that culture is "the social processes of sharing modes of behavior and outlook within a community" p. 273). Influencers do not exist in a vacuum: They inform and are

informed by culture. As influencers and social media alike become more popular among larger groups of people, they gain a larger role in shaping culture.

Culture was previously mostly informed by culture industries, i.e., corporations that worked to produce cultural goods which, through their consumption, create a passive society aimed at the consumption of these goods (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944). Audiences would create certain meanings and value judgments surrounding these ‘goods,’ popularize them and in doing so, drive consumption. In our social media driven and hyper-networked world culture industries such as these have lost some of their reach and impact since ordinary users are able to speak to the masses as much as the traditional media can. Today’s culture is greatly influenced by the content created on social media as users increasingly inhabit online spaces and draw cultural cues from these places. This means that individuals such as influencers have increasingly central roles in influencing culture, indicating a shift away from culture industries. This shift also highlights how media consumer priorities shift further into appearance, where having or attaining certain commodities or attributes related to them indicates some level of prestige or promise of social capital.

These developments point to contemporary culture’s move more toward the *spectacle*. Guy Debord (1977) defines spectacle as “a social relation among people, mediated by images” (p. 118), where images are seen as better and more appealing than reality, and thus become “real beings” (p. 118) and motivators for behavior. Social media in general, and YouTube in particular, through their dissemination of images that shape people’s views of the world, and the subsequent creation of identities centered on digitally mediated images, can thus be said to be part of this move toward culture as a spectacle. As influencers become increasingly relevant to

informing culture and thus people's view of the world, one could argue that instead of culture industries producing the spectacle, it's now individuals.

It might seem that this movement away from the culture industries and toward individual users shaping cultural movements is more democratic and empowering; after all, online users are free to be who they want to be on their own online channel. However, this is not entirely accurate either. Influencers' expressions could be argued to be limited by their need to make money, the demands of the companies who sponsor them, and the need to keep their audiences happy. At the same time, the argument could be made that influencers' (as well as others') behaviors are also shaped and limited by extant social norms. Norms are shared beliefs in a group regarding appropriate behavior, thinking and action, and social norms "are commonly social rules that function in relation to shared group identities" (Moncur, Orzech, & Neville, 2016, p. 126). In this sense, behavior is shaped and informed by expectations of how *others* believe the individual should act, because they see other group members as credible guides. This is tied up in the idea that not performing correctly, and not adhering to norms, can result in exclusion from one's social group. Because some level of social capital is involved in performing online, exemplified by likes, comments, subscribes, retweets, shares, and other forms of interaction, pressure to perform and measure up is created within the performance. This implies that perhaps the online identity performance is not as free and empowering as one might initially be led to believe.

When considering how powerful (or not) an individual is, one has to consider agency. Agency has been defined as "a system doing something by itself according to certain goals or norms within a specific environment" (Barandiaran et. al, 2009, p. 369). In social media this system refers to the body of users who act according to goals within the social media platform, which serves as the environment. This idea of individuals acting according to social norms

effectively captures the tension experienced by social media users, and especially influencers, to be both a unique, independent, and branded self that still meets the expectations and limitations of the environment in which they exist.

This master's thesis aims to add to existing knowledge on online agency, identity, and commodification through an in-depth examination of YouTube influencers' choices, habits, and motivations in the video production process. It is organized into a literature review, methods, analysis, and discussion. The literature review looks broadly at popular culture, the culture industry, and the effect which businesses and corporations have on commodifying audiences online. It will then discuss the ways in which influencers in general have popularized norms of behavior and ways of being online to maximize attention, thereby commodifying their lifestyles to acquire capital which in turn highlights the nature of the unique relationship between influencer and corporation. The literature review will also touch on structuration theory. Next, I discuss the study's methodology and research paradigm, followed by a discussion of the study's findings from interview data, ethnographic observation, and content analysis. In the conclusion, I will return to the main concepts of agency, commodification, identity performance, and culture, and explain how my findings contributed to the field's understanding of these terms from an influencer perspective.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agency and the Individual

As discussed in Chapter 1, this work will explore the tension between identity performance, commodification, and agency among YouTube influencers. Central to this investigation is the concept of agency, or people's ability to act and make meaning in relation to the environment in which they operate. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) is a theory which works to understand how people's choices are informed by their environment; it aims to define agency and explores the role that it plays in societal processes. As such, it looks at interaction between the individual, the social structures which they are a part of, and the way their choices (or acts of agency) impact the system. Structures are defined as the rules, resources, tasks, and norms, and systems, in contrast, are the "normalized social practices resulting from recursively reproduced actions between agents" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014, p. 9). The interaction between structure and system results in structuration: This occurs when individuals use structures that reinforce and maintain the system.

Structuration theory looks at the interplay between the environment and individual agency. In particular, it examines structures and the ways in which agents use these structures to choose how to act in a given context. Agency is exercised in the simple choice to act (Kirchberg, 2007): Agents know or believe a specific act will have a particular outcome, and they utilize their knowledge to achieve that outcome. This choice to act, however, does not exist outside the environment in which this choice was made. Agency thus needs to be understood as "the ability of individuals to shape their environments by reflecting, and adjusting, their own actions using the reactions of others as a mirror" (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 118). People's behaviors are recursive in

this sense, meaning that these activities are (re)created, altered, and reinforced through interaction, which in turn shapes the structures that inform future choices.

Central to this theory is *knowledgeability*, the knowledge of social conventions (Giddens, 1984, p. 26), which is essential to the patterning of social life. These forms of knowledge serve as a structure: Individuals use their available knowledge, informed in part by norms and values, to assess the context of the choice and draw upon it in their action (or choice to not act). The norms and knowledge people draw on are the product of both structures and individual determination: People choose how they behave, but the choices available to them are defined by the structures at hand. For example: If a person commented on one's YouTube video the influencer has the choice to ignore the comment, to reply back, or to "like" it; these are the socially accepted norms available to individuals online that define their choice, and the choice to ignore the comment is still an exercise of agency.

Agents exist within structures and cannot act outside of them, but they also reproduce the structure. This represents the *duality of structure* because "the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Because actors take part in the reflexive monitoring of their everyday activity, and because they consider their own conduct in relation to others, individuals actively reproduce, and thus (re)create the structures which define their behavior online. Because this research seeks to understand the interplay between agents online and the larger structures within which they exist, this understanding of structuration theory and its principles will serve as a thread throughout the rest of the chapter.

Identity as Social Performance

As inherently social beings, a person's ability to communicate and internalize one's sense of self is manifested through interaction. People have always experienced the need for impression management (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005), but with increasingly networked ways to communicate there is a greater and more complicated need for impression management (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This can be attributed to several reasons. First, the ability to manage the impression one gives off to others is challenged in online settings, where different elements of one's identity are on display simultaneously. In addition, online environments also allow users the ability to perform multiple, distinct identities for equally multiple and distinct audiences. Being able to perform a multiplicity of identities to a multiplicity of audiences is both an affordance, as it allows users forms of self-expression, and a complication: How do we perform, for who, and when? This phenomenon is highlighted by Marwick & boyd (2010) in their formulation of the *context collapse*, or the flattening of multiple audiences into one, that characterizes digital media. This allows users the ability to perform their identity in front of multiple audiences in one place when, normally, these audiences would exist in separate spaces. Affordances of the platforms, such as status updates and photo or wall posts which are visible to users' connections on the platforms, and sometimes appeal to only certain audiences, make it more difficult for users to keep audiences separate online. Sites often encourage one-to-many communication with sometimes invisible audiences (Vitak, 2012, p. 53), meaning that users are pushed to perform online as if they (the one) are speaking to their audience (the many), but because of the reach of online communications, and privacy settings, users don't always know just exactly who will view their performances. This makes the process of maintaining and managing different self-presentations more complex. For example, when considering updating

one's status, a person must consider if the information is not only suitable for their friends or acquaintances, but also for their boss, their mother, or anonymous viewers of their profile. This is further complicated by the perceived blurring of the public and private sphere that many social media users experience: Some scholars suggest that users use public channels as if they were private (Marwick & boyd, 2011), showing that even if users have specific audiences in mind for content online, they still distribute it to their entire network.

This blurring between the public and private sphere among social media users speaks to the separation and maintenance of certain elements of one's identity. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach (1959) contrasts the front stage, when an actor is conscious of being observed by an audience and acts according to social conventions, with the backstage, where individuals are removed from any audience, with the exception of a few trusted others, and thus feel that no performance is necessary. The backstage identity is made up of more private matters, shared with only a few people, if any; for example, mental health, family dynamics, or other personal information. In an online environment, separating these stages has become more difficult due to the context collapse discussed above. At the same time, social media platforms also offer users the ability to accentuate some features of their identity and conceal others depending on the audience they believe they're interacting with, allowing users to move between the backstage and the front stage in the same space. This dichotomy between the two stages illuminates the importance of the audience: One's mental conceptualization of the audience which they're speaking to in a specific communication is defined as the *imagined audience* (Markwick & boyd, 2010).

The concept of the imagined audience was created as an element in understanding identity performances on social media. Users "take cues from the social environment to imagine

the community” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 115), employing certain linguistic choices and portraying different elements of the self to present themselves appropriately to their conceptualization of a specific audience and its expectations. In this sense, users model their behavior on the expectations of others as well as general social norms by considering the expectations of others and acting accordingly. People evaluate themselves, develop their ideas of identity and their feelings of happiness or satisfaction (or the opposite) through comparison with others (Lee, 2014). Because of the onslaught of mediated images, selected, manipulated, and modified for mass appeal it can be said that modern users are surrounded by more desirable people and images and thus have a higher social comparison orientation, defined as “the extent to which individuals pay attention to and base their own behavior on the way others behave” (Lee, 2014, p. 255), than ever before.

A Return to Agency in Online Performances

Social media, with its combination of text, image, and video-based representation, has accelerated communication between people across sometimes large and differing audiences and have effectively changed the nature of interaction between individuals. In doing so, these platforms have also led to a debate about what this means for our understanding of online agency.

On the one hand, social media platforms operate through a host of technological affordances that influence how we view agency and that are important to recognize. Users operate within the affordances of the platforms, but at the same time, their repeated activity and interactions shape the routines surrounding platform usage, impacting the affordances that define the platform. The hashtag is a prime example of users’ habits becoming a defining affordance; Twitter didn’t intend for it to be used as a marker in a tweet, but once its popularity picked up,

the platform happily adapted. As these routine uses become widely accepted, they in fact become the affordances that shape and define these platforms, effectively becoming the structures that inform social media. In this way then, modern social media users are part of a feedback loop where they, through action, interaction, and a constant evaluation of both, can alter the structure in which they operate.

On the other hand, there are social norms and rules that must also be considered. Online knowledgeable is termed the social media habitus, or “the general tendency of people to reproduce certain patterns of action” (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013, p. 175). The habitus is a structure which is constructed by people’s interactions and in turn shapes itself – users reproduce certain patterns of action, or systems, and in doing so, create the parameters of the structure at hand. This reinforces the idea that the exercise of agency reproduces the very structures within which actors can choose to act and because these actions are socially bound, they limit the structures. Papacharissi and Easton (2013) elaborate on the ways which knowledgeable might inform people’s behaviors and highlight how they emerge from social contexts. As people share knowledge with other members of an online group, they exercise reflexivity, meaning they reflect on, interpret, and act upon the systems which constitute their activity, showing how the systems and structures that shape one’s behavior are informed by one’s agency can also limit one’s ability to act. At the same time, Kirshberg (2007) notes that an individual “perceives and evaluates his or her position in the field and actively improves his or her social situation” (p. 120) through mirroring others’ norms in their behavior. This means that individuals will model their behavior based on the expectations of others. It is this ability to evaluate one’s social position, coupled with the opportunity to act to improve it, that shows just one more way in which users can show their agency.

In enacting agency, users sometimes limit their own agency, showing the ways in which social interaction both creates and enforces agency for users. As users interact online, they share ways of acting and being: Certain practices gain meaning among community members that are comprised of structured associations and power relations, these are also known as systems. As such, social norms are the structures that inform these systems. When people are able to reflect on the structures that enable and conform their activity, they reproduce the structure but are able to also change the system. This means that there are predetermined structures that impose behavior and norms on individuals but that they can be altered by user behavior. It is instead the maintenance work, or impression management, and repair operations (Giddens, 1984) exercised by individuals to maintain a sense of security in one's life that impose behavior and norms on those individuals.

The interplay between and agent and the rules and resources available to them is highlighted in the tension between the micro- and macro-level structures that shape users' online experiences. Macro-level structures refer to social norms that are considered and guide one's actions, "compelling individuals to act according to societal-level considerations" (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 116), and micro-level structures deal with actions driven by rational considerations or an individual "consciously deciding about and governing his or her surroundings" (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 115). These structures, Kirchberg (2007) argues, result in role making, and individuals are thus secured in their roles through interaction. These daily, taken-for-granted routine actions that make up the system give users cues online which role they must take up in their performance; this is complicated, as discussed earlier, by the multiplicity and differences among audiences on social media. When applied to social media, it is clear how users draw on and imagine the routine interactions available to them for specific groups, drawing on the macro-level structures,

and act accordingly. In addition, some social media sites have policies that implicitly create norms and structures. Litt (2012) highlights the ways in which some sites' designs draw in certain audiences; LinkedIn might be for professional job-searching and networking with its own set of norms, while Twitter is more casual and subject to different norms.

In contrast, micro-level structures exist within the individual – they consist of the goals, motivations, social skills, and other characteristics a person possesses when performing online. These motivations make up some of the action in agency – users consider external norms and expectations of others alongside their own understanding of goals to be achieved, how to do so, and their own self-efficacy in performing, but also limit exactly how they *can* perform in a situation and this varies from user to user. This is captured by the idea that users vary in motivation and ability to monitor and adapt self-presentation (Litt, 2007); high self-monitors are motivated by external social cues while low self-monitors are less knowledgeable of social norms and are “likely to act based on internal dispositions and personal beliefs” (Litt, 2007, p. 338). It could be argued then that influencers, extremely learned in social norms inherent to online behavior, are high-self monitors. This idea that some users are highly motivated and that some are less so, as well as the appeal to either micro- or macro-level structures, indicate the importance of social interaction in operating online, and highlights the fact that the system, or social interaction, *can't* exist outside of the structure, the platform. In the case of YouTube, the platform is a structure which allows for a system to occur; if users didn't adhere to platform norms and thus no videos existed on the platform, there would be no interaction to recreate the system. This begs the question of just how one separates the rules which guide one's behavior (the structures) from their actual behavior (the system)? Can one claim that online agency,

because social interaction doesn't exist outside of the structure of platforms online, has proven to effectively collapse systems and structures?

Digital Culture and Identity

These types of structures outlined above speak, in large part, to culture, or the shared norms, values, practices, and expectations of the people living in a certain society (Deuze, 2006). Understanding how culture is created, maintained, and reproduced requires attention to the individual, the groups which they are a part of, and society as whole. Individuals will, in performing and interacting, share, and normalize modes of behavior which then make up popular culture, a type culture that is popularized through globalization (Cöteli, 2019, p. 2). The advent of the Internet and rapid uptake of mobile devices and computers has changed how people connect and share, thereby changing how culture is created and maintained, shifting from mass culture, the culture produced by mass industries for mass consumption, to digital culture (Çöteli, 2019).

Digital culture is defined by Deuze (2006) as “an emerging value system and set of expectations as particularly expressed in the activities of news and information media makers and users online” (p. 63). It is expressed in and created through the digital media forms, such as social media, that are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of individuals. Digital culture, like all other forms of culture, impacts how people see and interpret the world around them and with the technological affordances available people can now, more than ever, participate in the creation of this culture. Digital culture is constructed through participation, the idea that individuals are active agents in meaning making; remediation, that they adopt new media but can modify and change their own reality; and bricolage, that in borrowing and using different elements of old and new media people reflexively create their own version of reality (Deuze,

2006, p. 66). While digital culture is a more participatory form of culture there still exists a digital divide: Not all users have equal access to or knowledge of digital spaces and compatible devices, meaning that not all users can contribute equally.

An important element of people's activity online, and thus an essential part of the creation of digital culture, is identity performance. Most of what people do online can be seen as a form of identity performance which, when taken together, lead to the creation of a shared digital culture. Culture now in large part is conveyed through online content which is made up of user labor. When social media users use the various platforms to craft their own digital identities, the work that goes into crafting and maintaining it becomes a form of labor that, while beneficial to the user, is ultimately done in service of (and for) the platform. Maragh (2016) calls this *affective labor*, or "work that requires the inanimate parts of the body as production" (p. 352). This type of labor occurs when users use their emotions, lives, and subjectivity in service of the platform. It focuses on users as performing labor for capitalism which "acts as a service, a commodity in much the same way that a material product would" (Maragh, 2016, p. 356) and users are not necessarily aware of this. It is labor veiled as leisure time or entertainment and is thus not viewed as "work." This labor is also intensified and furthered by the density of audiences: Messages spread further and faster online, more so than they could before. It creates new stars who act as a guide to others' digital identities, and this is because instead of relying on communication professionals to tell stories, users are comfortable in telling and distributing them on their own (Deuze, 2006). This underlines the shift away from culture industries and a move toward individual users shaping culture. Technological affordances online are seen as the democratization of culture: This is because ordinary people, instead of corporations, are let in on the creation and popularization of attitudes, opinion, behavior, products and lifestyles, or culture.

Further, the increased use of mobile devices to access social media and create one's online presence has created a sense of easily accessible fame for everyone. Mobile devices have leveled the playing field online because they make users both producers and consumers, turning into what Çöteli calls broadcast media where users are able to have their own broadcast; they can more efficiently share information about themselves to a much larger audience than in any face-to-face setting, using a "technological infrastructure" where an "individual shares the mediatic public sphere with famous people" (2019, p. 3). Social media users see and interact with numerous others – some of whom may inspire them or serve as models for their behavior. The digitization of identities and the ability to interact with numerous others initiates the process of aspiration and copying (Çöteli, 2019, p. 10), especially because celebrities and social media stars exist on the platform among ordinary users, giving every user the chance (and tools) to become a self-made star. Users are led to believe that they can readily and easily become famous online with the right knowledge and skills, and, as such, corporations have an ever-growing pool of users to sell products and lifestyles to.

Platform affordances also can impact identities online. Social media affordances come in two forms: "warm affordances," those that allow individuals to connect and interact with one another, or the system, and "cool affordances," the "legal architecture that is laid down in a website's terms and conditions of use" (Trepte, 2015, p. 1), or the structure. This architecture refers not only to the terms and conditions of use, but is also structured by algorithms, or "disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms" (Cotter, 2018, p. 896). Users will work with the affordances to create an online identity performance that meets their needs. So, users who seek high visibility learn to perform within the terms of the algorithm as it rewards them with higher visibility and those who don't are penalized with lower visibility. This reward

and/or penalization comes into consideration when users, such as influencers, are concerned with the visibility and reach of their content in the accrual of social and monetary capital and could make the choice to, as a result of these algorithms, alter their identity performance. This begs the question of how different platform affordances impact influencer's agency online.

Cotter (2018) investigates the power of algorithms and platform affordances with respect to the ways in which influencers, or users using platforms for social or capital gain, interact with or seek to use algorithms in their favor. Her study finds that authenticity and entrepreneurship are core tenets in online participation. This is because self-branding demands feedback and social media platforms provide this feedback to users through 'metrics of engagement' (i.e., likes, comments, and followers). Higher metrics of engagement, effectively more likes, followers, and comments, means the user's messages have a further reach. Influencers thus look at these metrics of "warm affordances" which make up their online social system, and in doing so are able to gauge and validate their performances with respect to social status and social capital (Cotter, 2018, p. 897 and ultimately, the authenticity of their identity performance. Entrepreneurship, or the ability to monetize online, is also a factor in online identity performance. By benchmarking their performances through the accrual of social capital and then capitalizing on monetary capital, influencers clearly rely on algorithms, or 'cool affordances.' Because influencers seek high visibility online and rely on it to make a living, they must pay particular attention to warm affordances (the system) and cool affordances (the structure), and, in some cases, alter their identity performance. The navigation of identity performance in relation to algorithms, and influencers' need to have these operate in their favor to succeed online, reveals that agency in the construction of identity performance is impacted, if not constrained by the influencer's perception of audience expectations.

As found by Cotter (2018), authenticity is a core tenet online and is tied up in influencer identity performance. Scholars look at authenticity strategies employed by influencers and found that influencers use two types: Passionate authenticity, the sharing of anecdotal, use-based information, and transparent authenticity, the offering of fact-based information about products (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). The care and employment of different strategies to convey authenticity shows that users are motivated to be perceived as authentic or at least attractive by their followers and highlights the potential for the need to be authentic to impact influencer agency. Perceived audience perception here serves as a structure which informs the influencer's behavior because they choose to perform authentically to amass higher metrics, and this behavior, becoming normalized and reinforced through social interaction, recreate the structure. Algorithms, representing the structure, effectively 'learn' from these metrics online by categorizing and sharing information about users, which corporations then leverage to their benefit.

Understanding the Audience as a Commodity

Drawing on the concept of online metrics and rewards, the ability for users to amass these large followings for cultural and capital gain necessitates a shift in conceptualizing the audience as both commodity and workers (Cohen, 2013, p. 180). This labor online occurs, as discussed earlier, when users use their emotions, lives, and subjectivity in service of the platform and thus capitalism (Maragh, 2016). Users' demographics and data, as well as their activity and content, on social media are sold to advertisers and used to create algorithms to keep users as satisfied (and thus as active) as possible. As mentioned above, users' activity on social media sites has impacted what digital culture looks like, rendering it more digital and participatory (Cöteli, 2019, p. 2). While it may be more participatory, the labor of users online and the commodification of

online identities, evidenced through brand partnerships with influencers, has also made digital culture more commodified.

Prior to the birth of Web 2.0., the creation of culture was heavily influenced by culture industries. Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944) concept of culture industries equates popular culture to a factory producing cultural goods that are taken up by the masses and in their popularization, people drive the consumption of those goods. From this perspective, online performances should be thought of as a business; consumers, the participants in culture creation, are classified and organized as commodities. They are identified and organized in such a way for appeal to the largest audience and in turn, "the whole world passes through the filter of the culture industry" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 45). The tendency to consume goods to convey different elements of one's identity is also known as commodification, defined as a reflexive project of the self which "is intimately linked to the process of consumption" (Hearn, 2012, p. 25). This means that individuals use consumer goods as signals to convey their identity to others.

Today, online communication and social media have opened up the ability for users to take part in culture creation, ostensibly giving them more agency. As users upload photos, videos, and content to social media sites, as they comment on their friends' posts, and share links, they are indeed creating this culture, but they are also performing immaterial labor and creating value for the platforms, after all, these platforms exist by virtue of the content that people produce on them. The popularity and use of social media has generated a new commodity form, the *cybernetic commodity*, or "the information or feedback created from [users] actions and interactions online" (Cohen, 2013, p. 179). Users here are, as Maragh (2016) notes, "a specific kind of commodity in the process of media consumption *and* production" (p. 365). This means

that people both create and are the products of the advertisements that are sold to them. This relationship between immaterial labor and value reflects the success of social media sites: Individuals are working in their leisure time through connecting with others on social media and their leisure time becomes a form of labor. As corporations encroach upon these spaces, monetizing user information, with the sites joining in, the agency afforded in this labor is called into question.

Social media sites are what Cohen (2013) calls “sites of commodification, places where the spirit of access, interactivity, and participation is harnessed and capitalized on, creating surplus value for corporations” (p. 186). In an analysis of *Pranked*, an MTV reality television show featuring amateur videos from YouTube, Wiggins (2013) explicates the shift in the culture industry from creation to the curation of user-generated content, highlighting the show’s reuse of user-generated content to YouTube as a shift in our understanding of these industries. This shift is necessitated by the participation of users which thus allows regular people into the production of cultural goods. By performing and posting online, as outlined above, users are participating in, creating, and producing cultural goods that have the potential to be taken up commercially. This gives users agency in that they have the ability and freedom to create and post content online while at the same time allowing the culture to take advantage of them by using their content for commercial purposes without acknowledging the labor tied up in it (Schäfer, 2011, p. 77). This means that instead of creating the content culture industries can now draw on that which is created by users for their own uses – it is easier, cheaper, and quicker to do so.

In short, while users have greater control and agency in the cultural products that they consume, as corporations and industries increasingly encroach upon online spaces and offer capital to users like influencers, influencers face the question of who partner with, and what that

means for their identity performance. Because of this, the nature of their performance is inherently changed, and begs the question of what exactly these structures, in relation to the social system, mean for their agency. In addition, as influencers work alongside brands via sponsorships and partnerships on platforms, their voices become increasingly important in determining online structures.

Practices of the Modern Influencer

The importance of influencer voices in determining online structures is highlighted in marketing efforts today which privilege co-creation among companies and consumers, defining it as “a partnership, whereby companies and consumers collaborate for equal benefit” (Cohen, 2013, p. 180). Often times, this translates to a branded partnership between the company and an influencer, defined earlier as a person paid to promote and share testimonials about products on their personal social media pages (Abidin, 2016). These are users who not only have a large following, but who have gained credibility in the niche which they belong: Other social media users see these influencers as trustworthy and credible (Stubb, Nyström, & Colliander, 2018, p. 109). With more users on social networking platforms, and with an uptake in user data being collected and sold to companies, marketing trends point toward a rise in influencer marketing (Abidin, 2016). The growth in these partnerships points toward a need to better understand how influencers perform online as these performances make up the system in which users ultimately operate.

In order to attract followers and companies, influencers must maximize attention to their identity and their content online; they face the issue of needing to develop their follower base in an authentic way alongside the need to comply with algorithmic rules. Thus, the threat of not being seen online in effect “disciplines influencers into normalizing their behavior or risk

becoming invisible” (Cotter, 2018, p. 898). To amass large followings and social and capital gain influencers have taken up the practice of self-branding, which “involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital” (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016, p. 191). As a result, influencers treat themselves as one would a product: They create a distinct personality that appeals to a specific kind of follower and that sets them apart in a differentiated market (p. 192).

Self-branding in a social media environment is particularly interesting as this environment is characterized by the context collapse as well as a blurring between private and public spaces. In her study of hashtag use on Twitter, Page (2012) found that practices of self-branding were performed by users on a continuum from personal, to promotional, to professional uses. Hashtags were used by ordinary members wanting to make their online identity searchable, as well as to categorize their posts, while corporations and celebrities used them as a ‘commodity sign’ used for products or personalities. Self-branding comes from a desire for social or financial capital, but the influence and level of income associated with influencer’s self-commodification exists on a continuum. Some influencers align with a corporate identity, working as ambassadors for brands, others use and promote branded products in order to drive traffic to product sites or affiliate links, and others rely on their personae as the commodity (Page, 2012, p. 182). Because influencer status exists in varying degrees and influencers exist on platforms alongside celebrities, media stars, micro-celebrities, and ordinary people, it is important to understand the specific ways which influencers identify with their status and perform online accordingly, through practices such as self-branding.

This need to self-brand and stand out is in part due to the affordances of the platforms and as they change, influencers too must change to remain visible and relevant online. In her

ethnographic research Abidin (2016) considers the commercial value of the selfies that influencers post. Her findings illuminate the image enhancing and photo-editing influencers engaged into to edit one's photographs, a widely accepted practice online. This constant looking at one's (and others) edited self (or selves) is considered "gazing," where "influencers constitute their own ego through relating to the image of themselves being watched (Abidin, 2016, p. 12). This highlights a move toward highly curated posts and content that serve a distinct purpose. The ability to manipulate photos and in some cases enhance them highlight a drive toward perfection and, in effect, sometimes fake representations of reality. In addition, the speed and ease at which photos, perfectly stage and edited, cross users' feeds have grown exponentially with the uptake of image- and video-based social media platforms. These representations, consumed by others, in some cases produces aspiration and copying. Jin et. al (2018) found that the relatability of influencers and traditional celebrities were a factor in encouraging self-enhancement and inspiration: Those who felt the influencer or celebrities' achievements were attainable were more likely to enhance their own identities or inspired to imitate them. This indicates a tendency for users to aspire to, or want to copy, influencer performances. Practices like these highlight a move toward the spectacle (Debord, 1984), which posits that images online, like the feeds of influencers, have become not just replacements of reality but more 'real' than reality itself. When users see perfectly curated, edited, and manipulated photos they are led to believe that they are the 'true' reality, while they are the result of a lot of editing and practice. This begs the question of just where performances stop and authenticity starts – influencers seek to be relatable and thus authentic, but what does that mean in an online environment, especially considering the added pressures that influencers have to comply to brand image?

A Turn to the Spectacle

As influencers gain relevance and more followers, and more people pay attention to them it becomes evident that bigger voices in the attention economy have greater impact. To differentiate themselves, and to ensure financial and social capital success, practices such as those described above point to a trend by which behaviors such as photo manipulation, staging, and editing, skew users (particularly influences) toward spectacle. This means that images now mediate our social relations and thus how we see ourselves online (Debord, 1977). This term focuses on capitalist media, our advertising, television, film, and social media – those media that distract and encourage people to focus on mere appearance through capitalist gain. These mediated images come to be seen as better and more appealing than reality and become ‘real beings’ and motivators for behavior. Debord sees spectacle as altering the interactions between people, reducing them to commodity exchanges. Through the act of self-branding, influencers effectively narrate their lives with cultural meanings and images drawn on from popular culture and then connect these meanings and images to actual commodities. Influencers must, to some extent, make their lives a spectacle in order to make money off of their online performances: If their posts weren’t interesting or relevant to their audiences, they wouldn’t be successful. The spectacle in their hashtags, product placement, sponsored posts, brand deals, events, trips, and more. While these create *new* cultural products they also, for influencers, produce capital profit. Social media news feeds laden with photos and snapshots of people’s life, communicating their self-brand, present themselves as “images of various types of everyday selves” (Hearn, 2008, p. 208). As users become attuned to and aspire to copy these postings, they, in turn, become a generalizable model for profitable behavior online.

The ways in which influencers have begun to perform online are what some scholars call ambient marketing, or “recruiting spaces, bodies, and experience into rhetorical service” (Hearns, 2008, p. 210). This form of marketing works to bring together consumers and brands, highlighting the brand as enriching the experience of the users. This use of images to amass capital transforms everyday life into salable objects by which users can profit off of. Practices of self-branding, in promoting the spectacle, illuminate the cultural and surplus value that images, and videos create online. Standing out and retaining audience attention necessitates, in some ways, a move toward the spectacle for influencers. This tension between performance, identity, and the need for capital gain is further pronounced by these practices. Influencers want to seem real and relatable to their followers, but still must make a living off their online performances, which begs the question of how agentic users *can* be in this fast-paced, commodified, and consumer-centric social media landscape. These tensions influencers face between authenticity, identity, commodification and agency are the focus of this research. As such, the research questions are:

RQ1: How do influencers negotiate the interaction between identity performance and authenticity?

RQ2(a): How agentic do influencers believe themselves to be in performing online?

RQ2(b): Do their observed habits identity with those that they identity with/explain?

RQ3(a): To what extent do the observable habits of influencers reflect commodification?

RQ3(b): Do their observed habits align with those that they identify with and explain?

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Social Constructivism, Agency, Commodification, and the YouTube Influencer

Central to this thesis is structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), a theory which attempts to explain how agency works and does so by emphasizing the role of processes in society. As discussed in the previous chapter, agency is all about the ability to make choices that incorporate, reflect, and alter one's environment. Structures, or the rules and resources that define and enable society to function and that actors draw on to participate in society (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 50), are the outcomes of the choices human actors make and at the same time, influence these same choices. Subsequently, the argument could be made that actors exercise different levels of agency in enacting and behaving according to these choices. The present research seeks to understand the interplay between actor and structure, specifically looking at the ways which YouTube influencers understand and exercise their agency in an online setting while handling expectations from sponsors or partners. It attempts to understand how users utilize rules and resources available to them in order to perform online, and then how they make sense of their performance.

Research into online platforms and agency that relies on structuration theory is still very much in the early stages. Work reflecting on user agency in an online environment has remained either mainly theoretical (e.g., Kennedy & Moss, 2015; Yang, 2016) or has taken an exploratory approach (e.g., Billings et. al, 2015; Beckett, 2012; Damman & Henkens, 2017). This reflects on both the newness of research investigating agency on social media but also speaks to the larger issue of the difficulty of translating structuration theory and its various constructs into measurable concepts. Research to date thus reflects the gap that exists between structuration

theory and the empirical reality that could be used to assess this theory. In this next section I argue how the social constructivist paradigm, which forms the foundation of this research, can be used to bridge this gap as it perfectly matches the attempt of this thesis to understand how influencers understand their own performances and subsequent agency.

This social constructivist paradigm sees reality as a “social construction” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 49), a notion it extends to the research involved in understanding this reality, implying that researchers should take into consideration their own life experiences and methods when they seek to understand a phenomenon from the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2008). This paradigm proposes that “people construct both the studied phenomenon and the research process through their actions” (Hense & McFerran, 2015, p. 406). The social constructivist paradigm posits that people are both part of and constitute the society of which they are a part of in a continuous, two-way process. Subsequently, it emphasizes communication as the fundamental way by which people constitute their social world: Individuals use cultural forms of knowledge to engage with others and the world at large. Further, by focusing on subjective meanings the paradigm acknowledges that meanings “are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others” (Creswell, 2014, p. 37).

To better understand how people of a society make sense of the norms and values inherent to it, we use structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). This involves looking at rules, the “social dispositions, norms, and patterns of behavior” (Kirchberg, 2007, p. 118) which make it possible for people to operate within a structure. When individuals adhere to the rules, the performances of them are tied up in choice: Rules give people choices and they can choose to act within or outside of the rules, rendering them agentic in these decisions. Reflecting the social constructivist paradigm, structuration theory posits that as a part of a social environment, the

choices agents make both reflect and construct their reality. By adhering to social norms and rules, and allowing these to inform their choices, people also in turn reinforce the rules. When people choose to act differently, the structure is changed. Structuration theory centers on the push and pull between structures (rules and resources), and people's ability to act. Kirshberg (2007) highlights the importance of choice and reflexivity here: Individuals consciously consider and make decisions about how to behave within their environments. The choice reflects their agency, a notion also connected to the duality of structure, wherein the system is reinforced by people's reliance on the rules and resources that enable their actions (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, p.48), as discussed in the previous chapter. Subsequently, when examining structuration theory in an empirical context, the social constructivist paradigm is an excellent place to start since both theories consider the actions of individual actors, groups, structures, and systems concurrently.

With social constructivism forming the starting point of this research, and this particular paradigm arguing that one should seek to understand an experience or phenomenon from that of the participant, this research took a qualitative, people-centered, or interpretive, approach. People seek to understand the world in which they live, and they develop subjective understandings of their experiences (Creswell, 2014), which in turn influences how they view their world, and which leads to widely varying perceptions of reality. This variation in understanding aligns with the assumption of social constructivism that reality is a social construction. Subsequently, research using this paradigm focuses on the specific contexts which inform the participants experiences, i.e., the rules and resources that structure people's understanding and subsequent behaviors.

This approach is reflected in the methods used to answer my research questions. For this research, which aimed to understand the lived experiences of YouTube influencers, I utilized a

variety of qualitative methods to answer my research questions. First, interviews were conducted with three influencers, one of whom allowed the observation of the creation of a video. The choice to conduct interviews stemmed from the understanding that qualitative inquiry produces rich, in-depth data to work with. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that as a practice, social constructivism involves a “dialogical status of identity as a local, perpetually shifting accomplishment dependent upon collaboration and linguistic mediation” (p. 46). This understands identity as not fixed but ever-changing and negotiated through dialogue, further underlining the need for influencers to talk through their identity performance in an interview format.

Although rules are an integral part of how people operate in their social environment, individuals might not always be explicitly aware of the ways which they interact and perform these rules. Because rules serve as guides within a system to signal norms and accepted ways of acting *within* that system, and often are taken for granted, awareness of these rules is important to the exercise of agency. Interviews served as a place for people to reflect while not engaging with them, but it was equally important to observe the ways that people actually behave. This research sought to triangulate the interview data with an analysis of how influencers behave in an attempt to juxtapose what influencers talk about doing with what they actually do. In order to see the social regularities as they were performed, I collected data in two additional ways. First, I conducted an ethnographic observation of one of the interviewees recording a video for their YouTube channel. Second, I carried out a content analysis of nine YouTube videos sponsored by three brands. Analyzing content was a deliberate choice to see how actors acted as agents within the constraints of the structures that make up their activity online. Social constructivism’s focus on subjective meanings notes that they “are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed

through interaction with others” (Creswell, 2014, p. 37). While the influencers’ videos only showed one individual, namely the influencer, content analysis was an appropriate choice here as it recognizes that influencers’ online identity performance is not a solo performance but an interaction with their followers. This analysis thus seeks to understand how this performance is constituted through those interactions. This is because identity performance online is an imagined interaction that is constituted through the interaction of the imagined audience member. Doing this allowed the researcher to see both what influencers report or want to do and what they actually do – effectively capturing the tension that influencers face.

Interview Data

In order to assess the way that influencers interpret their experiences I conducted qualitative, in-depth interviews with three YouTube influencers to explore their specific choices throughout the video-production process, engagement with followers, partnerships with brands, and more elements related to their role as an influencer. The interviews allowed a rich interaction between researcher and participant, with both co-constructing the data. Participants were given the option to opt in or out of a portion of the interview that would consist of the observation of the creation of a video from start to finish. I chose to interview those who self-reported as influencers and, upon approval from the University of Maine IRB, began recruitment.

Data was collected from influencers recruited through my own personal, professional, and social media networks, as well as those of my faculty advisor. I started recruiting within my own personal network, reaching out to individuals who I knew were social media influencers and then asking for them to suggest others. When those outlets were exhausted, I searched influencers on YouTube. Due to spatial and temporal constraints associated with conducting this research in a relatively rural location, I utilized a broad approach to influencers, putting no

minimum or maximum on followers to participate in order to not exclude potential participants. Participants were contacted through email or Instagram direct message (Appendix A, 1.1), whichever was publicly available for contact. When a response was received and the influencer agreed, a second follow-up message was sent to determine an interview time and provide the informed consent form (Appendix B). My faculty advisor also contacted others within her network (Appendix A, 1.2 & 1.3) and after her initial contact I followed up with those individuals and provided the informed consent.

A total of three participants were interviewed via Skype, each interview began by obtaining informed consent and lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Audio files for each and their corresponding transcripts were anonymized and kept on a password-protected computer. Participants were able to opt in or out of the ethnographic observation portion of the interview in which the researcher observed the creation of a video. When they opted out, the researcher conducted a full interview without the observation (Appendix C, 2.4). If the participant chose to opt in the process consisted of a pre-interview (Appendix C, 2.2), the giving of the think-aloud method prompt (Appendix C, 2.1) the video observation process, and then a final, post-interview (Appendix C, 2.3). One participant agreed to participate in the observation. In this case, we conducted the pre-interview, I observed their creation of and performance for the video in its entirety, and then conducted a post-interview in which we addressed certain actions and moments that were observed.

Content Analysis Data

Social constructivism finds that theory is meant “to provide understandings of social processes that are both generated from and traceable back to people’s data” (Hense & McFerran, 2015, p. 409). This draws from the idea that people construct social processes through

interaction, and that these processes can be traced back to data people produce. Content analysis was chosen as an additional method to better understand the difference between influencer talk and action; I sought to augment what was reported in interview data with what was actually performed by influencers in videos. In selecting the influencer videos to be analyzed, I decided to work with videos sponsored by brands mentioned in the interview. In the interviews, two influencers mentioned a number of brands that they noticed others worked with, that they themselves worked with, or would like to work with. Focusing on the brand names mentioned by the influencers reflects social constructivism's aim to understand the specific contexts of meaning from their particular perspective. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that people "actively [use symbolic] resources to objectify, circulate, and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments" (p. 45). This means that influencers use resources to interpret and share meaning in their environment. Using the brand resources offered up by influencers as symbolic resources through which to interpret the influencer's environments thus allowed this research to focus on the creation of meaning from their perspective. Drawing from the brands mentioned, I selected three brands who did sponsored videos with influencers on YouTube: *Care/of*, a vitamin company, *HelloFresh*, a meal subscription service, and *FabFitFun*, a quarterly subscription box of beauty, fashion, wellness, and fitness products.

The videos I analyzed were all found among publicly available YouTube videos featuring one of the brands mentioned, created within the last two years (between 5/28/2019 and 2/18/2020). Videos were obtained through a simple search of the brand name on YouTube and were selected if they mentioned the brand in the description and in a disclaimer at the beginning of the video. These were criteria used to verify whether that brand was indeed paying for sponsorship of the video since they both signal a contract criterion for most brands and is a rule

of the platform (as explained by Interviewee 1 in their interview). I sought out influencer videos featuring sponsorship with each brand, and chose three videos for each brand, totaling nine videos. Aside from the brand, several other criteria influenced my selection of the videos. Influencers were selected based on the genre of the video, falling into the same categories of interviewees who participated in this project: lifestyle or “vlog,” makeup, or product-focused (Interviewee 1, 2, & 3) as they align with the products of each brand. In addition, each influencer in the videos was female and of the same age demographic (20-35 years old) as the interviewees. In addition, a variety of perspectives were sought out: The nine videos feature influencers ranging from smaller influencers (one subject of the content of the analysis had 4,089 video views) to larger influencers (another influencer of this case study had 380,231 video views). This selection was a conscious decision to obtain a wide range of performances by influencers who have varying levels of success on the platform. Obtaining data samples of a range of these videos was done in an effort to include multiple perspectives to highlight the nature of performance in a number of different scenarios. Seeking performances of a number of influencers that are similar to those that were interviewed helped contextualize the world views of the interviewees, as they theoretically operate online in similar ways and navigate the same tensions. Entire videos, as opposed to just the sponsor segments, were chosen as the unit of analysis in order to get detailed insight on the full performance from start to finish. The lengths of each video ranged anywhere between fifteen minutes to an hour and twenty minutes and were transcribed in their entirety. Each transcript was anonymized and kept on a password-protected computer. Links to each video used for the content analysis are available in the appendix (Appendix E, 4.1). Prior to the submission of this thesis, a final check of the YouTube videos used for the analysis revealed that

one of the videos used for the analysis had been deleted by the influencer, so the transcript of this video was included as well (Appendix E, 4.2.).

Analysis

The analysis for the interviews and content analysis was informed by grounded theory, a flexible method whose purpose is to “develop a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon from a specific set of data” (Corbin, 2016, p. 301). This method aligns itself well with social constructivism, which holds that people construct both the studied phenomenon and the research process through interaction. Social constructivism highlights the way in which theory is constructed from data, specifically through the analysis of patterns, themes, and categories found (Charmaz, 2008). The method is characterized by constant comparisons, asking of questions, and the process of writing memos. This allows emerging codes and themes to be revisited in the coding process and helps the researcher to continually ground the theory in the subject’s experience. This theory worked particularly well for the data collected in the study. The themes explored and the lines of questioning in the interviews asks participants to actively reflect upon and critique their experiences and performances as influencers, which provide a full understanding of their lived experiences. By using grounded theory, this fullness is not reduced but rather explored and connected to others’ experiences and existing theories, providing answers to the research questions.

One example of how the interviews served as a starting point for the content analysis was through *brand points*. Influencers in the interviews made mention of the importance of signaling to your followers that you were being paid, and this is conveyed through something called brand points. There is consensus online that “brands need to be explicit in telling influencers exactly how to properly disclose advertisements or brand/brand sponsored marketing material”

(MediaKix, 2020, para. 3). These marketing materials, often outlined in the contract, detail specific actions influencers must take, and these range from the length of time you need to mention for a video, specific bullet points you can mention about the brand/product to promote it, specific copy to incorporate, and more. Because of this, the researcher sought to observe these elements *in situ* through the content analysis. In addition, as the videos were transcribed the interviewer made observations with respect to the following video elements: voices, tone, interaction with self, interaction with product, audience mention, editing, lighting, and eye movement. These instances were noted and, in some cases, incorporated into the analysis.

These main themes of each of the research questions served as sensitizing concepts, or “interesting or challenging ideas to be further explored” (Beuving & de Vries, 2015, p. 60) to the analysis. These sensitizing concepts were agency, commodity, and identity. While each unit of analysis, albeit an interview or a video, was analyzed separately in an attempt to let the data speak for itself, the iterative process that characterizes grounded theory involved working between all of the codes assigned to both videos and interviews. This is where the social constructivist approach utilized in this study was particularly useful as it allowed the researcher to pay particular attention and care to the interviewee’s positionality, which in turn impacted the interpretation and inference of the content analysis. Findings from both the interviews and the content analysis will be synthesized to gain a better understanding of how influencers perceive and perform their identity, agency, and commodification online.

Findings

Following the outlined analysis process, a number of themes emerged from the data. As such, the following analysis will be separated into three sections – each which will address findings in regard to a specific research question theme. These include: (1) the distinction

between identity performance and authenticity; (2) the extent to which influencers believe themselves to be agentic in online performances, and how their observable habits in performances align with what's reported; and (3) the juxtaposition between the observable and reported habits of influencers that reflect commodification. Each section will cover content of these themes, looking at them will provide a basis to understand how agency and commodification manifests themselves, interact with each other, and influence influencer identity performances.

Connection Between Influencer Authenticity Online and their Identity Performance

When performing online, one important concept related to an individual's identity is the issue of authenticity, defined as "the unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprises" (Trepte & Reinecke, 2013, p. 95). The ever-changing nature of the online world complicates the understanding of identity and the authenticity of performance. This is due to an increased and more complicated understanding of impression management which is characterized by Marwick and boyd's (2010) context collapse of digital media by where multiple audiences are flattened into one. Users perform their identity in front of multiple audiences and thus have to figure out what this means for how they express their agency and authenticity. Some scholars note that there is little agreement on what authenticity means (Cotter, 2018) and how it is performed – especially online, because of these differing, distinct, and multiple audiences for which users perform. Influencers want to be authentic in their performances online but how do they view authenticity? The subthemes within this category consisted of performing real life as a part of identity performance, and the blending of authenticity strategies in the performance of the branded public identity.

Backstage Performance: The Showing of ‘Real’ Life. All social media content is ultimately a form of identity performance; people constantly create content that others will use to assess them. Influencers are an interesting category because, as mentioned before, they have to find the perfect balance between being authentic enough to appeal to their followers and still sell the product with which they are associated. This is further complicated by the understanding of the front stage, where an actor is conscious of being observed by an audience and acts according to social norms, and the backstage, where no performance is necessary and thus deemed as more ‘real’ (Goffman, 1959). How do influencers navigate this need to perform on the frontstage while still sharing enough of their backstage to appeal to their followers?

When deciding what to share, influencers reported on choosing to be transparent with their followers, sharing certain aspects of their life as a way to be authentic and show their followers their true self. Influencers used words like “real,” “honest,” “organic,” or “true” to describe their online performance and the decisions that went into its creation.

Similarly, another interviewee reported on the exercise of authenticity in the choice of brand sponsorships, noting:

If they reached out to me with something totally irrelevant to my life, I wouldn’t partner with them because I feel like it’s important to be trusted by people. That is how you build a following...because people trust you (Interviewee 2)

She highlights the important on the partnership being ‘relevant’ and making sense with her life. The mention of trust and a following is significant here in the fact that this type of authenticity is directly tied up in social expectations.

In another instance an interviewee reported on how she perceived her videos when she first started in comparison to now:

I think the vlogs are really true to my life and then I feel like I've become more real with it. Like when I first started, I wanted it to be perfect and very staged...and now I feel like I've become more real with it (Interviewee 2)

This influencer highlights her idea of what an influencer *should* be, evidenced by her use of the words “perfect” and “staged.” This highlights the attention she once paid to the front stage, or the stage where an actor is conscious of being observed by an audience. As time went on, she realized that she needed to be more real with her performance and now she believes that they are ‘truer’ to her real life. This type of performance in contrast to the appeal to the front stage, is part of the backstage where no performance is necessary, and she perceives this as more authentic to her real life.

Influencers didn't always share this sentiment, though. In one instance an interviewee didn't necessarily think of herself as an influencer from the start:

Well, I stayed consistent and true to myself and it just kind of grew. So, I didn't even consider myself an influencer until about...um, 2 years...a year and a half ago when I went part-time with my job, became a stay-at-home-mom, and really started focusing on it (Interviewee 1)

This influencer indicates that her success as an influencer (and what eventually led her to consider herself as an influencer) hinges on the authenticity of her performance. The importance of this concept was key to her online behavior. In this way, she “kind of grew” into being an influencer, with the growth attributed to her staying “true” to herself. Later on in the interview, she further underlines this point saying that she started her YouTube channel as a “creative outlet,” which underscores the essence of an influencer: To be real, honest, and true.

Strategies of Authenticity. At the same time, while influencers may claim to desire to be “true” and “honest,” they ultimately use the platform to amass large followings, promote products, or monetize their online activity. This was highlighted in an influencer’s disclosure about success on YouTube, noting:

The biggest thing is the more people that relate to your, the more people that are...that are gonna wanna follow you then, and obviously that’s how you get your larger following (Interviewee 1).

To get others to relate to you and to gain a large following, influencers tend to self-brand or craft a unique selling point or branded public identity (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016), which signals to followers which niche they fall into. The dichotomy of desiring to be true while still using the platform to amass followings or capital connects the two kinds of authenticity strategies that influencers can employ: Passionate and transparent authenticity (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). In order to partner with a brand, an influencer has to feel that it aligns with their identity performance; if the partnership makes sense it will be easy to create the identity performance. The tendency to navigate these types of strategies indicate a level of tension influencers face in wanting to be perceived as authentic but still needing to commodify themselves, or partner with brands, online. The analysis showed that influencers were very much aware of the importance of authenticity and employed this through the showing of ‘real’ elements of their life interwoven with brand points or sponsorship disclosures. Influencers attempted to signal signs of their identity in an effort to appeal to followers and be perceived as authentic.

In the content analysis, influencers were observed sharing backstage, or more private matters in their performance. In one instance, an influencer shared a video titled “*What I Eat in a*

Day” to provide tips, tricks, and to narrate a day of healthy eating for them. At the beginning of the video, she noted:

And you guys know [rubs right arm and looks off to right] if you’ve been watching for a while my history with eating and how I didn’t have the best relationship with food back when I was in lightweight rowing [fidgets on feet, moves to left]. Something I struggled with a lot and then when I was vegan or whatever...um so now what works best for me is to just eat [counts off on fingers] what I want, when I want, when I’m hungry (Video 1)

Here the influencer makes a choice to disclose some fairly personal information as part of the video performance. By doing so, she achieves several goals. First, she aligns herself with other health-related videos on YouTube, placing herself in that particular niche on the platform.

Second, and connected to passionate authenticity, she can be seen as relatable to former eating-disorder survivors or those struggling with one. This is further underlined by rubbing her arm, looking to the right, and fidgeting while talking: Showing her discomfort serves as a way to highlight the authenticity of the disclosure. By switching to the present tense, and signaling to what works best for her now, she brings attention back to the purpose of the sponsored video, moving firmly into the frontstage and switching seamlessly into transparent authenticity.

In another case, an interviewee highlighted the ways which being authentic can sometimes be uncomfortable by describing the trepidation she experienced surrounding a video she made titled “*How to Overcome Your Fear of Giving Birth:*”

I feel like I’m super careful, and anything to do with parenting...birth, being a mom, anything like that I just feel like you can’t be more vulnerable than sharing your opinion on those things on the internet (Interviewee 1)

Later on, she explains how she was “terrified to post” the video and attributes it to her belief that you are most vulnerable online sharing your opinions. This is juxtaposed by her extreme pride for the video: She was proud that the performance was so authentic. Further, this can be seen as letting her audience into the backstage. This is because things like birth and being afraid and nervous are generally more private matters, but she brings it forward as an appeal to her followers.

In other cases, influencers’ reports in the interviews signaled a tendency to rely on passionate authenticity, i.e., the sharing of anecdotes to show they are motivated by inner desire rather than a need to make money. One interviewee discussed her choice to brand and name her online identity:

My customers obviously know me as The Flip Flop Chef¹ because I wear flip flops no matter what the weather is like (Interviewee 3)

This influencer states she made the deliberate choice to name herself “The Flip Flop Chef” on all of her social media platforms, not necessarily because it will make her money but because it signals an authentic part of her identity that she wants to share with her followers. Subsequently, she made the decision to not only call herself The Flip Flop Chef, but she also opts to wear flip flops in each video, has flip flops in her logo featured on her Facebook page, and does a weekly giveaway, which she has dubbed “Flip Flop Friday.” In the interview, this influencer indicates she wears flip flops because she has a tendency to run hot and sweat, and the decision to call herself The Flip Flop Chef allows her to connect her personality with the company with which she partners, Pampered Chef. This deliberate choice shows an example of passionate authenticity, and the influencer’s tendency to offer anecdotal and use-based information.

¹ Respondent agreed to be identified, and IRB approval for identifying her was obtained

Although influencer's reports signaled the privileging of passionate authenticity in their performances, the content analysis showed a tendency to blur the two forms. The content analysis highlighted the tendency of influencers to toggle between transparent authenticity, in order to convey brand points, with passionate authenticity, to relate it back to themselves as a means to seem sincere. This was found in the video discussed above, as well as another influencer's video, where she vlogs her twenty-first birthday in Las Vegas but also includes acknowledgement of the *care/of* vitamin sponsorship. In the video, she moves seamlessly between discussing all the activities she and her family engaged in while in Las Vegas, and detailing the required sponsor points, including the quiz on your diet, lifestyle, and health needs, that they are high-quality products and where they are from, as well as the fact that there are vegan and vegetarian options. She details these as acts of transparent authenticity, but interestingly sprinkles in instances of passionate as well. In one example, she says:

If I'm in a rush [shows flat pack on the counter] I take it on the go with me, and my whole entire family takes care/of...we all love it. I highly recommend it, I cannot say enough amazing things about them...with that said, for 50% off your first care/of order go to takecareof.com and enter code "kenzie50" ["TakeCareOf.com/kenzie50" overlay on screen]. Again, for 50% off your first care/of order go to takecareof.com and enter code Kenzie50. So, now let's just get right into the video (Video 2)

Here we see the influencer sharing anecdotes about the products: She takes it on the go with her and her entire family loves it, instances of passionate authenticity used to justify the sponsorship; after all, it's something that she actually uses and loves. Further, she physically shows the pack of vitamins on her counter, solidifying the realness of her performance. It could be argued that this is done to convey the 'honesty' of her performance and provide a backstage feel for the more

frontstage-like performance of the brand points that follow. The “with that said” serves as a short announcement for the influencer to switch gears and offer up specific brand points: The sponsor’s website and her coupon code. This offering up of just the facts serves as a showing of transparent authenticity. The shift between the two kinds of authenticity is a form of code-switching common to influencers. In another video an influencer discusses brand points for the vitamins and code-switches, saying:

“I love that *care/of* cares about the environment...they know that I do too – and by the way thanks *care/of* for working with me on this video...because you know I’ve been taking your vitamins for years now” (Video 1).

The quick code-switching could be said is necessary for the influencer’s success: it shows the use of passionate authenticity to create a sense of ‘truth’ before using transparent authenticity to move to the ‘meat and potatoes’ of the influencer’s message, the brand points needed for the sponsorship.

Code-switching is a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to the tendency to alternate between two languages, dialects, or language varieties (Barnes, 2012, p. 247). As a language tool, this switching between varieties marks the distinction between an insider and an outsider (see for example Eckert & Rickford, 2002). Understandings of the switching, in this example social media users, depend on the knowledgeability and thus and meaning making of participants. Here the influencer switches between the two forms of authenticity to share how good the product is and how much she loves it without straight selling it. Influencers, as exemplified above, use passionate authenticity as a way to preface their selling so that it’s not perceived as actual selling. This can be seen as “setting the stage” and inviting followers in before launching into the brand points. Modern social media users are aware of these

sponsorships and partnerships, so the use of passionate authenticity is an appeal to that. These examples show the use of, and continual reference to, the branded identity as a way to convey passionate authenticity. Influencers privilege this as a means to show their authenticity to followers. In the same sense, they understand that in some cases, specifically in their performances with sponsors, they needed to convey transparent authenticity to fulfill sponsorship requirements. This highlighted the tension between wanting to convey authenticity in one way but needing to perform in a slightly different way in the presence of sponsorships. This tension is significant in the case of commodification, but more on that later.

Observing Agency in Online Performances

Agency is a central tenet of this study. Structuration theory posits that agency is the interaction between behavior and structure and is exercised in the choices that agents make (Giddens, 1984). The interviews and content analysis showed that choice is a central element to how influencers exercise their agency. Influencers reported experiencing an enhanced sense of agency when it came to their ability to adapt platform affordances to their needs within the structure that defined the platform, and most often reported that their experience of agency was limited by social practices, or the influencer's perceived audience expectations. Interestingly, influencers' agency appeared minimized when discussing FTC or platform guidelines and rules.

Structures Working on Influencers Through Audience Perceptions. As discussed earlier, digital media has complicated the role of the audience because of the context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Social media users today take cues from their social network to conceptualize their imagined audiences and use that to portray different elements of self to others; in the interviews, various respondents mentioned their need to appeal to their followers. In some cases, considering this imagined audience and its expectations affected the way an influencer chose to

perform, thus impacting their agency. In one video analyzed for this study, the influencer shares a clip of her dancing and making Tik Tok videos and later on in the video, she reflects:

“[It’s] the type of outlet where I can actually express my humor side, you know? Not like when I’m vlogging [gestures hand toward camera], and, I don’t know, sometimes it’s hard and that’s something my friends always say to me like, “[Mary] why don’t you show this funny side of you in your vlogs?” For some reason, when I turn on the camera I can’t...[touches necklace] I don’t know, in the moment when I’m saying things I just feel like it would be so forced [gestures with fingers] and I don’t want to be forced so yeah”

(Video 4)

This quote speaks to the decisions made by influencers in their performances for their followers and how these choices reflect and impact their identity performances as influencers. The influencer indicates the need to be authentic, underlined by the gesture with her fingers when she refers to it as “forced” to enunciate the word, while also touching on the complexities of what being authentic means. The participant admits to not showing the humorous side of her identity out of a concern of appearing “forced” and unnatural. While she doesn’t address the reason behind this feeling, it is clear that she feels that she “can’t” express her entire self when performing as an influencer, and in not being entirely “real,” she has, in effect, constrained her performance. The influencer’s agency is constrained by her perception of what is expected of her and affected it so much so that she makes the choice to not include her funny, humorous moments but sticks to a more ‘serious’ identity performance.

In other cases, influencers added to their performance to appease their perception of audience expectations and social norms. One interviewee discussed this addition to the performance when she described certain elements she’ll put into videos on specific topics:

I always say – if I’m gonna do a birth or parenting video I ALWAYS do a disclaimer at the beginning like “everyone’s situation is different” or “everyone’s child is different” blah blah blah (Interviewee 1)

This quote is a good example of the tendency for influencers to care about the perceptions and, in some cases, responses of their followers. The interviewee spoke animatedly when mentioning that it is something that she *always* does and goes on to describe the different terminology she might use. Her use of “blah blah blah” at the end of the statement also shows that she sees this simply as something she does but doesn’t think it’s worth discussing in-depth. This interviewee details that she has become an over-explainer, and later discloses that, because she puts her entire life online, she of course wonders what people think about what she posts (Interviewee 1). The same was observed in the content analysis. One influencer, when talking about getting ready to cook dinner notes:

I will be making Hello Fresh tonight and...you know full disclosure I’m just gonna keep it real with you – yes HelloFresh is sponsoring this video, but I use [enunciates with fingers] HelloFresh. I love HelloFresh. I pay for HelloFresh with my own money...yeah, they sent me this for this video, but I actually pay for the weekly HelloFresh with my own card [gestures hands] (Video 5)

While disclosing sponsorship is a legal requirement, this influencer also inserts a deliberate disclaimer letting her audience know that she is being paid but that she loves the company and pays for it herself. She is concerned what her followers think about her in relation to money – she doesn’t want to be seen as someone who simply uses a product for the video or because she is getting paid. She wants to emphasize that she pays for the products with her *own* money. The rules about disclosure puts limits on the way in which influencers can perform, so they disclose

and hope to justify it directly before the disclosure so that it doesn't take away from the authenticity of their performance to followers. While the rules, or structure, of their particular role limits their agency, influencers appear to be aware of this limitation and act in such a way that at minimum, their authenticity isn't impacted in the eyes of their followers, and at best, their agency doesn't appear limited, i.e., they appear to be fully in control of all the choices they make.

Using Structures to Influence Advantage: Enhancing Agency. Interviewees reported to also using platform rules and affordances in such a way that it could be said to enhance their agency. Analysis of the data showed several instances where influencers felt that they were agentic in certain actions performed as part of their online identity performance including the use of music and commenting on other videos. Their agency related to their entrepreneurial gumption deserves attention, this is because influencers' actions on social media platforms center on gaining followers in an attempt to amass social and financial capital. One interviewee discussed the importance of commenting on other, similar videos as a way to gain exposure. She described the role that her profile picture played in this:

Obviously then comes in the importance of your little thumbnail picture because if that's attractive people are more likely to press on it...and depending on your comment, like, if it's a positive one or they see "oh-you also have a little one" (Interviewee 1)

She uses the commenting, an affordance created by YouTube, as a way to expose her thumbnail to numerous others in an attempt to garner attention and ultimately gain new followers. But it's not just commenting that helps her acquire new followers, she also mentions having to ensure her performance in the comment is a positive one, and that her thumbnail shows her status as a mother. The positivity and relatability of her presence in the comments will ensure new

followers, showing that even in her use of the platform's structures to her own advantage, she is still limited by the social norms and audience expectations. Similarly, other influencers highlighted the use of comments as a means to gain exposure, and justified that they never "spam" people, or comment on a number of someone's photos in the hopes they do the same in exchange. One noted:

Honestly, I would just keep [the commenting] super genuine...I hate um, I promised myself that I would never spam anybody – NOT me (Interviewee 1)

The practice of commenting here is used as a way to convey authenticity potential new followers, serving as an example of how influencers use YouTube's structures for their own gain. She states that commenting is important to do but wishes that she had more time to do so. At the same time, the interviewee again points to the presence of unwritten rules they must adhere to as well; spamming is something that is clearly not done, and honesty in one's comments is expected.

The social expectations that both quotes acknowledge can be tied to the imagined audience of these comments. As another interviewee points out:

Usually, I try and be very specific and not just do—because I know commenting can also benefit you because people see your comments (Interviewee 2)

This quote shows what was implicit in the others: Influencers are very much aware of the potential audience for each of their comments. Each example shows that the influencer is aware of the social norms that surround YouTube use, and the use of commenting for exposure implies that users interact within the comments and seek out others to follow. Influencers, by doing this, exercise agency in their active promotion of their branded activity in a way to be perceived as

authentic or attractive to their followers, while also experiencing limitations on their behavior as social norms dictate how they should comment.

In other cases, the interviewees report certain ways of performing that use the platform's affordances to their benefit, effectively drawing on structures available to them to skirt social norms. One reported on the tendency for influencers to use "clickbait," which references the use of a photo, caption, or description that might not be what the video is about; it's a purposeful move meant to mislead viewers and to interest them to make them click or watch longer. She originally notes that using clickbait is "deceitful," and stated that she had promised herself she would never use it (Interviewee 1). She eventually admits to recently using clickbait in a video, and explains the use by saying:

I intentionally used click-bait on one of my vlogs, um, a couple months before getting pregnant...because in the very end of the vlog we said something about baby number two, it was like a four-second clip about wanting another baby and that was it. But on the thumbnail I put "baby number 2?" and it got three times the views (Interviewee 1)

This quote signals the influencer's agency in choosing to use clickbait. She describes using the affordances offered by YouTube (the ability to insert a quick clip and add a title) as well as the practices common to the platform in an attempt to get more views. Her choice to include this in this way (at the end) forced users to watch to the end to find out, and she saw the results in her views.

Another interviewee also uses platform tools to help her performance online. When discussing YouTube's restriction on copy-righted music she explained her work around for the rule:

I know Epidemic Sound is a good one, you have to pay for it, but it gives you access to good music. And you can cheat the system and use music...sometimes you get caught and sometimes you don't (Interviewee 2)

She describes the use of an outside tool to gain more access to music without getting flagged for copyright abuse; the need for this stems from the limited choices influencers are given to use music with their videos. This influencer's use of Epidemic Sound to circumvent these rules signals her ability to enact her agency to work around these rules; her use of the phrase "cheat the system" signals her perception of her agency in the situation – she knows the ramifications of cheating the system, considers them, and chooses to use the music anyway in some cases.

Structures Impacting User Agency: Minimizing Agency. As discussed in the introduction, influencers' performances are impacted, and in some cases, limited by platform and FTC rules and regulations. Interestingly, the findings showed that influencers, on the one hand, minimized their level of agency, while on the other hand, some reported experiencing enhanced agency, exercised through finding ways to circumvent platform rules and affordances to skirt the system.

One interviewee had a quick answer in response to a question asking if she was aware of the FTC's guidelines:

I'm not aware...[laughs] – I probably should be (Interviewee 2)

The response was short and to the point, and the respondent didn't offer up any information to explain or justify this statement. In addition, she paused and then laughed, communicating a discomfort in her lack of knowledge on the topic. The statement doesn't situate her as an active agent, nor does it demonstrate any agency or urgency to do something about it. Another interviewee had a different perspective on the guidelines, saying:

So....maybe. But um...it's that basically where Facebook is asking you now to define your videos if they're kid-friendly or not kid-friendly. So, I understand that, yes

(Interviewee 3)

This interviewee answered with trepidation – it is evident in her use of “maybe,” her pause after “um,” and the use of one anecdotal instance of “kid-friendly” or not, which she uses to describe her understanding of all of the guidelines enforced by government agencies. This reveals a limited exercise of agency, as she is simply not aware of the structures that may or may not constrain her decisions. While this interviewee shows more awareness of the rules than the previous quote, the vagueness in her answer shows a lack of understanding. The question this raises is whether a lack of awareness of the rules diminishes the influencers’ agency or in fact enhances it (under the idea of “what you don’t know can’t hurt you”).

In a third example an interviewee explained her lack of knowledge and attempted to justify it:

I sound like...I feel like I sound like so uneducated when it comes to this stuff...but I just always told myself I didn't want to get wrapped up into anything (Interviewee 1)

What’s interesting about this particular quote is that this interviewee admits not being familiar with the rules but argues this is an intentional decision. So, while her agency appears as limited as the previous interviewees, the argument could be made that the conscious decision to avoid learning is in fact a sign of enhanced agency. On the other hand, while the previous interviewees didn’t express a desire to “not get wrapped up in anything,” their lack of awareness of the rules effectively affords them this same freedom; if one doesn’t know the rules, one cannot be limited by them, although their freedom does not come from a conscious choice, unlike interviewee 1. This lack of choice implies a lack of agency. At the same time, the argument could be made that

those rules are enacted regardless of an influencer's awareness or not, so even though influencers might not be aware of the rules, these structures do limit their agency.

Interviewee 1 discusses the specific rules which YouTube has for earning money on the platform through videos and attempts to talk through the specifics of ad placement. Later on in the interview she notes that knowing and caring too much about the rules would impact her performance by saying, "I feel like it would take away from what I'm doing, right," in other words, it might detract from her performance reflecting her real, authentic, and true self, as discussed earlier. Here the influencer acknowledges that she chooses not to learn the rules; she could because she knows they exist, but she prefers not to in order to feel that her performances are sincere and true. This example further raises the question once more if her agency is diminished or enhanced by this choice.

Each of these examples show that agency cannot be viewed as a binary concept. Influencers experience and consider their agency on a spectrum: Their agency fluctuates depending on the situation, and while they report to having a great deal of agency, when discussing some notions further, reveal that in some cases they deliberately choose to ignore or not learn certain rules and resources on the platform. This choice to ignore certain rules, from a traditional understanding of agency, reveals limited agency but when influencers discussed this, they expressed enhanced agency, because they are able to choose to act outside of the structures online that shape their behavior.

Influencer Portrayal of Commodification

As highlighted by structuration theory, people create meaning and form understandings of reality through interaction with others; it is through these interactions with others that the structure is reinforced. Identity performances are an integral part of how we make sense of the

world around us, both impacting and affected by our construction of reality. As such, our identities are in part the result of the economic and social climate of the time. This means that ideas of the self and the ways to express it are both created and maintained by culture, and, as culture changes, so do our identity performances. These performances, as parts of a system, effectively shape culture as well. This interplay highlights the impact of culture as it is a product of individuals' identities as well.

Commodification, the process through which objects are altered to earn a profit (Wee & Brooks, 2010) is a part of identity performance. When connected to the construction of one's identity, commodification can be seen as the "reflexive project of the self" which "is intimately linked to the processes of consumption" (Hearn, 2012, p. 25). When looking at identity construction from this perspective, the narrative of self is tied up and built through the possession of desired goods. This means that people tell or signal the story of their identity through products. This, in turn, encourages consumption and, in the modern internet world, has proven to increase the production of immaterial commodities (i.e., knowledge, communication, and symbols) that translate into immaterial labor, or "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms" (Hearn, 2012, p. 26), in other words, defining the self.

Commodification is a process even more prevalent in the identity performances of influencers. For them, some elements of their identity could be seen as *affective labor*, which involves work that uses "the inanimate parts of the body as production" (Maragh, 2016, p. 352), meaning that influencers use their emotions, lives, and subjectivity in service of the platform and the product they are selling, i.e., commodification. Despite the personal gratification they might get from these performances, this means that influencers essentially live their lives in the service

of the platform. Where corporations once relied on culture industries, or modern media corporations that distribute media content to the masses and effectively dictate cultural goods (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944), they now use specific users, namely influencers, to do so. Subsequently, influencers, their popularity, and their monetized online activity produces a promotional culture (Hearn, 2012, p. 28) which is concerned with winning attention and market share.

Audiences condemn or dislike this “selling” of oneself or “selling one out,” communicated in the interviews with influencers (Interviewee 1), but as Hearn (2012) highlights, most people of the culture take part in commodification. Influencers operate on the tipping point between reality and imagery: When something is too transparent it is seen as unattractive and it is considered that it won’t sell products, but when something is too fake their audiences see through it, or believe they are ‘selling out.’ This highlights the fact that commodification exists on a spectrum and, at the high end of the spectrum, influencers must reduce or change their identity in order to commodify and thus seem attractive to audiences. At the low end of the spectrum, they are simply commodified: They share products that they like and use as normal users do. The final research question thus seeks to understand the extent to which influencer performance is commodified. Answering this question involves observation of influencer habits that might reflect commodification and also exploring if, when, and how they talk about it. Influencers most commonly reported or performed commodification in two ways: On the one hand influencers used elements of commodification to signal something about their identity to their followers, and at other times they tried to conceal or downplay the commodification at play in an appeal to their followers and thus their perceived sincerity or authenticity.

Commodification to Convey Identity. Some scholars (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2018) found that reliability was a strong indicator for self-enhancement and inspiration among influencers; their experiment found that users were more likely to enhance their identities or imitate influencers when they trusted them and thought that they were consistent and thus, reliable. Users see these curated lifestyles and are led to believe they are real when they are just performances. This relates back to the concept of the spectacle (Debord, 1977). On social media interactions only take place via the exchange of images, and this relate back to structuration theory in that these images constitute the system. Based on this, one could argue that YouTube influencers are the epitome of spectacle. This is because influencers perform a highly curated lifestyle in such a way that can sell a product and still appear reliable and thus inspirational to followers. This shows a trend toward the attention paid to appearance; as people effectively judge influencers' identities, reliability, and 'realness' by looking at images curated by influencers instead of observing them in real life. The spectacle of course exists outside of commodification, but as influencers increasingly commodify their online performances through the introduction of actual commodities, and users aspire or copy these performances, it is easy to see how online behavior can be impacted by both the presence of the spectacle and commodification. This trend toward the spectacle highlights the tension influencers experience in relation to their performances; as their images are judged by others, they experience more pressure to 'perform' and present images attractive and relevant to audiences. These findings indicated that commodification often is not seen as a sign of agency. This was revealed in the fact that *networked commodification*, i.e., the commodification of (the part of) the online performances carried out by influencers, was seen as limiting. This was in direct contrast with the commodification of regular users who don't have to consider the nature of their

commodification or what it looks like to their followers: They simply just do it, and the consequences are less important to these users because they're not capitalizing monetarily from the performance. Influencers, in contrast, because they are being paid for the use of products, have to particularly craft these performances to fit with their online identity: The commodification must align with the influencer, the brand *and* the product. This reveals the opportunity for influencer agency to be limited as it relates to the performance of both commodification and identity which signals a tension.

This tensions between commodification and identity performance presented itself in the findings, specifically in the ways which influencers chose to share information about products. As mentioned above, one influencer I interviewed, the Flip Flop Chef, is a Pampered Chef consultant, a multi-level marketing partnership where consultants for the company market, promote, and at times have parties, to sell kitchen products to consumers. Her role is two-part: She is a Pampered Chef consultant and she is an influencer, and she uses her work as an influencer to reinforce her role as a consultant. In addition, her use of the title "The Flip Flop Chef" serves as a direct identity marker to tie her to the brand. She's a mom who's always in the kitchen, who wears flip flops, gets hot in the kitchen, and loves all things Pampered Chef. Her name, identity, and subsequent performances online have been streamlined to create a sense of self that aligns with her brand. This could be said to be networked commodification: Influencers are being paid but make the conscious choice to commodify their identity online, indicating a high-level of agency.

This tendency to choose brands which they believe in, as well as the desire of influencer to have some control over the perception of what that means for their identity performance, was also observed in the creation of a video by the same participant. In the observation process, the

interviewee is recording a cooking tutorial which highlights a Pampered Chef air fryer and the tutorial centers on pineapple as the main ingredient. She prepares the food and talks through her process:

So, I'm gonna use [holds up tool] the zester that we have right here [grabs container, slides zester on top, begins to zest]. I'm just gonna zest this right over the top of the pineapple fries—and I love our zester because it's very easy to use...you can use it on all citrus fruit...to grate ginger, garlic or nutmeg. You could use it for parmesan cheese, but I'd recommend one of our other graters just because it gives you a bigger...um blade to work with (Interviewee 3)

In honoring her work as a consultant, and sharing in the hopes of garnering another sale, the influencer crafts her performance on camera using Pampered Chef products in her arsenal and highlights each product with descriptive detail. Here she is using a Pampered Chef grater (separate from the air fryer which the video is about) and shows her followers how to use it, defining appropriate uses (i.e., for ginger, garlic, or nutmeg). When she has the opportunity to mention another product, which might warrant another potential sale, she provides advice for when to use that – the bigger grater would be better. This trend was apparent throughout the observation. In other instances, she pulls Pampered Chef products out of cabinets, under the counter, or from off-screen. Her performance, littered with these branded products, is commodified in order to drive sales.

Surprisingly, when asked about it in the post-observation interview, she doesn't necessarily report the same. When asked whether or not she would shy away from sharing products that are not Pampered Chef she notes:

No, if I used a regular seasoning from the grocery store, I would just say use that. A lot of recipes – I make a lot of my own recipes, so the pineapple fries are mine and I sort of tweaked it here and there...and then today was a suggestion from one of my customers. But if I'm looking at a recipe and it uses garlic powder, I'd use our garlic and herb products (Interviewee 3)

At first, she says she would reference the “regular” seasoning from the grocery store and not necessarily one she sells. However, when compared to what was observed in the video creation process, this was not how the influencer performed. She peppered her performance with products to solidify her branded identity and alignment with the company, seemingly using every opportunity to mention branded products. Additionally, her mention of “our” garlic and herb products at the end of the statement contradicts what she says at the outset: She would recommend the regular product but says explicitly in the interview that she would use the branded product. This contradiction reveals the difficulty influencers face when navigating the presentation of their commodification: When asked, she claims her performance is not commodified and that she would share generic items that she is not making money off of but in her performances, she does the opposite. The influencer claims to engage in an authentic identity performance; but her behavior shows that her performance in these videos is ultimately driven by a desire to make sales, showing the commodification of her identity which ultimately limits her agency in performing that identity.

Interestingly, several influencers, including the Flip Flop Chef, discuss bringing in another, different brand which does not pay them to promote products:

I do a lot of stuff with Aldi grocery stores. They don't like me to do videos in their stores, but I do a lot of social media. People know me for a few reasons – they know me for

Pampered Chef and my love for Aldi. I do tours at Aldi grocery stores and I do that for free. Aldi hasn't paid me yet, but I mean they close their stores just for me (Interviewee 3)

In this excerpt, the interviewee is describing a grocery store trip she organized where she had followers meet her at the store, which had been closed especially for this group, and led them through the store to shop. Aldi is a discount grocery store where shoppers buy wholesale products stored in their original boxes and save money. This influencer chooses to align herself with a brand that is not paying her, displaying a conscious choice to commodify her identity. This choice, which can be seen as a sign of a high level of agency, could in fact be said to further align the influencer's identity with her Pampered Chef products, which works to further underlie her agency. Both brands appeal to working moms with busy lives and families, connecting perfectly to the influencer's identity as a mom who likes to save money and who supports her family through her job selling kitchen products. The choice to connect her online performance with Aldi doesn't just solidify the Flip Flop Chef's identity performance by offering "more" to her followers but it also offers her an opportunity to connect to new followers who might, because of her work with Aldi, be more likely to purchase products from her. If they find value in her tour and enjoy her personality, they might be more likely to follow her on social media, more apt to have a Pampered Chef party, or might tune in on her YouTube videos. In this case then, the influencer's decision to align herself with a brand that does not pay her, the traditional form of commodification, contributes to the success of her commodified, online identity as an influencer.

Another interesting element to consider here is the concept of labor. While her for work Pampered Chef can be considered what we know as the traditional form of labor, i.e., one for

which she is paid, her work for Aldi could be seen as immaterial labor, i.e., the kind of work for which she does not get paid, but from which the brand does benefit, and which does help define her in the eyes of her followers. As stated above, her public persona and online identity are made up of her identity as a mom, her affinity for deals, and her love for cooking. Aldi appeals to her as a brand because it fits with that persona and, even though the brand is benefitting, the influencer is too. She is better able to share her identity with her followers and there is always the potential for a brand deal. She later stated that she hopes Aldi will pay her in the future, but because her identity and the brand (Pampered Chef) are so aligned, choosing to bring in Aldi fits perfectly into the performance.

Navigating the Commodification Tipping Point. Influencers, to successfully perform online and to make their living, have to acknowledge the networked commodification that is a part of their identity performances. Even if they don't acknowledge this type of commodification, they still have to work with brands points, navigate their contractual obligations, and weave it into their performances while still keeping their audiences engaged. In this way, networked commodification allows them to more easily navigate the tension between the need to commodify and their audience expectations. In some cases, highlighted by both the interviews and content analysis, influencers acknowledged this type of commodification and also attempted to situate some parts of their performance as traditional, or classic commodification (i.e., commodifying but not being paid to promote products or brands) to appeal to their audiences.

Influencers worked to highlight traditional commodification forms in their performances, and actively addressed it in their narrative, to be transparent with their audiences, showing an attempt to navigate the commodification tipping point. Navigating this tipping point means engaging in sufficient commodification to earn brand points and sell the product but not going

overboard to where audiences disengage. This need to perform in a certain way for the audience is highlighted in self-perception theory (Laird, 2007). This is the belief that when individuals observe their behaviors as though they are outsiders, they can then draw conclusions about their own attitudes based on the choices they observe themselves making. Performing certain behaviors in a public setting leads to a sense of commitment about that behavior and the attitudes that underpin it, which contributes to future behaviors as well as one's sense of self (Tice, 1992). This concept, coupled with that of the spectacle implies that how your identity is performed publicly with respect to commodification matters because it informs one's attitude and, effectively, one's sense of self. This was observed in the analysis conducted for this chapter as well.

In a video titled "EATING HEALTHY & WORKING OUT," sponsored by *care/of* vitamins, an influencer describes going off track with her diet but getting back to being healthy. She proceeds to share her daily routine with tips and advice for her followers: She drinks lemon water each morning, has smoothies, makes green juice, and makes a conscious decision about her snacks. Each element of the identity performance is consistent with a health-focused persona, which indicates a consistent and public commitment to the identity performance. The influencer is taking part in modern commodification, as evidenced by the sponsorship of the video. She is being paid by the brand *care/of*. Amidst her performance of modern commodification, because she has publicly committed to a healthy persona, she works forms of traditional commodification into the performance; this is to further align with her identity and to share what she loves and uses with her followers. This works to further her relatability with followers. She states:

I've been getting a lot of like my groceries delivered because it's – the Whole Foods is really far from me so the fact that they're delivering to me is like really, really, cool, plus

they have all these healthy options online. So yeah, that's kind of what I've been doing...I kinda love it – and this is not a brand deal...it might sound like it but I'm obsessed with it (Video 3)

The influencer emphasizes good things about the brand: That they deliver to her, that they have healthy options online, and that she loves it. What's interesting is her choice to specifically note that it's not a brand deal, meaning that she is not being paid to share the brand. Choosing to include both the brand and the statement that she is not paid to promote them shows how this influencer chooses to navigate the commodification tipping point. She chooses to commodify that part of the performance in the traditional form because it signals both her identity and her public commitment to the healthy identity. *Whole Foods*, because of its focus on healthy foods, appears to fit into the identity she performs for her followers. By highlighting that it's not a brand deal she reinforces the commitment to the identity as sincere and true to herself – she's not getting paid it's just something she loves and wants to share. This highlights the tension influencers experience in wanting to make money off their content, but not wanting to alienate their followers by coming off as a “sell-out” who is paid by everyone and is an example of the commodification tipping point. This disclosure serves as an effort to not alienate herself from her followers, she shows the spectacle in practice. The Flip Flop Chef's decision to do videos about Aldi can be seen in the same light; using Aldi works to solidify her identity as a busy mom looking for deals to help her take care of her family.

At the same time, it is also possible that the influencer in the *Whole Foods* example is hoping to get a brand deal out of her statements. The latter is evidenced later in the video when she shared how seeing an influencer friend working with a brand that she liked (*care/of*) inspired her to reach out to the brand and acquire a partnership with them as well. Drawing upon that

perception of a friend's opportunity, the influencer sought it out for herself in an effort to align herself with the brand, and in turn, to capitalize financially. Her choice to disclose the information further underlies the need to be perceived as authentic and relatable to followers; if it wasn't important, she wouldn't choose to add it to her performance. This also exemplifies the navigation of the commodification tipping point. She chooses to disclose how she came to have the brand deal as a way to convey her traditional commodification which, upon use of her entrepreneurial gumption, turned into a modern commodification performance. Although she benefits from the networked commodification and is thus paid, she presents it as something she truly does, attempting to convey traditional commodification to appeal to audiences. This highlights the tendency for commodification to be performed on a continuum.

If you're not commodified enough you can't monetize but if you're too commodified, you're seen as inauthentic or insincere by followers. Influencers must commodify to make their living but are aware that there is such a thing as too much commodification and it is not attractive to followers. This was apparent in an interview where an influencer discusses followers' opinions on coupon codes:

The other thing is that I know a lot of subscribers have a bad taste in their mouth about coupon codes. Some people just...they're negative about it and won't use coupon codes because they know it makes you money. It's kind of um...looked down upon in the influencer world with some things, like if you're constantly using coupon codes then people think you're constantly making money off of everything you post...and that's kind of annoying to people (Interviewee 1)

Her discussion revolves around the use of coupon codes, the system by which a company pays an influencer to post about a product and then post a specific coupon code to give followers a

discount on the product. The coupon also serves as a way for businesses to track the sales to specific influencers. Here the influencer acknowledges the tension between modern and classic commodification: Influencers don't want followers to think they're making money off everything they post, indicating a tension between classic commodification (sharing products) and networked commodification (the use of coupon codes). The choice of this influencer to tend to not promote products with coupon codes shows a great deal of agency, and sheds light on the ways which influencers navigate the tipping point between old and new forms of commodification. This example speaks to the strategies which influencers use to convey commodification in a way that makes them money but also that is acceptable to their audiences. Influencers must consider the expectations of their audiences when performing or explaining their commodification, indicating that their self-perception is tied up in this understanding.

These examples highlight the ways which influencers are sometimes at odds with the expectations of sponsors and audiences, which further underlies the continual tension between behavior and awareness, which informs their agency. In these findings, commodification was found to exist on a spectrum where influencers exercise a lot of agency in their ability to choose partners to brand with and products to share (whether they're paid or not) on the one hand, but that their public commitment and perceived audience expectations limited their agency on the other. These findings highlight the fact that traditional commodification and modern commodification, as expressed by influencers, are sometimes at odds with one another and that the performance of commodification has an effect on their agency.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

It is easy to see, given the discussion within the chapters thus far, the role that influencers and their online performances have in creating, maintaining, and reinforcing the VSCO girl I described in the first chapter. Influencer habits, including the sharing, linking, or selling of VSCO girl identity markers such as scrunchies, Birkenstocks, and Hydro Flasks, show just how commodification works in both the performance of influencers and its impact on regular users, or followers. This research worked to shed light on the role commodification played in the workings of influencers, not just in terms of inspiring the ubiquitous VSCO girl, but regarding all online behaviors.

The aim of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of how influencers navigate the tension between the need to monetize and to perform one's identity online and explore how influencers exercised agency within the online structure which they operate. Specifically, this research looked at the popular video platform YouTube, examining how influencers manage the platform's technological affordances as well as the other demands they as influencers face. The research's aim was to gain not just a deeper understanding of how influencers worked, but also to see how agency and the theory from which this concept is developed, structuration theory, operate in an online environment.

Structuration theory works to understand how individuals function in society by looking at the role that agency plays in how individuals interact with and perform the rules and resources available to them, and how their agency is affected by these interactions. These rules and resources are what Giddens calls structures, and they provide individuals with understandings and boundaries that detail how to function in society. This research attempted to elaborate on the

way which YouTube influencers understand and exercise their agency online while handling the structures that define this particular environment, such as audience norms, technological affordances, and expectations from sponsors and partners. Existing research employing structuration theory, particularly in a web 2.0 environment, is still in its infancy, remaining mostly theoretical or exploratory. Subsequently, this thesis aimed to further this field by applying structuration theory to a very specific area of social media behaviors, and my research questions centered on identity, agency, and commodity. The first research question dug into identity, exploring how influencers negotiate their identity and authenticity in performing online. The second research question attempted to answer the question of influencer agency, investigating how influencers perceive their agency online as compared to their observed habits. The final research question sought to understand whether or not the observable habits of influencers reflect commodification and if that aligns with what they report.

Because little research to date has been able to translate structuration theory into measurable concepts, the decision was made to adopt a social constructivist approach. Social constructivism is the best approach to operationalizing structuration theory because of its focus on the co-construction of reality between participant and researcher, which privileges the interpretive and qualitative approach of the research methods. Lifeworld data was collected in two ways. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified influencers. Influencers were asked to take part in a participant observation of the making of a video, with one choosing to participate. Second, I conducted a content-analysis of nine influencer videos for three different brands. Both the interviews and content analysis were analyzed using a social constructivist perspective using grounded theory since this approach allows codes and themes to emerge from

the data itself, allowing the theory to be continually grounded in the experience of the influencers.

Findings from the content analysis and interviews shed light on the friction between agency and commodification, revealing the need to rethink the role structures and systems play in defining and demarcating online agentic behavior. This need becomes apparent through the following three findings. The first finding pointed to the tendency of influencers to blur the front stage and backstage during their online performances. The second finding revealed the multiple and diverse ways influencers experience agency. Agency appears to exist on a spectrum, with influencers experiencing a wide range of agency depending on the situation. Finally, findings pointed to the flexibility in how influencers experienced commodification. The following sections will explain each of these findings in more detail. My findings can be summarized in three themes, which are the blurring of the front and backstage that I have titled “the everyday stage,” the complicated definition of agency in an online world, and the tendency of influencers to pay attention to and sometimes edit their performances of commodification.

The Everyday Stage

The first research question sought to understand how influencers negotiated the interaction between identity performance and authenticity. This research found that influencers tended to rely on authenticity strategies as a way to appeal to audiences to reveal elements of their backstage in a way that was still under their control. The kind of strategies included transparent authenticity, or the offering of fact-based information about products, and passionate authenticity, the idea that users are motivated by inner desires over capital gain and share anecdotal, user-based information. Instances of transparent authenticity were used most often with respect to brand partnerships and disclosures, and this, coupled with the instances of

passionate authenticity show the tension between commodification and authentic identity performance.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach consists of the front stage, the part of one's identity shown to others, and the backstage, the part of one's identity only few, trusted individuals will have access to. Interviews with influencers as well as the content analysis revealed that influencers tend to display a great deal of their backstage in their videos: They take a camera around with them and show internet users their real-life, everyday experiences. When discussing the videos, influencers reported wanting to be seen as "real," "organic," and "true" to their followers, revealing the importance of authenticity in online performances. This shows that they consider the perceived audience expectation and attempt to act in a way that is authentic to their sense of self as an appeal to that audience. The research found that authenticity was conveyed in two ways: Passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity. Influencers, through their use of passionate, or anecdotal, and transparent, or fact-based, authenticity strategies, tended to toggle between their front stage and backstage performances to navigate the tension between corporate interest and audience expectation.

Passionate authenticity generally serves as a strategy for sharing of *more* of one's backstage, however influencers are unique in that they use these backstage appeals to sell products, an activity that is generally seen as a frontstage performance. Because influencers want to sell products and make their living and want to be "real" and "honest" with followers, this is an ideal approach for them. Passionate authenticity also served as a way to appeal to the audiences and to navigate the earlier explained tension between authentic identity performance and commodification. This is because passionate authenticity is a strategy which causes individuals to reveal information in a way that appears as the sharing of backstage information

but is still highly curated and linked to the front stage behavior of selling products and earning brand points.

Influencers showed an awareness of the importance of appearing authentic to their followers. They mentioned the idea of building trust with followers, keeping their performances true to their “real lives,” and not taking on brand deals that didn’t “make sense” for them. Influencers most often used passionate authenticity to convey their “realness;” showing “real” elements of their life amid brand points and sponsorship disclosures. This allowed them to signal their identity to both appeal to followers and to be perceived as authentic. By showing so much of what one once perceived as private to followers and sometimes invisible audiences, i.e., the showing of a child’s tantrum, giving a tour of one’s bedroom, or the sharing of one’s birth story, influencers were found to disclose personal information to help solidify their identity in the eyes of followers and they did so alongside their performances in which they promoted products, goods, and lifestyles. Their tendency to disclose personal information is an appeal to the backstage and is done while performing a brand deal or sponsorship, a front stage performance.

The use of passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity as ways to convey different elements of their identity shows the ways which influencers navigate the tension between what’s public and private. As influencers increasingly share elements of their real-life in the offline world as part of their online performances and take on more brand sponsorships, we see the blurring of their private and public lives. These findings support extant literature, discussed in Chapter 2, which found that some social media users use public channels as if they were private, and that users draw on cues from the social environment to imagine their audience and perform accordingly. The perceived blurring of the front stage and backstage discussed above confirms the tendency for users to use public channels as if they were private. With

respect to the dramaturgical approach, these findings indicate a tendency for influencers to blur the lines between these two stages. As people share more of their backstage online intermixed with their front stage, it makes it harder for audiences to distinguish between the two stages, moving effortlessly between one and the other regardless of how public or private the space in which they are performing is. In addition, the unique status of influencers, who bring commodification into their backstage performances, change the nature of this understanding.

What is Agency in 2020?

The second research question explored influencers' perceptions of their own agency with respect to performing online. To date we have defined agency as the ability for people to navigate, shape, and change the structure in which they exist, but what was expressed in the interviews contradicts this understanding of agency. Audience perceptions proved to limit influencers' agency in the interviews and content analysis. Influencers' agency was greatly enhanced when breaking the rules of the structure or relying on technological affordances that are the result of user routines rather than platform-created structures (i.e., the use of clickbait, and to find and use third-party music platforms). As mentioned in the previous chapter, platforms such as YouTube have stringent rules against using music without paying for it, yet influencers discussed workarounds they discovered and actively use in their videos. In addition, an influencer shared how they used clickbait, or ways of fooling the audience or hyping them up for something that did not happen, in their videos to draw in extra readers. While clickbait was never an intended affordance, the use of algorithms means that social media users have learned to utilize attention-grabbing headlines to gain the most clicks and bumps. However, as one influencer shared, clickbait is generally frowned upon among audiences. This speaks to social expectations: Because audiences don't like clickbait, influencers must learn how to use it

(because they do) in a way that is acceptable to audiences. This ability to adapt and manipulate the environment to work to their advantage speaks to the importance of systems in informing the structure and further underlies the idea that structures and systems are collapsed online, more so than ever before.

These findings highlight the tendency for structures to be at odds with one another in web 2.0. Users operate in an ecology made up of social and technological structures which impact user agency. As evidenced by the influencer's observed habits, users navigate the tension between the social and technological structures – they need to perform in certain ways in respect to the technological structures that inform their behavior online, but the social norms within which they operate are sometimes at odds with these behaviors, and they must change their performance to operate within the system. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory doesn't actually distinguish between the two kinds of structures; this is because Web 2.0 has made the distinction between these two more obvious. Prior to Web 2.0 it was harder to parse out the structure, but social media platforms have changed that. Social norms make up the structure that inform user behavior, and the system is thus how users engage, guided by these structures. This system effectively reproduces the structures each time users perform online; thus, the system can both enable and constrain the structures. The original definition of structures was not only not clearly defined, but today we have technological rules that are so closely tied to the way that users perform, which makes the disentanglement of systems and structures ever-more complicated. It is important for future research to address these differences and to determine between social structures and technological structures. Because Web 2.0 has laid bare the structures, their impact on our agency has become clearer.

As mentioned above, influencers' sense of agency was also affected by the audience perceptions of their performances. In some cases, audience expectations were found to have an effect on the way an influencer chose to perform, which impacted their agency. For example, influencers added disclosures to their performances, indicating a need to be perceived well by followers while still adhering to platform rules and their contracts with their sponsors. Audience perceptions and expectations thus take on the qualities of a structure which then constrains influencer behavior. The influencers interviewed also reported using platform rules and affordances in ways that enhanced their agency. This was shown in the use of comments as a way to project oneself to new audiences and to convey identity information to numerous others. Influencers expressed enhanced agency when they broke the rules of the structure: They reported to using clickbait to trick followers into watching more of their videos and also admitted to using third-party music sites in an effort to work around YouTube's copyright restrictions. By doing this, influencers position themselves as active agents in the online structure. Their ability to choose behavior that breaks rules shows the knowledgeability that influencers have of the larger system. Each example shows that influencers cheat the system, creatively and efficiently circumventing the rules that structure their behavior by choosing to act differently – they consider the consequences of breaking the rules and display a high level of agency in their choice to break them anyway.

In addition, the public nature of influencer identity performance proved to limit influencer agency. This finding points to existing literature, and further underscores the public commitment element of self-perception theory (Tice, 1992). As influencers increasingly rely on public performances and identity markers to define themselves to followers, they show a high public commitment to presenting themselves in a specific way, a choice that limits their agency.

This is because when influencers commit to a certain identity or element of their identity performance, they are held accountable to these choices, as evidenced through the care for audience expectations, and their agency is minimized.

Conversely, when it comes to rules of authority structures (in this case the FTC guidelines) influencers agency appeared mixed. Influencer agency related to these rules fell into two categories: Those who actively chose to stay uninformed and those that were *truly* uninformed. When asked about their understanding of FTC rules, influencers tended to have short responses, without offering up further explanation. One subject reported on her ignorance of the rules but described it as an intentional decision to do so. While her agency appears limited through a traditional structuration theory lens, from an internet-based perspective, the argument could be made that the decision to avoid learning shows a great deal of agency. While Giddens (1984) asserts that structures don't exist outside of knowledge of them, this does not apply in the case of legal rules or technological affordances which can actively impact our ability to act even if we are not aware of them. Furthermore, if we consider the concept of knowledgeability, an awareness of the rules, the influencer who indicated not knowing about certain rules is not knowledgeable. But choosing *not* to learn about them, with this consideration, shows an enhanced agency, an idea that appears to counter Giddens' original belief that it is an awareness of the structures that gives someone agency.

In other cases, however, influencers used anecdotal examples of guidelines that displayed a lack of knowledge of the rules' complexity. This shows that some influencers might simply just be unaware of the structures that may or may not constrain their decisions which, according to structuration theory, limits their agency. This raises the question: If the influencer is not aware that her agency is or can be limited by those structures, and thus does not report to it in the

interview and cannot be observed having minimized agency, is her agency really limited? These findings reveal that this is not the case, since these rules often tend not to physically stop an influencer from behaving in a certain way. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, the enforcement of these rules is spotty at best. This is an option not considered by Giddens when he designed structuration theory; he assumed an awareness of the structures when discussing agency, or at least an ability of these structures to actively limit agency. The theory doesn't account for people just not playing along. This research shows that structures can exist outside of knowledge and means that structuration theory must reconsider the role of knowledgeability as a factor in deciding agency.

These findings reveal that influencer agency exists on a spectrum and means different things to different people. Structuration theory assumes that individuals have a built-in understanding of the structure and rules which shape their online behavior, but this study has shown that this is not necessarily the case. Findings also, as discussed throughout, point to the perceived collapse between a number of concepts including the context collapse, the blurring between what's private and public, and the front- and backstage to name a few. Structuration theory as it exists in current literature assumes a separation between structure and agency which allows users to consider their choice, imagine the consequences, and choose to act in one way or another. However, this study points to the problems that arise when they systems which exist online are so closely tied to how people operate. Because structures and systems are so closely intertwined, it is becoming increasingly difficult to disentangle them.

Commodification is a Dirty Word

Commodification, the process of objects being altered to earn a profit, is a major part of online identity performance. As influencers turn to platforms and make a living off promoting

products to their followers, we see how the narrative of the online self is tied up in the possession and display of desired goods. Because of this, influencers are the epitome of the spectacle – they perform lifestyles that are highly-curated yet meant to be perceived as authentic and inspirational. The findings revealed how influencers experience a tension between commodification and identity: They want to be authentic and thus in control of their decisions and performances but at the same time they need to make money off of their online performances and must do so by commodifying their online them, i.e., sharing products, coupon codes and offering testimonials. As described by an interviewee, influencers are more successful when they focus their attention and effort into a particular niche or category. This is because systems for influencers are made up of how they are relating to their followers. The social norms tied up in the system structures their performance because they want to be seen as authentic and real to their followers. All of this has an impact on influencers' agency. When selecting brands to partner with influencers rely on working with brands that represent the “real” them, that reflect what they view as a “true” part of themselves. This decision to only partner with brands that reflect one's identity means that when influencers take part in commodification, they don't see it as such: They argue that the act of partnering with this brand is something they would do in normal life anyway because the brand is so close to them. This is an appeal to the classic form of commodification, one which is more attractive to followers. The findings revealed that influencers often aligned themselves with brands not paying them, thus taking part in a form of immaterial labor, or the kind of work they're not paid for, but which helps further reinforce the influencer's identity. The use of passionate authenticity served as strategy to show a look inside the influencer's lifeworld (their backstage) through sharing their “personal” moments, while selling it in a way that appeals to traditional commodification.

The findings reveal that there are two types of commodification: Traditional, the sharing of products like as all people do, or networked, highlighted by the commodified performances of influencers. Networked commodification exists because, in order for influencers to make a living, they must partner with brands who pay them to share and promote products. This type of commodification, as stated by an interviewee, was “looked down upon in the influencer world” (Interviewee 1), and thus seemed ‘dirty’ to influencers. In order to convey authenticity and to avoid modern commodification, influencers were found to pay particular attention to commodification in their performances. Often this was displayed through the sharing of a brand that does not pay the influencer, thus appealing to traditional, relatable commodification. The influencers tended to disclose that “this is not a brand deal,” but continued performing in a way that looks like it by sharing points consistent with a brand deal and aligning with brands that still fit into their identity performance. The choice to disclose that it’s not a brand deal shows that commodification is considered by influencers and has decidedly become a dirty word; they don’t want their followers to think that they are inauthentic or insincere by being too commodified or taking on too many brand deals.

These findings underline the perceived blurring of the front stage and backstage discussed in the previous section as influencers use backstage elements, or strategies of passionate authenticity, to display traditional commodification. This thesis’ findings on commodification, specifically influencer’s attempts to justify commodification, show the tension between the importance of making money online (monetization) and the need to create a connection with their followers that lies at the foundation of being an influencer. Influencers increasingly relied on warm affordances, such as sharing of links and products, hosting contests or giveaway with followers, and liking or commenting back on follower responses, in order to

disguise the cool affordances tied up in their commodified activity online (i.e., brand points, sponsor disclosures, etc.). Because they want to attract followers and sponsors alike, influencers commodify parts of their identity in authentic to ways that appeal to audiences through the use of warm affordances, and, for transparency-sake and as outlined in their contract, disclose their commodification which is part of cool affordances, or the legal architecture of the website of platform.

The discussed findings point toward the tendency for commodification to be at odds with identity in performances online: Influencers used commodities to signal parts of their identity to followers but needed to manage the delicate balance between being commodified and being *too* commodified. Content analysis showed that the observed habits of influencers reflect commodification on the one hand, but interview data and the tendency to disguise commodification in their performances highlight the acknowledgment that commodification is a dirty word. It is a necessary and sometimes lucrative practice, but influencers are aware of the need to toe the line in order to remain authentic in the eyes of their followers.

Limitations and Future Research

The research was not without its limitations, but each limitation serves an opportunity for future research. A first limitation was the sample used for the study. While qualitative research does not produce generalizable results, the sample in this case did not reflect the wide spectrum of influencers. This is because the research was conducted in a relatively rural setting and the researcher had limited access to influencers within her own personal network. The sample of influencers interviewed and observed in the YouTube videos consisted of all females. Work that explored just male influencers or both male and female influencers could reveal different findings with regard to identity performance, commodification, and online agency. Reaching out

to influencers online at random also proved more difficult. Influencers, it seems, were not open to speaking with a researcher they did not know without some kind of incentive. In one instance, for example, an influencer would not agree to participate unless they were compensated. In addition, the researcher sought out Instagram handles and emails for business contact included on the YouTube influencer's site page. It was an assumption of the researcher that this information would be readily available but that was not always the case. When it was available, the researcher reached out via email or Instagram direct message, but they often went unanswered. The number of interviews (three) was representative of this limitation.

Future research should first work to include a wider variety of influencers. One way to do this is to consider incentivizing influencers to participate in research whether that be monetarily or through exposure to potential others. Doing so would attract more participants and help gain a deeper understanding of influencers. The field could also benefit from more research with a wider range of influencers – this work dealt mostly with micro-influencers but there are certainly influencers much smaller and larger. In addition, a broader sample could provide more insight into the gamification, or maximizing of benefits, of online activity. Sampling larger influencers on the ways that they use technological affordances to their advantage could reveal a deeper understanding of agency as it relates to circumventing rules of the structure. Working with a variety of influencers would help better conceptualize the work and behaviors of influencers who achieve varying levels of success too. Conducting focus groups with influencers could serve a future approach as they foster group discussion, and participants might be more comfortable speaking with a researcher in a group setting.

The lack of participation in the participant observation also served as a second limitation in the research. Only one participant volunteered to take part in the participant observation.

However, with findings indicating there was a disconnect between what they and what they do, this research would have greatly benefited from more participant observation to further contextualize what influencers were sharing in their interviews. Future research should attempt to use the think-aloud method (Charters, 2003) to capture influencer opinions and perceptions of their behavior as they're performing.

A last, final limitation was the decision to focus on YouTube. This research was conducted using YouTube influencers, but influencers do not exist in a vacuum. Often times influencers in the interviews mentioned their work on other platforms and made reference to it, most notably Instagram. Future research should explore influencers on different, new, and emerging platforms as well as those who work across-platforms.

Final Conclusion

This thesis sought to gain a clearer understanding of agency as expressed and experienced in online spaces through examining influencers on YouTube. In-depth interviews with three influencers, a participant observation of the production of an influencer video with one influencer, and a content analysis of nine publicly available YouTube videos were conducted, and using grounded theory, the findings were synthesized to investigate the main concepts of agency, identity, and commodity. The findings strongly supported the idea that identity creation online affords influencers varying levels of agency. Their agency was found to be constrained in relation to audience expectations and enhanced in circumventing the structures that make up the system. Further, findings highlight that the concepts of the front stage and backstage no longer are as clearly demarcated as they once were. As influencers popularize habits like “vlogs,” video blogs which take viewers through their entire day from start to finish and show more elements of what was once considered the backstage, the distinctions between

the two stages becomes blurred. The findings also show the tendency to understand commodification as a necessary but less attractive part of their identity performance, highlighting the complication of identity performance in an online setting.

This research suggests that consideration of agency online needs to be revisited with a modern media environment in mind. This environment presents a set of structures that are far more malleable than any structures that Giddens discussed when first developing his theory. The original structuration theory looked at ways which agents alter and change the structure, but the findings from this study also point to agency as exercised through the circumventing of platform rules online. This begs the question that if influencers are finding ways to make their efforts online work, and if they are feeling creative and fulfilled, then how do we best define agency? This study illuminates the fact that structuration theory is not best suited, as it stands, for a web 2.0 context.

This issue of agency highlights the need for subsequent research in the field which can help tease out the expressions of it among influencers online and explore how they relate to the various platforms' structures. When the original structuration theory was created, the understanding of structures was much more straightforward: Even if people were unaware of a structure, the social contexts which they were bound to engage in would make them aware of it. This was the result of face-to-face interactions among individuals and the fact that most legal structures were clearly posted in the shape of signs and rules. Social interaction today, with the advent of the internet and web 2.0 platforms like that which this research is focused on, is vastly different. Because online communication is not face to face, individuals lack visual cues in response to their performances. Further, the technological characteristics of digital platforms today complicate the ability to know all of the structures that limit and guide how to behave

online. And finally, online interaction does not have to be reciprocal; it is possible to comment, post, and like without ever receiving any feedback on whether one's behavior is deemed appropriate. Giddens (1984) posited that structures are not of individuals' making, but that they also cannot exist outside of human action, because they are socially constructed. As a result, Giddens argued that all agents have knowledgeability of the structures, however, these results point to the fact that that is not always the case. Because structures are more difficult to learn today, users operate on social media platforms like YouTube without a clear understanding of its structures. After all, one doesn't need to understand how algorithms privilege certain videos over others to enjoy going from one video to the next. In other words, our understanding of structures needs to be rethought if structuration theory is to apply in Web 2.0. This also has implications for our understanding of agency as algorithms increasingly streamline user behavior it is important to explore structures online and how they operate among systems. This is because the social norms, structures that inform behavior online, are so closely tied up in the system, or the social exchanges that occur online, the complication of disentangling this necessitate a return to our understandings of agency online.

While culture industries also used to dictate popular cultural goods, they no longer do: They have changed with the advent of the internet's technological affordances. Technological structures are not as influential as social expectations among influencers, as revealed by the findings. Today culture industries shape social norms via algorithms which effectively produce the conduits to the content people create. This means that while users online might believe that technology has democratized online behavior and given individual users more agency, this is not the case. Networked commodification illuminated these tensions in influencer performances in this research. We must instead consider the ways in which the structures, or technological

affordances, still drive our social norms. It is no longer realistic to believe that Web 2.0 and the rise of ordinary internet users like influencers has truly democratized our performances online.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT

1.1 PI Email or Instagram Direct Message Contact for Participants

Hello,

My name is Aysha Vear and I am a graduate student at the University of Maine in the Department of Communication and Journalism. I am conducting a research project that attempts to understand how influencers like yourself understand and make sense of your role as an influencer on YouTube. I am specifically interested in investigating people aged 18 years or older who are active YouTube users and consider themselves an influencer. I obtained your email from _____. I would be very grateful if you would be willing to participate.

As the popularity of becoming an influencer increases, it is important to understand how influencers make sense of their role in influencing others online, as well as how they take into account their followers and or corporate interests. I am looking for a number of influencers to take part in this research. Should you wish to participate, I am asking that you allow me interview you and observe you create a video for your YouTube channel in person or via Skype and ask you some questions about it. If you do not wish to be observed we can just do an extended interview. I will meet you at a time and location convenient for you to conduct the interview and/or observation. Should you choose to allow the observation the process will consist of a 20-minute pre-interview, the observation of the production of a video from start to finish and end with a 20-30 minute post-interview. If you opt to take part in just the interview it should take about an hour. These interviews will be audio-recorded, if you choose to have your observation done via Skype no video will be recorded, just the audio.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this e-mail. If you know any others who would be willing and able to participate please share this with them as well or forward along their contact information.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Aysha Vear
Department of Communication and Journalism

If they respond positively:

I have scheduled you for an interview on (*date and time*). If you have any questions or if, for any reason, you need to reschedule I can be reached at (207) 877-1020 or aysha.vear@maine.edu. Thank you for your help and willingness to participate. Please find the consent form for this study attached to this email. I will go over it with you before we start your interview and answer any questions you may have.

1.2 Faculty Sponsor Email or Instagram Direct Message Contact for Participants

Hello,

My name is Judith Rosenbaum-Andre and I am a professor at the University of Maine in the Department of Communication and Journalism. I am advising a research project that attempts to understand how influencers like yourself understand and make sense of your role as an influencer on YouTube. This project is specifically interested in investigating people aged 18 years or older who are active YouTube users, and who consider themselves an influencer. I am reaching out to you as you are a part of my person/professional/social media network and I think you would be a good fit for this research. I would be very grateful if you would be willing to participate.

As the popularity of becoming an influencer increases, it is important to understand how influencers make sense of their role in influencing others online, as well as how they take into account their followers and or corporate interests. We are looking for a number of influencers to take part in this research. Should you wish to participate, the researcher is asking that you allow her to interview you and observe you create a video for your YouTube channel in person or via Skype and ask you some questions about it. If you do not wish to be observed you can just do an extended interview. She will meet you at a time and location convenient for you to conduct the interview and/or observation. Should you choose to allow the observation, the process will consist of a 20 minute pre-interview, the observation of the production of a video from start to finish and end with a 20-30 minute post-interview. If you opt to take part in just the interview it should take about an hour. These interviews will be audio-recorded, if you choose to have your observation done via Skype no video will be recorded, just the audio.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this e-mail. If you know any others who would be willing and able to participate please share this with them as well or forward along their contact information.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Judith Rosenbaum-Andre
Department of Communication and Journalism

If they respond positively and we have agreed on a date and time:

Thank you for your willingness to participate. I have included Aysha Vear, the researcher, on this email to figure out a date and time to meet. If you have any questions or if, for any reason, you need to reschedule she can be reached at (207) 877-1020 or aysha.vear@maine.edu. Please find the consent form for this study attached to this email. She will go over it with you before you start your interview and answer any questions you may have.

1.3 Facebook Script for Faculty

Calling all influencers! Do you have an active YouTube channel? Are you over 18 years old? With the increasing popularity of the site and the rise of influencers making money from their videos, it is important to understand how *you* make decisions in video topics, production, and even brand sponsorships.

The principal investigator is Aysha Vear, a graduate student I advise at the University of Maine in the Department of Communication and Journalism. Participation will require either the option of a pre-interview, observation, and post-interview OR a full interview. The time commitment for either option will take no more than two hours. If you are located in Maine these can be done in-person, or on Skype if you are not.

If you're interested in speaking with a researcher about your specific experience as an influencer, please comment below!

1.4 Think-Aloud Method Prompt

Thanks for your willingness to take part in this research. Right now, I am going to ask you to start producing your video. During this portion of the process I will ask that you speak out loud any words in your mind while you complete the production of your YouTube video. I will record anything you say and take notes. This may seem strange, but this helps me gain better understanding of the decision-making process that happens as you create your videos. It is really important that you act as though I am not here. The only thing I am asking you do differently is that you speak all your thoughts out loud.

After the observation, we will have a brief interview where I will address moments and actions during observations that stood out to me.

Please let me know if you have any questions before we start.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Identity and Agency in YouTube Influencers

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Aysha Vear, graduate student of the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of Maine. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which being a YouTube influencer informs your identity and how in control you feel when making choices regarding your videos, as well as how corporate influence affects and introduces pressure in that decision making. My hope is that the information will further research done on the platform and provide more insight to how specifically the technology impacts our lives and habits online. Findings will be shared with the researcher's faculty advisor and thesis committee throughout the process, and eventually used as part of the researcher's thesis defense, with your identity kept confidential. You must be at least 18 years or older to participate, in addition you must consider yourself an active YouTube influencer.

What will you be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, you will let the researcher observe you create a video for your YouTube channel and ask you some questions about it. You will be asked to take part in a pre-interview that will allow you to discuss and share your use of YouTube, your behaviors in interacting with others, your motivations for choosing brands to work with, and how you decide what content to create. With your permission, the interview audio will be recorded. The interview should take roughly 20 minutes. Some sample questions include: "In your opinion, what is a social media influencer?" and "About how long does a video take you to put out?" After the pre-interview, you will be asked to allow the researcher to observe your video production process from start to finish, with you "thinking-aloud" and explaining what you're doing and why you're making certain choices as its happening. After the observation is done, a 20-30 minute post-interview will be used to discuss clarification from the "think-aloud" data as well as general reflection on your experience as an influencer. The total time for participation will vary based on how long it typically takes you to create, film, and edit a video. For this reason, the time total for participation will consist of around 2-3 hours.

Risks

Other than your time and inconvenience there are no risks to you in participating in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you in participating in this study. Participation will give you the opportunity to reflect on your personal social media use and motivations with regards to YouTube. This research will benefit the broader community in providing a resource for more literature to be written on YouTube and influencers and their effects on society. The findings of this study could help to further contextualize social media's impact on identity formation and agency.

Confidentiality

Your name will not be included in any of the data. Your identity will be protected by keeping interview confidential and by providing you with a pseudonym. Data collection includes two

interviews and the observation that will, with your permission, be recorded by the researcher. The audio recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer in the researcher's office and will be destroyed no later than December of 2020. The anonymized transcripts will be retained indefinitely and shared with the faculty advisor listed above.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in the study you can stop at any time. You may also skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study please contact the researcher, Aysha Vear or her faculty advisor, Judith Rosenbaum-Andre.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please reach out to the Office of Research Compliance at the University of Maine: call at (207) 581-2657 or email umric@maine.edu.

Thank you!

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APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

2.1 Pre-Interview Guide

***These questions will serve as queues for a conversation between the researcher and participant.*

Timing	Part	Topics
~5 min	I	<p><u>Introduction:</u></p> <p>Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and observation process.</p> <p>1: Were you able to read over the informed consent form?</p> <p>2: Did you have any questions about any of the content of this form?</p> <p>3: Just to review, the consent form states that throughout this process, I will be asking you about your experience as an influencer and observing you during production of a video with discussion throughout, and then an interview at the end to discuss decisions made and to ask a few closing questions. Some of these questions may make you feel uncomfortable and you can, at any time, refuse to answer the question or end the interview. Your name and identity will be kept completely confidential throughout the research process and the audio recording will be destroyed after completion of transcription. By participating in this research, you can aid in the expansion and creation of new understandings related to the concept of identity and agency in influencers.</p> <p>4: Do you have any questions about anything?</p> <p>5: Do you consent to participating in this interview?</p>
~5-10 min	II	<p><u>Influencers:</u></p> <p>1: In your opinion, what is a social media influencer? Do you think there was such a thing as influencers before social media?</p> <p>2: Do you consider yourself an influencer? Why did you become an influencer?</p> <p>3: What about being an influencer matters most to you?</p> <p>4: Talk to me a little bit about your understanding and opinion on the influencer landscape (history, major influencers who have paved the way, etc.). What kinds of genres are there? Which genres do you consume? Into which genre do you fall? Why?</p> <p>5: Are you aware of the Federal Trade Commission’s guidelines for influencers? Can you discuss what you know about them? How do you manage and incorporate these rules into your practices?</p>
~5-min	III	<p><u>Overview: YouTube</u></p> <p>1: Do you watch YouTube videos in your spare time? Who do you watch and why?</p> <p>2: Who are you subscribed to? Why? Do these people and their videos influence your own videos?</p>

		3: Do you comment on other YouTube videos? What makes you comment?
~5 min	IV	<p><u>Posting Habits:</u></p> <p>1: Tell me a little bit about your posting schedule. When do you post? Why?</p> <p>2: About how long does a video typically take you to put out (from idea to filming to editing and posting)?</p> <p>3: Can you describe your favorite video you've made? Why? Least favorite? Why?</p> <p>4: What are some quality standards you insist on for your channel? Some examples include camera quality, video quality, audio standards, etc. What motivates you to maintain these standards?</p> <p>5: What would make you not post a video or to scrap a video concept altogether?</p>

2.2 Post-Interview Guide

***These questions will serve as queues for a conversation between the researcher and participant.*

~15-20 min	V	<p><u>Post Observation:</u></p> <p>1: I will start by asking a series of questions about things they did during the observation period (i.e., why they made a specific choice, why they turned the camera off at a specific time, why did you rephrase that statement, etc. <i>The main purpose for this series of questions is to bring up and discuss certain telling moments during the observation process to understand influencer choices and navigation of identity.</i>)</p> <p>2: What are some of the downsides to being an influencer? Advantages?</p> <p>3: How do you balance your influencer life and your real life?</p> <p>4: What advice do you have for younger kids wanting to become an influencer?</p> <p>5: Do you partner with brands and or corporate sponsors? Tell me a little bit about that process (different kinds of partnering, going on trips, advertorials, etc.). How do you select which brands to partner with? Have you ever regretted a partnership? Why? What is a partnership you're really happy with? Why? Are there any brands you would never partner with? Why? Which brands would you love to work with? Why? Do you know of any influencer-brand partnerships that work really well? What makes you think these partnerships are successful? Or really poorly? What makes you think these partnerships don't work?</p> <p>6: How exactly do you monetize on your YouTube channel? Do you mind sharing how much money are you making? Do you have contracts with brands/partners? Are there limitations or stipulations in these contracts? Do you mind describing them? How do you perceive these? <i>Cues:</i> Do you like them? Do you dislike them?</p> <p>7: Do you ever respond to comments on your videos? Can you tell me about your experience in doing so? When do you? What do you say? Do you ever respond back? How do you deal with "hate comments?"</p> <p>8: Talk to me a little bit about how you balance the wants and needs of your followers and your own.</p> <p>9: Do you look to other influencers for inspiration, motivation, or advice? Who and why?</p> <p>10: What is the biggest lesson you've learned through being an influencer?</p>
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~2-5 min	VI	<u>Conclusion:</u> 1: Do you have any questions regarding the interview or observation? 2: Do you have anything you would like to add before concluding? 3: Are there any other YouTube influencers you recommend me reaching out to with request to participate in an interview for this project? 4: Thank you for your time and contributions.
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2.3 Interview Guide

***These questions will serve as queues for a conversation between the researcher and participant. These questions will be used for strictly interviews – no observation will be done.*

Timing	Part	Topics
~5 min	I	<p><u>Introduction:</u></p> <p>Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and observation process.</p> <p>1: Were you able to read over the informed consent form?</p> <p>2: Did you have any questions about any of the content of this form?</p> <p>3: Just to review, the consent form states that throughout this process, I will be asking you about your experience as an influencer, I will ask about your videos, how you edit them, how you make money, how you choose to partner with brands, etc. Some of these questions may make you feel uncomfortable and you can, at any time, refuse to answer the question or end the interview. Your name and identity will be kept completely confidential throughout the research process and the audio recording will be destroyed after completion of transcription. By participating in this research, you can aid in the expansion and creation of new understandings related to the concept of identity and agency in influencers.</p> <p>4: Do you have any questions about anything?</p> <p>5: Do you consent to participating in this interview?</p>
~5-10 min	II	<p><u>Influencers:</u></p> <p>1: In your opinion, what is a social media influencer? Do you think there was such a thing as influencers before social media?</p> <p>2: Do you consider yourself an influencer? Why did you become an influencer?</p> <p>3: What about being an influencer matters most to you?</p> <p>4: Talk to me a little bit about your understanding and opinion on the influencer landscape (history, major influencers who have paved the way, etc.). What kinds of genres are there? Which genres do you consume? Into which genre do you fall? Why?</p> <p>5: Are you aware of the Federal Trade Commission’s guidelines for influencers? Can you discuss what you know about them? How do you manage and incorporate these rules into your practices?</p>
~5 min	III	<p><u>Overview: YouTube</u></p> <p>1: Do you watch YouTube videos in your spare time? Who do you watch and why?</p> <p>2: Who are you subscribed to? Why? Do these people and their videos influence your own videos?</p> <p>3: Do you comment on other YouTube videos? What makes you comment?</p>

~5 min	IV	<p><u>Posting Habits:</u></p> <p>1: Tell me a little bit about your posting schedule. When do you post? Why?</p> <p>2: About how long does a video typically take you to put out (from idea to filming to editing and posting)?</p> <p>3: Can you describe your favorite video you've made? Why? Least favorite? Why?</p> <p>4: What are some quality standards you insist on for your channel? Some examples include camera quality, video quality, audio standards, etc. What motivates you to maintain these standards?</p> <p>5: What would make you not post a video or to scrap a video concept altogether?</p>
~10-15 min	V	<p><u>Video Editing:</u></p> <p>1: Do you plan your videos ahead of time? How do you decide what videos to create/when? Take me through the decision process.</p> <p>2: Take me through your video editing process. Please explain where you start, what you edit with, how you edit, what effects you use, etc.</p> <p>3: Generally, how long are your videos? Why?</p> <p>4: What do you edit out of your videos? Why? Are there certain elements of your life you choose not to include?</p> <p>5: Do you perceive your videos to be true to your real life? Why or why not?</p> <p>6: What would make you scrap a video altogether?</p>
~20-25 min	VI	<p><u>Brands/Monetization:</u></p> <p>1: Do you partner with brands and or corporate sponsors? Tell me a little bit about that process (different kinds of partnering, going on trips, advertorials, etc.). How do you select which brands to partner with? Have you ever regretted a partnership? Why? What is a partnership you're really happy with? Why? Are there any brands you would never partner with? Why? Which brands would you love to work with? Why? Do you know of any influencer-brand partnerships that work really well? What makes you think these partnerships are successful? Or really poorly? What makes you think these partnerships don't work?</p> <p>2: How exactly do you monetize on your YouTube channel? Do you mind sharing how much money are you making? Do you have contracts with brands/partners? Are there limitations or stipulations in these contracts? Do you mind describing them? How do you perceive these? <i>Cues:</i> Do you like them? Do you dislike them?</p> <p>3: Do you ever find inspiration from other YouTuber's videos to create brand ads/content? What do you draw from, and why?</p> <p>7: Do you have a sense of how your followers feel about ad content/brand inclusion in your videos? If so, can you talk a little more about it.</p> <p>8: Talk to me a little bit about how you balance the wants and needs of your followers and your own.</p>

		<p>9: Do you have a sense of how you make money from YouTube specifically, i.e. AdSense, ads played throughout the video, etc.</p> <p>10: What are some of the restrictions YouTube places on creators? Do you like them? Dislike them? Why?</p> <p>11: Are you aware of the Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) rules for influencers? Can you explain them to me? How do you make sure you adhere to these rules? Are you aware of the ramifications if you don’t adhere to them?</p>
~10-15 min	VII	<p>General/Wrap Up:</p> <p>1: What are some of the downsides to being an influencer? Advantages?</p> <p>2. How do you balance your influencer life and your real life?</p> <p>3: What advice do you have for younger kids wanting to become an influencer?</p> <p>4: Do you ever respond to comments on your videos? Can you tell me about your experience in doing so? When do you? What do you say? Do you ever respond back? How do you deal with “hate comments?”</p> <p>5: Do you look to other influencers for inspiration, motivation, or advice? Who and why?</p> <p>6: What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned through being an influencer?</p>
~2-5 min	VIII	<p><u>Conclusion:</u></p> <p>1: Do you have any questions regarding the interview?</p> <p>2: Do you have anything you would like to add before concluding?</p> <p>3: Are there any other YouTube influencers you recommend me reaching out to with request to participate in an interview for this project?</p> <p>4: Thank you for your time and contributions.</p>

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

3.1 Interviewee Demographic Information

Interviewee 1	Female
Interviewee 2	Female
Interviewee 3	Female

3.2 Observant Demographic Information

Video 1	Female
Video 2	Female
Video 3	Female
Video 4	Female
Video 5	Female
Video 6	Female
Video 7	Female
Video 8	Female
Video 9	Female

APPENDIX E: CONTENT ANALYSIS DATA

4.1 Content Analysis Video Links

Video 1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vYnAD_KAIA
Video 2	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxQJufaj2e8 (Video has been removed from YouTube)
Video 3	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU4lfOdRBJA
Video 4	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcJ1VSzcza0
Video 5	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-DIZwRml6g&t=616s
Video 6	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C9PNT7oE00
Video 7	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irKRwol6kc8
Video 8	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oxd5aGByq-I
Video 9	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSd7zR2LpLc

4.2 Video 2 Transcript (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxQJufaj2e8>)

**Influencer has since deleted Video 2, which was used as data for this project.
Transcript of original video below.

1. [sitting in kitchen in front of fridge, hands clasped to left of shoulder] Hi guys welcome back to my channel...so as I'm sure you saw by the title...today's video is a Vegas vlog-
2. -I actually went to Vegas for my 21st birthday...or to celebrate my birthday...my birthday was on Dec. 2nd and we went um from the 6th to the 9th just so we were there for the weekend....so it would be more fun
3. I went with my mom, my dad...um Bubs, my brother and his wife...
4. And we did so many amazing cool things...we went to the desert and drove these sand buggy things...I don't even know what they were called [looks to the right] but they were so much fun
5. We went to the casino and on this cool ferris wheel thing [clasps and unclasps fingers] and just really great restaurants...so I thought I would vlog it and take you guys along with me...
6. So if you want to see what I did in Vegas to celebrate my 21st birthday then just keep watching-
7. -before I get started though [holds hands palm to palm to left of body] I just wanted to quickly say thank you to Care/Of for sponsoring this video
8. You guys know how much I love care/of...they just make it super easy to taking your vitamins and maintaining healthy habits as cooler months kick in...
9. You take a short, fun five-minute quiz [overlay on screen of herself taking the quiz on mobile phone...screen record]
10. They just as you easy questions about your diet, your lifestyle, and your health needs...
11. And then your care/of just gets delivered to your door in convenient daily packs that are perfect for like an on the go lifestyle...
12. [frame change of YTer taking pills on flight] I'm literally taking care/of on the plane...I literally took it with me for my trip to Vegas
13. So if you're always traveling these are really good...if you're on the go these are awesome...you can throw them in your backpack, your gym

- bag, your purse, whatever you're doing and wherever you're going you can take care/of with you-
14. –Care/of makes it easy to see where they source their ingredients from and they ensure only the highest quality products
 15. Also I always like to mention that vegan and vegetarian options are available...
 16. Like I said all you have to do is go online and take a really fun, short quiz
 17. It took me like 5 minutes and then it recommends the vitamins and supplements I should be taking and it comes right to my door- I don't have to go out and get the vitamins myself
 18. It just comes all right to me...it takes all the stress out of that
 19. I just take it every single morning, whether I take it in my house like right from the dispenser on my counter [frame change, grabbing pack of vitamins from box on kitchen counter]
 20. Or if I'm in a rush [shows pack flat on counter] I take it on the go with me
 21. My whole entire family takes care/of...we all love it...I highly recommend it, I cannot say enough amazing things about them...
 22. With that said...for 50% off your first care/of order go to takecareof.com and enter code "kenzie50" ["TakeCareOf.com kenzie50" overlay on screen] again for 50% off your first care of order go to takecareof.com and enter code Kenzie50
 23. So now...let's just get right into the video [frame change to Welcome to Las Vegas sign in airport...walking through airport]
 24. [frame change to mail on LV strip with bag in hand] We're starting the vlog...here's the intro....
 25. My parents got me this bracelet and I love it so much, thanks dad [shows parents walking in front of her on camera]
 26. I had it on this wrist [shows left wrist with bracelets] but then I thought it looked too crowded so [shows bracelet on right wrist] I put it on this one
 27. Now we're going to Off White so I can pout and not buy anything [frame change to boyfriend holding off white bag with hand on mouth]
 28. Damn bubs got the heat...
 29. [frame change to sign for Sugar Factory restaurant, flips through menu pages, with music playing over it]

30. [frame change pouring drink over dry ice, smokes up, zooms around...shows chocolate milkshake stacked up with food, pans in on plate of pasta, boyfriend dancing]
31. [frame change to casino machine]
32. We're up 300 bucks right now...started with \$50 and I'm wearing off white
33. [frame change to bowl of ramen] It's currently 12:10 in the morning and bubs and I are eating noodles and a burger [zooms over to boyfriend with burger] ...enjoying
34. [frame change to pan over collectible cars on display]
35. [frame change to footage of out the window of driving through the desert, people talking]
36. [boyfriend on rocks, yells] Bubs get down...bubs do a backflip [frame change to more outdoor scenery]
37. [frame change inside Mandalay Bay] Inside Mandalay Bay for Cirque du Soleil...[pans to her outfit] I was wearing heels but changed into sneakers cause that's just who I am
38. [frame change walking on the strip] We're going to breakfast and then we're gonna go shopping
39. [talking with friend on camera...] I'm not gonna make fun of you on my vlog...I think we're actually gonna do this tonight [points upward]
40. Right mom...hold on I'm gonna turn it around [show ferris wheel] we're doing that tonight- I think you like go in those little pod things on the ferris wheel and you can like...what do you do in it?
41. Drink and stuff...happy hour you know all that good stuff
42. [music, pans to restaurant sign, shows plate of breakfast]
43. [pans to ATVs in desert, shows footage of them driving them with music over it]
44. Show like the scenery...yup yup yup [shows footage of her with helmet on about to drive]
45. Out here...hell yeah [drives atv]
46. [frame change to boyfriend] How do you feel...I feel like my head hurts
47. [frame change, more driving]
48. [frame change, running in hotel hall]
49. [frame change, Nobu menu, pans over to different appetizers]

50. We made it...[shows ferris wheel]
51. [casino game] This isn't good...bubs this is horrible
52. [frame change to plane window...video ends]

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Aysha Vear was born and raised in Winslow, Maine, where she graduated high school in 2013. She attended the University of Maine and graduated in 2017 with a double-major in Journalism and English, with a minor in professional writing and a concentration in analytical writing. After graduating she accepted a marketing position with the University of Maine Alumni Association and enrolled in graduate school. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Maine in December 2020.