

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Fogler Library

Spring 5-3-2024

The Effects of Moral Violations on Parasocial Relationships with Influencers

Julie Aprill

University of Maine, Julie.aprill@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd>



Part of the [Social Media Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aprill, Julie, "The Effects of Moral Violations on Parasocial Relationships with Influencers" (2024).
Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 3981.

<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/3981>

This Open-Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

**THE EFFECTS OF MORAL VIOLATIONS ON PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS
WITH INFLUENCERS**

By Julie Aprill

B.A. Colorado State University, 2020

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master Arts
(in Communication)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine
May 2024

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum-Andre, Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism, Advisor

Dr. Laura Rickard, Associate Professor of Communication and Journalism

Dr. Michael Socolow, Professor of Communication and Journalism

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Maine recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of Penobscot people, where issues of water and territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations—the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac—through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The University also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

**THE EFFECTS OF MORAL VIOLATIONS ON PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS
WITH INFLUENCERS**

By Julie Aprill

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Judith Rosenbaum-Andre

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master Arts
(in Communication)
May 2024

Morality impacts relationships in complex and highly contextual ways. Moral violations specifically can lead to a variety of reactions in social and parasocial relationships. This study extends past research on morality and parasocial relationships to examine the impacts of moral violations on parasocial relationships with influencers. Drawing on *affective disposition theory*, and *expectancy violations theory*, this study employs a 3-condition between subjects experiment to determine this relationship. The results indicate that a moral violation can result in a decrease in enjoyment of the influencer's content and a parasocial breakup. The results also suggest that a moral difference between fan and influencer caused by the moral violation mediates the relationship between exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer and a decrease in the strength of the parasocial relationship. Implications for the study of morality and parasocial relationships are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the countless people who may have impacted the course of my life in small but meaningful ways that resulted in me becoming the person who I am in this moment. Just as much as our lives can be made up of big moments with big impacts, so too those small impacts accumulate to set us on certain paths. My path led me here, and I'm exceedingly grateful for not only those who had large and measurable impacts, who are mentioned below, but to those who in their small way also directed me here.

First, I would like to recognize my advisor, Dr. Judith Rosenbaum, without her direction, patience, and encouragement, this project would not have come to fruition. It is truly a privilege to be mentored by someone who is knowledgeable and enthusiastic about your work. I would also like to thank Dr. Amelia Couture Bue for her contributions not only to this thesis but to my knowledge, ability, and confidence as a researcher. Dr. Brianna Dym also contributed greatly to the planning of this project, which I am grateful for.

There can be no doubt that the professors I had as an undergraduate set me on the path to graduate school. It was their encouragement that spurred me to believe in myself and become confident in my ability as an academic. I would specifically like to thank Dr. Katie Knobloch for mentoring me in research and Dr. Hailey Otis for explaining what graduate school might mean for me and for supporting me towards that goal. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Royce Ammon, who taught me to love the "world of ideas" and everything that it has to offer.

I would like to thank my sisters Jennifer Aprill and Joanie Barnes for supporting me throughout this process. Through countless phone calls their support helped me have the fortitude to tackle and continue to tackle the sometimes-daunting task that is graduate school. I

would also like to thank my parents, Chuck and JoAnna Aprill, who supported me even if that meant living far away.

More than anything else, I would like to thank my grandparents, Lloyd and Carolyn Guggenmos, without whom I would surely not be the person I am today. Through their steadfast love, encouragement, and unwavering belief in me, they showed me what was possible and what I could achieve. Words simply cannot express how exceedingly grateful I am for the privilege of being their granddaughter. It was my grandparents who first taught me to love learning, that there can be joy not only in knowing the answer but also in asking the question. This thesis was made possible by my grandparents, though they will never be able to read it, their hand is in it, and it's dedicated to them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Cancel Culture.....	3
Description of study.....	7
Outline of Thesis.....	9
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Parasocial Relationships.....	11
Parasocial Interaction Versus Parasocial Relationship.....	13
The Formation and Outcomes of PSR.....	14
Social Media, Influencers and PSR.....	17
Influencers and PSR.....	18
Affordances of Social Media and PSR.....	19
Parasocial Breakups.....	21
Morality.....	22
Morality, Media, and Enjoyment.....	22
Expectancy Violations Theory and Social Relationships.....	23
Celebrity, Moral Violations, and PSB.....	27
Affective Disposition Theory.....	29
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	32
Participants.....	32
Procedure.....	33
Stimuli.....	34
Measures.....	34
Morality.....	34
Parasocial Relationships.....	36
Authenticity of Influencer.....	37
Enjoyment.....	37
Parasocial Breakup.....	37
Affective Disposition Theory.....	38

Social Media Engagement	38
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	39
Quantitative Results	39
Qualitative Results	43
Possible outcomes for the influencer	44
Reference to Broader Social Issues.....	49
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	53
Findings and Implications	53
Limitations and Future Research.....	58
Conclusion.....	62
WORKS CITED	64
APPENDICES	70
Appendix A: Questionnaire.....	70
Appendix B: List of Influencers.....	88
Appendix C: Stimuli.....	91
Control	91
Medium Moral Violation	92
Severe Moral Violation.....	93
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY.....	94

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2022, an influencer scandal broke that was unique in the level of attention it saw, receiving coverage from such news outlets as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. This was the scandal of Ned Fulmer, one of The Try Guys, cheating on his wife with an employee (Kircher, 2022). The Try Guys gained internet fame through “trying” various new activities often outside of the traditionally masculine (Kircher, 2022). Their activities included such things as trying knitting, stand-up comedy, manicures, and baking without a recipe. Fulmer was “the wife guy” which not only matches the Try Guy branding (“try guy” sounds like “wife guy”) but also referred to a broader trend of referring to male influencers and celebrities who talk often of their wives and build their brand on being loving, doting husbands as “wife guys” (Kircher, 2022; Lukpat, 2022; McIntyre & Negra, 2022). The scandal was originally uncovered by fans on Reddit who posted photos of Fulmer and the employee at a nightclub together, and resulted in the other three Try Guys formally parting ways with Ned Fulmer (Kircher, 2022; Lukpat, 2022). Since the scandal, Fulmer has stayed out of the spotlight except to issue an apology on social media to his wife, fans, and the other Try Guys (Kircher, 2022; Lukpat, 2022).

More recently, an influencer scandal involving Colleen Ballinger has been making its way through the internet as well. Unlike Fulmer, Ballinger has had a history of scandal that only recently seemed to stick. Ballinger, who began her YouTube career in 2008, made content that appealed to younger audiences and was often based on cringe humor (Koul, 2023). Allegations of grooming those young fans first emerged in 2020 when a young male fan claimed that Ballinger had sent him lingerie as part of a giveaway, which she confirmed but claimed her intentions were not inappropriate (Chery, 2023; Koul, 2023). The original allegations had little effect on her career, but they resurfaced in 2023 with added allegations claiming that she

humiliated young girls at shows, made inappropriate sexual comments to underage fans in a group chat, and non-consensually shared nude photos of a fellow influencer (Chery, 2023; Koul, 2023). Ballinger responded to these accusations with a video in which she played the ukulele and referred to the allegations as “the toxic gossip train,” a song which many thought trivialized the accusations against her. The backlash to the video prompted her to take a break from social media, but fans and critics alike believe these setbacks to be temporary (Chery, 2023; Koul, 2023).

Examining these two cases there are several notable differences between Fulmer and Ballinger. The first and perhaps most obvious is the difference in their content. Where Ballinger has a long history of making cringy content that tests the boundaries of what is appropriate, Fulmer had been known for making wholesome content about men trying new things. Additionally, the accusations against Ballinger included several actions that were not necessarily secret. Fulmer, on the other hand, committed a single clear transgression that shocked and disappointed his fan base. Another difference is that Ned Fulmer issued a clear apology in which he took responsibility for his actions and Ballinger addressed accusations by denying them in a shockingly tasteless way. Importantly, people consistently rank harm to children as one of the most severe forms of harmful content online, significantly more severe than infidelity (Scheuerman et al., 2021). This would seem to go against the reactions we have seen to these two scandals: Fulmer’s scandal, which did not involve children, resulted in the loss of his career, but Ballinger's grooming accusations were overlooked the first time they arose. This suggests that something more is likely at play than strict morality, but that those relational contexts and expectations may be contributing to what is playing out online.

Cancel Culture

The proceeding few cases are likely a part of the broader internet phenomenon termed *cancel culture*. One definition which captures many of the nuances of cancel culture is Ng's (2020):

the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues. (p. 623)

The idea of “canceling” originally comes from callout culture and Black Twitter; the term was then co-opted by journalists describing cycles of internet outrage as “cancel culture” (Clark, 2020). This history may help to explain the dual meaning it often takes in popular culture with some considering it a form of protesting, holding the powerful accountable, and giving agency to the marginalized (Clark, 2020), and others considering it mere internet outrage and an unreasonable demand for ideological purity (Ng, 2020).

A commonly cited example of cancel culture on both sides of this argument is the #metoo movement which started with women describing their experiences of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood and broadening to a wider context of sexual harassment and assault (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). Some, however, have pointed out that celebrities often experience little long-term harm from being canceled, but less powerful individuals may have their lives ruined by cancel culture, suggesting that cancel culture favors the powerful and is not even-handed (Ng, 2020). These issues of cancel culture are similar on YouTube within influencer drama and

apology videos, where influencers explain drama that is going on between them and another influencer and either call out each other or apologize to each other (Lewis & Christin, 2022). These apologies exist more as performative accountability that rarely achieves lasting results, meaning, or resolution (Lewis & Christin, 2022). Essentially fans feel outraged because of some scandal, then influencers “perform” accountability by apologizing, but make no meaningful changes to their behavior. Lather, rinse, repeat.

The idea of cancel culture exists beyond the context of celebrity and social media. Perceptions of cancel culture within academia vary by country with progressives in conservative countries (e.g. Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt) feeling that they are targets of cancel culture on campuses, and conservatives in progressive countries (e.g. United States, Western Europe, Australia) feeling that they are the targets (Norris, 2023). This phenomenon would counter the argument that cancel culture holds the powerful in check, instead suggesting that it exists to enforce dominant social norms and ideologies and supports the spiral of silence in political minorities (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). On the other hand, other studies have suggested that exposure to cancel culture events can be collectively empowering and validating for marginalized groups (Traversa et al., 2023). Still others suggest canceling decontextualizes actions and their harm and paints issues with oversimplified black and white sentiments that do not accurately reflect reality (Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

Within these arguments for and against cancel culture, there is a thread that ties much of the discourse together, and that is morality. Cancel culture can be seen as both a way of policing the morality of others and of performing one’s own morality by participating in the canceling. Therefore, issues of cancel culture are ultimately tied to issues of morality and social norms. Within these issues of morality, the theme of *moral capital* emerges as a possible explanation for

some of these aspects of cancel culture. Moral capital is a type of cultural capital that allows people to use others' perception of how moral they are to enhance their social standing and privilege (Adams, 2011). Moral capital should not be confused with morality itself. Morality is a system of values that dictate behavior, with certain behaviors being deemed positive and other behaviors deemed negative (Graham et al., 2011). Moral capital is how the individual fits into that system based on others' perception of them, and how that in turn influences their social standing (Adams, 2011). Someone with high moral capital will be seen as moral or good and therefore their social standing will benefit; someone with low moral capital will be perceived as immoral or bad and therefore their social standing will suffer as a result. This judgment exists separate from how moral that person may be in their actual thoughts and actions. Essentially, due to factors like identity, stereotypes, and past actions, people build constructs of how moral they think others are (Adams, 2011) This relates back to the concept of the wife guy who leverages his good image—or moral capital—as a loving, doting husband for social standing and prestige; he does not actually have to live according to this morality as long as others perceive him as doing so (McIntyre & Negra, 2022). Adams' (2011) research also suggests that moral capital bears different weight for men and for women, with male politicians gaining more moral capital for being family oriented than female politicians. This suggests that moral capital is not distributed equally but is based on existing biases and distributed according to those biases. Cancel culture therefore exists within the context of moral capital, where due to both behavioral and identity-based factors people may have more or less moral capital to lean on when they are accused of wrongdoing.

A second concept that relates closely to cancel culture is public shaming. Public shaming can be defined as, “a practice of public moral criticism in response to violations of social norms.”

(Billingham & Parr, 2020, p. 998). Since cancel culture consists of publicly calling out people online, one of its main tactics is the practice of public shaming (Norris, 2023; Traversa et al., 2023). To fully understand public shaming it is beneficial to examine a few historical examples that shed light on how it works. The first example is the Puritans in early American history. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" Hawthorne describes a character being forced to stand on a podium before the whole New England town and wear a scarlet "A" on her clothing for the rest of her life to be shamed for an out-of-wedlock pregnancy (1878). This is arguably the most basic example of public shaming in which a person is literally shamed in public both as a punishment for their own moral violation and as an example for the rest of the town. A second more modern example that is often used when discussing public shaming is what happened to Monica Lewinsky in the aftermath of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Monica Lewinsky was shamed in the mass media for her part in an affair with then President Bill Clinton. Clinton, on the other hand, although also shamed to an extent, experienced less disgrace. This relates public shaming back to moral capital (Adams, 2011) in that the young female intern likely had less moral capital than the much older male president. The person with less moral capital experienced more public shame for the same action.

Public shaming has experienced a resurgence recently in online spaces. Billingham and Parr (2020) argue that, although all types of public shaming have their own ethical considerations—the issue of moral capital being one of them—online public shaming in particular is morally dubious in that it fails to be even-handed, violates privacy, offers no means of reintegration for the person being shamed, and the punishment often does not fit the crime, with people losing their jobs and experiencing significant impacts on their mental health as a result of being shamed online. Although these issues can apply to all types of public shaming, they are

especially magnified in online spaces where affordances such as persistence and spreadability mean that perceived moral wrongdoings remain online indefinitely and spread far beyond the perpetrator and victim's social circle. They also note that online shaming may be based on incomplete information or partial truths. This conversation about online public shaming is where some of the debates about what cancel culture is come into play, as the concerns surrounding online public shaming echo the concerns of cancel culture. When cancel culture is merely the act of calling out bad behavior online through the act of public shaming, then this online public shaming has significant overlap with cancel culture, to the point where one might even argue that they are one and the same. However, if cancel culture only applies to public figures, then online public shaming would be broader than cancel culture, as anyone can be the victim of public shaming. Regardless, cancel culture and the potentially broader online public shaming seem to share the same set of ethical concerns of proof and fairness.

Description of study

Within this world of influencer transgressions, cancel culture, and public shaming it is clear that the modern mediascape is permeated with the ebb and flow of admiration for those celebrities and influencers perceived as good and canceling of those perceived as bad. The backlash and the potential anguish of fans after a perceived moral violation comes to light is all too familiar to those on the internet. It may be something new, a recent comment or action taken by the influencer, or it may be something dredged up from early in their careers or even before they were influencers. Given the sometimes tenuous relationship that the internet has with proof and measured reactions, it is no surprise that fans display a variety of reactions from shock and outrage to support. These online reactions to an online scandal have the appearance of being more severe than what we may have seen with celebrities before the internet. It is possible that

the internet and cancel culture have provided the opportunity for these reactions to be more visible, or it may be possible that reactions to influencer transgressions are genuinely more extreme due to the expectations and relationships that fans form with these people.

Nevertheless, studying these relationships is likely a crucial step in understanding what is at play in these cycles of outrage that are the result of a moral violation. When fueled by admiration, fans often attach themselves to characters, celebrities, and other media personas that they don't know in real life or in a reciprocal way through parasocial relationships, which are one-sided relationships with a media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These two concepts, parasocial relationships and perceived moral violations likely interact with each other as the social internet roils from the latest scandalous revelation. This is particularly important when it comes to influencers whose career is largely based on their likability and their relationships with fans (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Rohde & Mau, 2021). How these parasocial relationships with influencers are affected by moral violations will be the focus of this study.

Extant research suggests that these parasocial relationships function on a psychological level similarly to social relationships and can be fueled by perceived similarities including moral similarities, as explained by *affective disposition theory* (Dibble et al., 2016; Eden et al., 2014; Giles, 2002; Tamborini et al., 2013). However, when those morals don't align, affective disposition theory also suggests that observers take pleasure in morally negative actions being met with just retribution (Bonus et al., 2021; Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard et al., 2021). Furthermore, *expectancy violations theory* suggests that relationships are damaged when someone violates a moral expectation (E. L. Cohen, 2010). Taken together this would explain some of the varied reactions we see from fans when influencers are caught up in moral scandal. Coming back to the two cases mentioned above, Fulmer's career as an influencer essentially

ended, but Ballinger has kept a number of loyal fans, and other influencers have gone through scandals and come out relatively unscathed in the end (Koul, 2023; Lewis & Christin, 2022; Lukpat, 2022). Clearly, the relationship between the moral violation and the impact on an influencer's following or career is more complicated. Understanding the role that parasocial relationships play will likely help us to better understand what is truly at play in these influencer scandals.

Following from the previous discussion, one area of research that emerges in need of future study is the relationship between moral violations, or actions seen as morally wrong by the observer, and parasocial relationships with influencers. Much of the previous research on moral violations and *parasocial breakups* or the dissolution of parasocial relationships, has been conducted using fictional characters, although a few studies have looked at major celebrities. Influencers are unique from celebrities and fictional characters in that they are perceived to be average people and are expected to be authentic (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Additionally, due to the nature of social media, the practices of self-disclosure, the expectations of authenticity, and the amount of exposure that fans can have with an influencer on social media it is likely that there are differences in parasocial relationships—and parasocial breakups—with influencers than there are with more traditional celebrities. This research aims to examine influencers specifically to fill that gap. This study is also unique in its use of affective disposition theory and morality to examine parasocial relationships, influencers, and moral violations.

Outline of Thesis

This thesis will begin with an overview of the literature in Chapter 2 with a discussion of the theoretical background, formation, and outcomes of parasocial relationships, as well as sections on influencers, parasocial breakups, and morality. At the end of this chapter research

questions will be posed. Chapter 2 explains the methods used to answer these questions; it includes an overview of the participants, procedure, and measures used. The next chapter discusses the results. The fifth and final chapter of this thesis contains a discussion of the results, implications, areas for future research, and limitations of this study. It ends with a general conclusion. Following the final chapter are the works cited and appendices.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand how parasocial relationships with influencers are affected by moral violations the background of research must be examined. Parasocial relationships have a rich background of research, and throughout the years researchers have been able to clarify the concept and explain how these relationships form and what affects they can have on media consumers. More recently, parasocial relationships on social media and with influencers have been examined. Researchers have also examined what happens when these relationships come to an end. Morality has also been studied in the context of media and in the context of parasocial relationships, particularly as it relates to enjoyment. Two theories of morality that shed light on morality's relation to enjoyment and parasocial relationships are *affective disposition theory* and *expectancy violations theory*. All of these provide valuable information on how moral violations might impact parasocial relationships and inform this study's research questions.

Parasocial Relationships

To begin, *parasocial relationships* (PSR) are relationships formed with media personalities such as characters, celebrities, and influencers that appear regularly in media; these relationships, although one-sided, function similarly to social relationships in the emotions they evoke and the psychological processes involved such as feelings of comfort, familiarity, and support (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). The concept of parasocial relationships was originally conceived by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl when, in the mid-1950s, they suggested that the parasocial relationship was a new phenomenon resulting from what they referred to as “new mass media,” specifically radio, television, and movies. They refer to parasocial relationships as, “the seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215) wherein the main difference was the non-reciprocal

nature of the parasocial relationship. Their definition, by their own admission, evokes the theater where a performer speaks toward the audience and can be considered in conversation with the audience. However, in stating that the PSR is a function of “new” media and that it is “seemingly face-to-face,” rather than face-to-face they exclude the theater as a realm where these relationships could be formed. From this early definition there are two key aspects of PSR that have endured throughout the literature. First, that these relationships are non-reciprocal, and second, that they are a function of media, meaning that other non-reciprocal relationships that take place outside the realm of media are not considered parasocial relationships. The relationship that a person has with a TV character is parasocial, the relationship that a person has with that guy on the bike they always see at the park and think that they somehow know despite having never interacted with is not parasocial.

This is not to say that the performer is unaware of the relationship. Horton and Wohl suggest that not only is the performer aware, but that the performer makes every effort to maintain that relationship (1956). They state, “the publicity campaigns built around successful performers continually emphasize the sympathetic image which, it is hoped, the audience is perceiving and developing” (p. 220). It is important to note that the awareness of the parasocial relationship on the part of the performer does not create a social relationship; the performer still does not know the individual members of the audience in the way that they know the performer. Furthermore, fan mail and even responses to that fan mail, according to Horton and Wohl, also does not make it reciprocal. Despite it being a form of direct communication, it is an expression of the fan’s relationship not a mutual relationship, even a response to a particular fan is merely a response, it does not necessarily indicate reciprocity.

Horton and Wohl propose that the main mechanism which explains how parasocial relationships form is parasocial interactions (PSI), which is the simulation of a conversation or an interaction with the performer (1956). This can include feelings of interaction and actual interactions such as talking back to the screen (Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSI is used to refer only to people's interactions with media personas which are often the result of commonly used elements of media that encourage parasocial interaction, like the performer simulating eye contact with the audience by looking directly at the camera, directing a statement to the audience, or the simple act of zooming in on the performer's face seemingly drawing the viewer closer (Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Horton and Wohl suggest that this interaction can also take place through other characters, cast members, or even a studio audience as the performer interacts with them. These character interactions can lead to PSI because of perspective taking on the part of the audience; when they take the perspective of the person in the piece of media that the performer is interacting with, that is itself a form of parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Essentially, this type of PSI is interaction through the perspective of the other characters. Horton and Wohl go on to say that a casual viewer, as opposed to a regular or avid viewer, will also experience PSI, but due to the casual nature of their viewing habits are unlikely to form parasocial relationships from those parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This makes sense when compared to social relationships; that is, we may interact with a variety of people in our everyday lives, but not every interaction leads to a relationship.

Parasocial Interaction Versus Parasocial Relationship

Early researchers applying Horton and Wohl's concepts often used the terms parasocial relationship and parasocial interaction interchangeably; specifically, scholars often used PSI to

refer to the actual relationship and not merely the interaction (Dibble et al., 2016). In 2016, Dibble et al. made a case that parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships should be separately defined and separately researched concepts as they describe different experiences with different psychological and social characteristics. According to Dibble, and in agreement with the original Horton and Wohl position, parasocial interactions are the interactions that viewers of media content have with the performer or character. They go on to argue that parasocial relationships are lasting relational feelings that linger long after consuming the media. By these definitions, the distinction between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship is whether the effects continue long past the moment of viewing. Parasocial relationships primarily develop because of multiple exposures, which may or may not involve the conversational aspects that typically cause parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002). Dibble went on to argue that past research suggested that although the elements of media that encourage parasocial interactions can assist in the development of parasocial relationships, those media elements are not critical in the development of parasocial relationships. This means that people form parasocial relationships through programming and genres without performers directly addressing the audience (like fictional/story driven programming) as well as those genres where they do (e.g. reality TV, game shows). Despite these efforts, the conflation of the two terms continues, this study follows the perspective of Dibble et al. (2016).

The Formation and Outcomes of PSR

As another explanation for the formation of parasocial relationships, many have taken a uses and gratifications approach. *Uses and gratifications theory* rests on the assumptions that through socialization and/or individual characteristics people have basic needs, and they intentionally consume media (uses) to “gratify” those needs (Rubin et al, 1985). Several

researchers have suggested that PSR forms to satisfy needs for companionship, personal identification, and/or entertainment (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Giles, 2002; Nabi et al., 2006). In early research, Rubin et al. (1985) looked at parasocial relationships (but called them interactions, see discussion above) by considering individual needs, loneliness, and media dependency as predictors of PSR. They did not find a significant connection between loneliness and PSR. Additionally, the issue of loneliness continues to have mixed results suggesting it may be a factor sometimes, but not all the time and not for all people (J. Cohen, 2004; Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985).

As an alternative explanation to the needs and gratification model, Giles (2002) asserts that parasocial relationships and social relationships are driven by the same psychological processes. This places PSR theoretically into the same realm as social relationships, which may form because of need, but Giles suggests that, again like a social relationship, PSRs often develop without a specific reason or intention. It has also been argued that these relationships are formed from a human instinct to connect with other people, exist as a part of the typical viewer's social life, and function to complement rather than to substitute for social relationships (J. Cohen, 2003; Giles, 2002).

Identification has also been found to have a hand in the formation of parasocial relationships in several ways. Identification is largely based on similarity or a desire to be similar to the media persona and is correlated to several of the scales that measure PSR (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002). More specifically, when a fan identifies with or feels they are like the media personality it contributes to the formation and strength of parasocial relationships (Derrick et al., 2008; Giles, 2002). Having a parasocial relationship with a character or media personality that has a similar social identity to oneself has also been shown to have positive impacts on self-

esteem (Derrick et al., 2008). Audiences may be able to role-take in a parasocial relationship to explore identities, try out relational roles not yet realized or available in their lives, relive past roles, or even better understand situations currently unfolding in their lives (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Aside from the scenarios that can encourage a parasocial relationship, the sheer amount of exposure to a media persona increases the strength of a parasocial relationship. This is similar to a social relationship in which people may meet and, after spending more and more time together, feel closer to one another. Instead of meeting, though, parasocial relationships entail repeated viewing and going back to the same media source (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002). The amount of exposure to a media persona also functions in the formation of these relationships in that they provide stability and consistency in appearance and character (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Co-viewing, i.e., viewing with other people, and subsequent discussion of a character may also increase the strength of a parasocial relationship, likely due to its encouraging thought and interaction with the character beyond the moment of viewing, although more research is needed on how social relationships influence a parasocial relationship, and vice versa (Giles, 2002).

As a result of these multiple exposures, consumers feel that they “know” the person or character they have a PSR with in ways similar to social relationships that form over time through observation, interaction, and accumulated knowledge (Chung & Cho, 2017; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships get stronger the more information one has about the object of the relationship, which in turn leads to a sense of understanding the values of the person as well (Chung & Cho, 2017). Finally, parasocial relationships positively relate to enjoyment, predicting it in certain genres and more broadly being correlated with it (Nabi et al., 2006). Therefore, factors that affect a parasocial relationship may also impact enjoyment.

Social Media, Influencers and PSR

Social media influencers are individuals who leverage social media through personal branding and the appearance of authenticity to gain followers and build a business out of their personal brand (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Lee & Eastin, 2021). An important aspect of influencer identities is that they draw in audiences through their personalities rather than simply talent or skill (like more traditional celebrities) (Cocker & Cronin, 2017). The influencer's personality is so central to their personal brand that fan communities may even adopt or mimic certain personality traits of the influencer while interacting online (Cocker & Cronin, 2017). Further, informative value of the content, perceived authenticity of the influencer, and perceived similarity to the influencer all positively influence PSR with influencers (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Similar to PSR, and often hand-in-hand with it, higher familiarity with influencers marketing a product leads to higher purchase intentions (Park et al., 2021). Influencers are so persuasive in marketing that including a disclosure statement that they are making sponsored content has little to no effect on their persuasiveness or ability to foster purchase intention (Feng et al., 2021).

Clearly, influencers function as opinion leaders. This is partly because people identify more with them than traditional celebrities due to them being seen as “typical individuals” who often come from more humble beginnings; these aspects work to make them seem more authentic than traditional celebrities and to build PSR through similarity and identification with the influencer (Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Giles, 2002; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Rohde & Mau, 2021). This is especially relevant to PSR because identification is one of the drivers in motivations to follow influencers and in the formation of a PSR (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Dibble et al., 2016). Additionally, influencers use their likability strategically, as it is one of the building blocks of their careers, creating positive associations between their likability and

any products they may be selling, and they emphasize familiarity and similarity to fans throughout their videos (Rohde & Mau, 2021). There is a growing, but still relatively new, body of research that examines how influencers are similar and different from traditional celebrities in terms of the strength and development of parasocial relationships. There are several factors that are important when considering influencers and parasocial relationships. The next two sections discuss these, which are: self-disclosure, amount of exposure, authenticity, and illusion of reciprocation.

Influencers and PSR

One unique aspect of social media that is central to explaining how PSR with influencers differs from that with celebrities is self-disclosure, or messages that reveal personal details about someone's life, beliefs, or values (Chung & Cho, 2017). Self-disclosure has been shown to aid in the development of parasocial relationships as well as increase their strength, and influencers use self-disclosure often in the process of branding themselves as authentic and genuine (Chung & Cho, 2017; Croes & Bartels, 2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Additionally, the details of these self-disclosures can evoke feelings of empathy in viewers. Drawing on past research on social relationships, Hwang and Zhang argued that empathy's importance in forming intimate connections and identifying with other people in social relationships could explain its similar importance in PSR, particularly PSR with influencers (2018). Although this can play out in parasocial relationships with major celebrities and even characters as well, influencers typically practice more self-disclosure online than traditional celebrities leading to stronger parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017; Wellman et al., 2020). It was also found that empathy resulting from self-disclosure was even more closely related to PSR with real people than with fictional characters (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Finally, what sets influencers apart from more

traditional celebrities, who may also participate in self-disclosure, is the setting and frequency of these disclosures (Chung & Cho, 2017; Croes & Bartels, 2021). For example, an influencer may film themselves doing any number of daily tasks in their home—sometimes giving fans a literal daily look into their home and personal life—which is arguably different from a celebrity sharing an experience on a talk show.

Affordances of Social Media and PSR

In addition to what makes influencers unique on social media, there are drivers of PSR that have been magnified by the affordances of social media. One such aspect is the amount of exposure. Similar to previous findings, Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that repeated exposure increases the strength of the parasocial relationship; additionally, they found that social media provided even more opportunities for exposure to influencers than traditional forms of media. Furthermore, the amount of exposure is often what creates that sense of knowing a media personality, but with this increased exposure consistency in how an influencer presents themselves is more scrutinized. Influencers on TikTok report a pressure to maintain consistency in their presentation of self, lest they be seen as inauthentic (Barta & Andalibi, 2021), meaning that as they produce more and more content to create the parasocial relationship, they must also maintain a consistent image to remain authentic in the eyes of their fans.

This discussion of consistency in how an influencer presents themselves leads to another important aspect of influencers when it comes to PSR: authenticity. Authenticity is very loosely defined as being perceived as genuine and true to oneself; however, it is context specific and dependent on the audience (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Liu & Zheng, 2024). For influencers, two important aspects of authenticity are that they express their genuine opinions in their content, and they appear to be internally motivated and not externally motivated when it comes to making

their content (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Essentially audiences expect influencers to “be” authentic through accurate representations of themselves, their lives, and their opinions in their content. Authenticity is also one of the best predictors of PSR with influencers (Liu & Zheng, 2024; Park et al., 2021). In addition to this, influencers report that their direct interactions with fans are an aspect of how they cultivate authenticity (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022). This again ties authenticity back into parasocial relationships since interaction encourages parasocial relationships to form (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Furthermore, for influencers, authenticity is not only an aspect of their personal brand, but the broad ethical obligation that influencers report holding themselves to (Wellman et al., 2020). Interviews with travel influencers, revealed that these influencers feel that they and their influencer peers and colleagues have a responsibility to represent themselves authentically in their content and in their interactions with their fans (Wellman et al., 2020).

Another aspect of parasocial relationships that is influenced by the affordances specific to social media is that it provides the opportunity for fans to have seemingly more reciprocal relationships with their idols. Chung and Cho (2017) identified the interactive nature of social media, particularly the possibility of having celebrities and influencers respond to fans' comments, as a factor in parasocial relationships either created or mediated by social media. They state that fans may be more likely to keep returning to the same influencer and interacting with their content in the hopes that the influencer may notice them and interact back, since influencers do sometimes comment back to fans. Importantly, these relationships are still one-sided in that the celebrity or influencer does not truly have a relationship with the fan even if they comment back on a fan's post—they don't suddenly know the fan in a way that would make the relationship truly reciprocal—but the small amount of interaction suggests the possibility of

reciprocation and strengthens the parasocial relationship for the fan (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

All these factors work together for influencers on social media to foster parasocial relationships. Much of the findings concerning social media and parasocial relationships suggest that previous assumptions about parasocial relationships and television apply in an online setting, but the online setting has brought several new factors—such as the possibility for reciprocation, the emphasis on self-disclosure, and the accessibility of content—that can further strengthen these relationships.

Parasocial Breakups

Social media has been identified as a source of parasocial relationships, but what happens when parasocial relationships end? J. Cohen (2003) hypothesized that since parasocial relationships resemble social relationships the *parasocial breakup* (PSB) ought also to resemble the dissolution of a social relationship. In their research, J. Cohen found that people expected to have negative feelings toward a parasocial breakup, similar to what they would experience in a real breakup (J. Cohen, 2003, 2004). Cohen referred to this distress as *parasocial breakup distress* (PSB-distress). Additional studies looking at PSB after the end of popular TV series have similarly found that PSB results in that psychological distress; however, distress at the loss of a PSR was generally lower than distress at the loss of a social relationship (E. L. Cohen, 2010; J. Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Additionally, although loneliness has little connection to the formation of PSR, loneliness was found to increase PSB-distress (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). A spoiler, on the other hand, could reduce PSB-distress likely through allowing fans to prepare for it (Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018). In all these studies there is an element of the foreseen to the breakup; audiences are aware that TV shows end and that they will one day part with their

favorite characters. A breakup caused by a moral violation may, therefore, be less expected than one caused by the ending of a TV show, and as the research regarding spoilers would suggest, the breakups that audiences can prepare for are less distressing (Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018).

One early study on PSB was able to examine these unforeseen breakups. In a unique study, Lather and Moyer-Guse were able to take advantage of a television worker strike that left several shows off air for an indeterminate amount of time to study unforeseen, albeit impermanent, PSB (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). They found that even impermanent parasocial breakups, such as an interruption in regularly scheduled programming for an indeterminate amount of time, still led to emotional distress; the levels of emotional distress were mediated by the viewing motivation, with companionship motivations and stronger PSR leading to more distress (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). All of the above studies ask about the possibility of a parasocial breakup but did not ask about how the breakup came to be. It is likely that the response to an involuntary breakup resulting from a character being taken off the air would be different from a voluntary breakup resulting from one's favorite influencer doing something one believes to be immoral.

Morality

Morality, Media, and Enjoyment

Influencers, PSRs, and PSB all exist within a broader context, one of media and morality which have a mutually reinforcing relationship in that our morality influences the types of media we engage with and the media we engage with influences our morality (Eden et al., 2014). When audiences engage with media, moral similarity between the viewer and media persona influences liking and connection to the media persona (Tamborini et al., 2013). For example, a viewer who values care may feel more connected to a character who seems very caring, rather than a

character who exhibits fairness. Interestingly, liked characters are typically perceived as more moral than disliked characters who exhibit similar levels of morality, but the direction of this relationship is unclear with some studies suggesting that morality causes liking and other studies suggesting that liking leads us to see characters as more moral (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard et al., 2020).

This intricate relationship between liking and morality is further complicated by morally ambiguous characters (MACs): characters that have a combination of positive and negative moral traits and do not neatly fall into a hero or villain archetype. MACs are the exception to the rule of liking entirely in that they may be liked even if they are not perceived as moral (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard et al., 2020). One might argue that MACs are complex in a way that is truer to real people. Thus, moral violations committed by real people like influencers may be perceived more like MACs' moral violations than traditional characters – that is, with more nuance and appreciation for the complexity of moral decisions. This research on the relationships between MACs, morality, and linking suggest first that morality is complex and nuanced rather than formulaic, and second that morality may be relative—moral standards may shift depending on the expectation of the character. It is plausible that this can apply beyond fictional characters. Similar to MACs, real people like celebrities and influencers may be seen as more complicated and thus the relationship between liking and morality may be more complicated as well. Furthermore, the research on MACs suggests that people may have different moral expectations for different media personas, and this too likely extends to celebrities and influencers.

Expectancy Violations Theory and Social Relationships

One theory that sheds light on the complexity of people's reactions to moral violations is *Expectancy Violations Theory*. According to this theory, we have a set of expectations or schema

within which our relationships operate, and violations of those expectations cause the relationship to suffer (E. L. Cohen, 2010). This applies to both social and parasocial relationships. One important aspect of these expectations and violations is that they differ from relationship to relationship. A violation in one relationship may not be a violation in another relationship. This means that the expectations one has of their friend might differ from their pharmacist, or their parent, or even their favorite influencer. Furthermore, these expectations may differ from pharmacist to pharmacist, or importantly influencer to influencer. Extrapolating from this, one fan's expectations of a single influencer may differ from another fan's expectations, since these constitute two distinct parasocial relationships.

There are three main types of violations: moral violations, trust violations, and social violations (E. L. Cohen, 2010). Moral violations happen when a relationship partner acts outside of the moral expectations that the partner has for the relationship like adultery or abuse. Trust violations, although similar, can involve things outside of immorality, for example failing to show up on time for an important event. Finally, there are social violations. Relationships come with certain expected behaviors that become normalized over time, these can again relate to trust and morality, but they have more to do with deviating from patterns of behavior. For example, partner A usually makes the coffee every morning, but this morning they didn't, neither a moral code nor the other partner's trust have been broken, but the break with their normal behavior might result in some tension at breakfast that morning. There is some overlap between these violations, for example telling a lie may be seen as both a moral and trust violation and being rude to a cashier may be seen as both a social and moral violation.

Researchers have examined how social relationships are impacted by these moral violations. In line with expectancy violations theory, relational motivations, the type of or reason

for having the relationship, impact perceptions of how morally wrong something is (Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019). It may feel more morally wrong for one's friend to lie about what they were doing last weekend than for one's pharmacist to do the same. Interestingly, moral violations in close social relationships may lead to more self-criticism and guilt than criticism of the person who committed the violation; this may be because the process of justifying and downplaying a close other's bad behavior then leads to guilt on the part of the person doing the downplaying (Forbes & Stellar, 2022). However, despite less harsh reactions for close others committing moral violations, the context of a relationship changes moral relevance of moral violations, meaning that one may be inclined to be less harsh while also feeling that the act has more meaning because of the relationship. This is particularly true when the act is perceived as a threat to the relationship or community (Forbes & Stellar, 2022; Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019). Finally, morality is often central to both our own identity and to how we perceive others (Heiphetz et al., 2018). Taken together, violations, particularly moral violations, may have unique impacts not only on the relationship, but on individuals' perceptions of both self and other. Altogether the context of the relationship matters greatly when it comes to how a moral violation is perceived and responded to.

Social relationships are not the only relationships that can experience violations. Parasocial relationships are also affected by expectancy violations (E. L. Cohen, 2010). However, in line with research suggesting that moral wrongness and expectations differ by relationship, parasocial relationships differ from social relationships in reactions to expectancy violations (E. L. Cohen, 2010; Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019). A study by E. L. Cohen (2010) found that there was a significant difference in how fans responded to major and minor moral violations committed by media personas versus friends, despite there being no significant

difference between the two groups when it came to trust and social violations. Interestingly, for close friends both major and minor moral violations resulted in less anticipated reduction in closeness than for trust and social violations, whereas for media personas this was only true of minor moral violations, which still resulted in a greater anticipated reduction in closeness for media personas than friends. Essentially, what Cohen found is that people anticipated a greater effect of moral violations committed by media personas than by friends and that the severity of the moral violation matters when it comes to how much their relational closeness was influenced.

Other studies have also found that moral violations have a negative impact on PSR with media personas. Bonus et. al. (2021) examined how parasocial relationships are affected by violations of moral expectations. Violations that were positive (i.e., an unexpected morally good action) strengthened the relationship with the villain and caused fans to like the villain more; interestingly, both positive and negative moral expectation violations had a negative impact on parasocial relationships with the protagonist, which they speculated had more to do with the well-established expectations of the character such that any violation weakened their connection to the character (Bonus et al., 2021). Although this study looks at fictional characters it is possible that reactions would be similar when influencers commit moral expectancy violations. However, one could make the argument that our expectations of real people differ from our expectations of fictional characters, and that parasocial relationships with these two groups may differ in how they are influenced by particular behaviors. Since expectancy violations impact all kinds of relationships, expectancy violations theory may explain the varying reactions that fans have to influencer moral violations, and it may shed light on why some influencers are more punished than others.

Celebrity, Moral Violations, and PSB

Beyond fictional characters, a few studies have examined how moral violations can impact parasocial relationships and parasocial breakups with celebrities. One qualitative interview study looking at parasocial breakups with Kevin Spacey after his sexual misconduct allegations suggested that moral violations, what the researchers refer to as “scandal,” lead to a distressing process of grief and a sense of broken trust (Jones et al., 2022). Similarly, a quantitative study on celebrity scandal found that scandal could lead fans with a parasocial relationship to experience PSB-distress which Hu (2016) used to gauge if a parasocial breakup had happened. Specifically, Hu (2016) found that the post tested parasocial relationship was lower and the PSB-Distress was higher for the scandal condition than the control group. They also found that the stronger the pretested parasocial relationship, the more parasocial breakup distress was experienced by participants, which is in line with previous research on PSB-Distress (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). However, they did not measure any actions or intentions that might suggest that fans would choose to break up with the celebrity. It may be that in this context the distress and the actual act of severing ties with a media figure are separate things, especially given the already distressing nature of a moral violation. The measurement for an actual parasocial breakup was a decrease in PSR, however, it is possible that that decrease in PSR may not actually lead to fans severing their ties with a media figure. Therefore, the first research question addresses an issue tangential to the issue of morality and PSR, but essential to better understanding PSR and PSB:

RQ1: Is a decrease in PSR correlated with an increase in PSB?

Notably, neither the Kevin Spacey nor George Clooney studies (Hu, 2016; Jones et al., 2022) measured either the moral leanings of the fans or their moral perceptions of the celebrity;

however for Jones et al. (2022) morality emerged in their interviews with fans as a driving factor in fans' reactions to celebrity scandal to morally decouple by separating their morals from the celebrity, morally sublate by assimilating or excusing the new morality, or become morally outraged (Jones et al., 2022). This provides further evidence that the morality of the fan may be an important factor in the results of a moral violation. They also note that PSB with media figures like celebrities and influencers, rather than media characters, needs more research. This provides further evidence for the need to look at parasocial breakups with influencers.

As mentioned above, influencers appear to be particularly understudied in the context of morality and parasocial relationships and given social media's ability to amplify parasocial relationships it follows that there could be differences between traditional celebrities and influencers. Specifically, given the strength of the attachments that are formed through social media with influencers, a response to a moral violation may differ either due to devotion or due to a heightened sense of betrayal. Although previous studies have suggested that fans have a variety of reactions to moral infractions committed by celebrities including but not limited to a decrease in PSR and PSB-distress (Hu, 2016; Jones et al., 2022), the combination of morality, parasocial relationships/breakups, and influencers has not been studied. Additionally, Hu noted that future research should examine the severity of the scandal/moral violation in order to determine how severity influences parasocial breakup (2016). This leads to my first hypothesis and second research question:

H1: PSR will decrease proportionally as a result of an exposure to a moral violation committed by the influencer and the degree of the moral violation committed by an influencer.

RQ2: Will exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer result in a parasocial breakup?

Affective Disposition Theory

Related to morality and media, another theory that may illuminate the processes at play with influencer moral violations is *affective disposition theory* (ADT). ADT suggests that enjoyment of media comes from moral justice for characters, i.e., the good guys win, and the bad guys lose (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2021; Tamborini et al., 2013). These moral judgements of characters are often made automatically without much critical thought while viewing a show (Tamborini et al., 2013). Audiences' attitudes toward characters are influenced by their moral judgment of the behavior of the characters; when characters do things that are wrong, people respond negatively, and when characters act in ways that are right, the audience generally responds more positively (Bonus, 2021). As previously discussed, moral similarity between the viewer and character fosters connection with the character and liking of characters in fiction; however, the direction of this relationship is unclear (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard et al., 2020; Tamborini et al., 2013). The ambiguous direction of this relationship is important because if liking is purely based on morality, then a moral violation will have a high impact on liking—and through liking PSR; however, if our liking of a character has a bigger influence on the character's perceived morality than the liking—and by extension the PSR—would potentially lead fans to downplay a moral violation. Therefore, it is likely that there is a relationship between PSR and enjoyment in the context of a moral violation.

Additionally, when viewers and fans see characters (both in fiction and reality-based shows) that are morally similar to themselves, they report stronger parasocial relationships and report enjoying the content more (Eden et al., 2015; Nabi et al., 2006). Conversely cognitive

dissonance, perhaps caused by a moral violation, and disengagement from characters limit enjoyment (Eden et al., 2017; Raney, 2011). These aspects are likely at play with influencers as well. It is possible that how morally similar fans are to the influencer will affect their reaction to the moral violation, or it may be possible that the moral violation will influence fans' perception of their similarity to the influencer. All of these could affect enjoyment of the influencer's content and a change in PSR. This leads to my next set of research questions.

RQ3: How does the pre moral violation alignment of the participant's and influencer's morality impact a change in PSR after exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer?

RQ4: How does a change in alignment between participant and influencer morality impact a change in PSR after exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer?

RQ5: Will exposure to a moral violation committed by the influencer decrease enjoyment of the influencer's content?

Additionally, E.L. Cohen (2010) found that gender moderated people's reactions to hypothetical moral violations, with women anticipating a greater negative impact on their PSR with media figures when a moral violation was committed than men, leading to my second hypothesis:

H2: Gender will moderate a decrease in PSR after exposure to a moral violation committed by the influencer.

Fans often desire good endings for moral characters who are typically more liked by fans and justice for immoral characters who are typically less liked by fans (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2021; Tamborini et al., 2013). Because of this, a

shift in perceived morality of the influencer may lead to fans predicting certain outcomes that align with moral justice, which leads to a sixth research question:

RQ6: What types of outcomes will fans predict for the influencer when a moral violation has been committed?

As mentioned previously, influencers are seen as more authentic and more like everyday people than traditional celebrities, which strengthens parasocial relationships (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, authenticity is one of the best predictors of PSR with influencers (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Lack of authenticity hurts credibility and may be seen as unethical, particularly by other influencers (Lee & Eastin, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). Moral violations may hurt PSR with influencers who are perceived as more authentic because they likely have stronger PSR and thus more to lose and because the act may be seen as a violation of both morality and authenticity since a scandal coming to light may be seen as them hiding an aspect of their lives which would make them seem inauthentic. This leads to my next research question:

RQ7: Will authenticity of the influencer moderate a decrease in PSR after exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer?

As mentioned above, the amount of exposure increases the strength of a parasocial relationship (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002). Therefore engagement, which would increase the amount of exposure, may influence a change in PSR, which leads to my final research question:

RQ8: Will the amount of social media engagement of the fan moderate a decrease in PSR after exposure to a moral violation committed by an influencer?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This study utilized a between-subjects online experiment wherein respondents were exposed to one of three conditions, two involving moral violations and a control condition. Respondents were asked to think of an influencer and were instructed to take the survey and engage with the stimuli with that influencer in mind.

Participants

This study was conducted at a medium-sized public university in the northeastern United States. Undergraduate students were recruited through a participant pool in communication and psychology courses. They received credit for participating in the study. To be included in the study, participants had to answer yes to the pre-screening question: “Do you follow one or more influencers on any of your social media accounts? (an influencer is defined as an individual who leverages social media through personal-brand and authenticity to gain followers and build a business out of their personal-brand).” (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Lee & Eastin, 2021). Participants who did not follow at least one influencer were ineligible to participate in this study. Once data collection was completed, participants who stopped answering questions after the stimulus, skipped an entire scale or more of questions, or failed the manipulation check were excluded from the final analysis. A total of 507 participants took the survey; after cleaning the data with the steps outlined above there were 297 usable responses. 85.2% of the participants identified as white with the remaining participants identifying as two or more (9.6%), Black or African American (1.7%), Asian (1.3%), Hispanic or Latinx (.7%), Native American or Alaska Native (.3%), and other (.3%). The gender identities of the sample were female (49.5%), male (47.8%), non-binary (2.4%), and other (.3%). The mean age for the sample was 18.66 ($SD=1.005$); this distribution was positively skewed as participants had to be at least 18 to participate.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected through an online experiment carried out using Qualtrics (see Appendix A for the questionnaire). The study started by consenting the participants. Participants were aware that the study was on parasocial relationships with influencers; however, they did not know that the study was also about morality, as this might have impacted their responses. Next, participants completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire to determine their own sense of morality (Graham et al., 2011). Participants were then asked to think of one of their favorite influencers (see Appendix B for a list of chosen influencers), what social media platforms they follow this influencer on, and were asked to report this. They then completed measures for PSR, influencer authenticity, and enjoyment, as well as the moral foundations questionnaire for the influencer. Next, participants were randomly sorted into one of three conditions: control, medium-level moral violation (MMV), and severe moral violation (SMV). Next, participants completed the manipulation check. Then, they again completed the moral foundations questionnaire for the influencer, PSR, and enjoyment scales. To assess parasocial breakup I used a scale where participants were asked on a scale of 1 to 10 if they would continue to follow this influencer and on a scale of 1 to 10 if they would continue to watch their content. They were then asked an open-ended question, “If the news story you read happened in real life, what do you think would happen to the influencer's career, if anything?” Next, they completed the Social Media Engagement Scale for Adolescents (Ni et al., 2020). Finally, they were asked demographic questions. Included at the end of the survey was a debrief explaining the purpose of the research.

Stimuli

The stimuli for the three conditions were developed to be applicable to a wide range of influencers. Participants were asked to imagine that the influencer they chose was the subject of a set of two news stories posted to Instagram, one from the BBC and one from NPR, describing either a neutral act for the control group (influencer goes apple picking), a medium-level moral violation (MMV) (influencer abandoning an animal at shelter), or severe moral violation (SMV) (influencer caught hoarding animals) (see Appendix C for stimuli).

To check if the manipulation worked, participants were asked on a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* “was this a moral violation?” for the control group answers of *neutral*, *agree*, or *strongly agree* were considered a failure of the manipulation check. For the medium and severe moral violation conditions, an answer of *neutral*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree* was considered a failure of the manipulation check. Scores revealed that a majority of participants in each condition passed the manipulation check. (control: 84 out of 163; MMV:119 out of 179; SMV: 111 out of 148), suggesting that the manipulation worked.

Measures

Morality

To measure participant and influencer morality, the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011) was used. The scale consists of two types of items, one focused on judgment and one on relevance. Items looking at judgment measure people's agreement with normative statements. Relevance items focus on how important a particular value is to an individual. The scale is also split into five domains of morality: Harm, Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity. According to Graham et al. there are several options for the number of factors this scale can be split into. In the context of this study, it made the most sense to use the

five-factor option which entails combining relevance and judgment items and splitting along the five domains of morality, such that each domain contains three judgment items and three relevance items. All relevance items were measured on 7-point scales from *not at all relevant* to *extremely relevant*, this included questions like, “Whether or not someone was cruel.” Judgment items were also on a 7-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and included questions like, “People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.”

For the participant, the domains were all reliable; Fairness, 6 items, sample item, “Justice is the most important requirement for a society,” $N=293$, $M=4.781$, $SD=0.863$, $\alpha=.740$; Ingroup, 6 items, sample item, “It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself,” $N=291$, $M=3.961$, $SD=0.993$, $\alpha=.699$, Authority, 6 items, sample item, “Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society,” $N=293$, $M=4.092$, $SD=1.008$, $\alpha=.733$, Purity, 6 items, sample item, “People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed,” $N=296$, $M=3.602$, $SD=1.085$, $\alpha=.764$, and Harm, 6 items, sample item, “Whether or not someone suffered emotionally,” $N=297$, $M=4.898$, $SD=0.846$, $\alpha=.669$.

For the influencer the questions were all the same and the domains were all reliable as well, Fairness, $N=295$, $M=4.962$, $SD=1.036$, $\alpha=.818$ (Pretest), $N=289$, $M=4.333$, $SD=1.199$, $\alpha=.832$ (post-test), Ingroup, $N=296$, $M=4.012$, $SD=1.081$, $\alpha=.753$ (pre-test), $N=291$, $M=3.875$, $SD=1.173$, $\alpha=.798$ (post-test), Authority, $N=295$, $M=3.801$, $SD=1.127$, $\alpha=.788$ (pre-test), $N=291$, $M=3.731$, $SD=1.174$, $\alpha=.810$ (post-test), Purity, $N=292$, $M=3.530$, $SD=1.299$, $\alpha=.850$ (pre-test), $N=295$, $M=3.332$, $SD=1.368$, $\alpha=.875$ (post-test), and Harm, $N=296$, $M=5.047$, $SD=1.011$, $\alpha=.851$ (pre-test), $N=293$, $M=4.425$, $SD=1.419$, $\alpha=.891$ (post-test).

As the reliability for the Harm scale for participants was lower than ideal (although still acceptable at .699) and considerably lower than the other scale, I ran a reliability analysis to determine the individual questions' influence on the entire scale. It was found that removing the statement "It can never be right to kill a human being." from the scale increased the reliability to an alpha of .727($N=297$, $M=4.966$, $SD=.839$). This could possibly be explained by the fact that in the middle of collecting data for this study a mass shooting was committed in a town less than two hours away from the university where the data collection was taking place. Due to that context, and the lack of nuance in the original question, it was decided that the question should be removed in order to maintain reliability, although the alpha for the influencer pretest Harm was .851 and posttest Harm was .891. To maintain consistency, the question was removed from all three scales with resulting pretest Harm alpha of .883($N=297$, $M=5.036$, $SD=1.060$), and posttest alpha of .902($N=293$, $M=4.383$, $SD=1.469$).

Parasocial Relationships

To measure the parasocial relationship with the influencer, Rubin's PSI scale was used (Rubin et al., 1985). The questions were modified to reflect influencers rather than newscasters. This scale includes statements such as "The influencer keeps me company when I view their content" (originally: my favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on television). Questions were designed to be run on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Due to a survey design error the post test was run on a 7-point scale instead of a 5-point scale. The posttest scale was recoded at a ratio of .714 to 1 in order to fit into the 5-point scale while leaving the spread of the original data intact. Scores were reliable, $N=297$, $M=3.371$, $SD=0.622$, $\alpha=.887$ (pre-test), $N=291$, $M=3.139$, $SD=0.851$, $\alpha=.943$ (post-test).

Authenticity of Influencer

To measure authenticity, the Authenticity of Social Media Influencers scale was used (Lee & Eastin, 2021). This scale contains questions like, “Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public” and “Comes off as very genuine” on a 7-point Likert scale from *not at all descriptive* to *exactly descriptive*. The scale proved to be reliable, $N=290$, $M=5.485$, $SD=0.927$, $\alpha=.898$.

Enjoyment

To measure enjoyment Oliver and Barch's (2010) enjoyment scale was used. This scale was modified to reflect influencer content and used items like, “Engaging with this influencer's content is meaningful” and “This influencer's content is heart pounding” on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. This scale proved to be reliable, $N=296$, $M=3.649$, $SD=0.770$, $\alpha=.908$ (pre-test), $N=290$, $M=3.445$, $SD=0.886$, $\alpha=.923$ (post-test).

Parasocial Breakup

To measure parasocial breakup this study used a self-made scale. Participants answered three questions related to their intended behavior: “if the news story you read happened in real life how likely would you be to unfollow this influencer?” “if the news story you read happened in real life how likely would you be to no longer like/comment on the influencer's content?” and “if the news story you read happened in real life how likely would you be to no longer watch/read the influencer's content?” on a 10-point numeric scale from *1* to *10*. This scale was reliable, $N=293$, $M=5.867$, $SD=3.029$, $\alpha=.930$.

Affective Disposition Theory

Participants were asked an open-ended question of “If the news story you read happened in real life, what do you think would happen to the influencer's career, if anything?” to assess how, if at all, the assumptions of affective disposition theory relate.

Social Media Engagement

To measure social media engagement, the Social Media Engagement Scale for Adolescents was used (Ni et al., 2020). This scale contains questions like, “Using social media is my daily habit” and “Compared to the real world, social media makes me feel more comfortable.” on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. It proved to be reliable, $N=293$, $M=3.125$, $SD=0.745$, $\alpha=.878$.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Since this study included both quantitative and qualitative data the results are discussed in two sections, starting with the quantitative results. After data cleaning, there were 84 participants in the control group, 112 in the medium-level moral violation (MMV), and 101 in the severe moral violation (SMV).

Quantitative Results

To examine if there is a relationship between PSB and a change in PSR (RQ1) a correlation was run. Pearson's r was $-.208$, suggesting that the two are not strongly related to each other but as PSB increases PSR decreases. ($N=295$, C.I. = -0.315 , -0.096). However, a one-way ANOVA found that the relationship between a change in PSR and PSB was not significant [$F(28, 266) = 1.325$, $p = .133$]. This suggests that a change in PSR and a Parasocial breakup are likely distinct, and a drop in PSR may not necessarily lead to PSB.

To test if exposure to a moral violation resulted in a decrease in PSR (H1), a one-way ANOVA was run comparing the control and two experimental groups. The relationship was not significant [$F(2, 293) = 2.435$, $p = .089$]; H1 was not supported. This suggests that a moral violation alone does not lead to with a change in PSR. However, there was a nonsignificant negative trend in PSR for those that were exposed to a moral violation, indicating that the moral violation may influence a decrease in PSR, but that other factors are likely at play in the relationship between these two variables.

To test if a moral violation resulted in a parasocial breakup (RQ2), a one-way ANOVA was run. The relationship was significant [$F(2, 293) = 72.689$, $p < .001$]. A post-hoc Bonferroni test showed that the means between each condition (Control ($M=3.398$, $SD=2.533$), MMV($M=5.921$, $SD=2.611$), SMV ($M=7.835$, $SD=2.294$) differed significantly at the $p < .001$

level. Suggesting that exposure to a moral violation may result in a parasocial breakup, and that the odds of a parasocial breakup increases with the severity the moral violation committed.

To test if moral difference between the participants and their chosen influencers moderated the relationship between exposure to a moral violation (RQ3) and change in PSR an OLS regression was run on each of the five domains of morality as a separate moderator using the difference between the participant's and influencer's morality. The relationship was not significant for any of the dimensions of morality. Harm [$\beta = .064$, $t(295) = 0.421$, $p = .674$], Fairness [$\beta = .064$, $t(295) = 0.408$, $p = .683$], Ingroup [$\beta = .005$, $t(295) = 0.032$, $p = .974$], Authority [$\beta = .015$, $t(295) = 0.084$, $p = .933$], and Purity [$\beta = -.168$, $t(295) = -1.024$, $p = .307$]. This suggests that the initial alignment of the participants' morality and the influencer's morality does not affect the relationship between exposure to a moral violation and a change in PSR.

To examine if difference in morality between the participant and the influencer after exposure to a moral violation mediated the relationship between the moral violation and change in PSR (RQ4), I used a Hayes Process Macro (Hayes, 2018) model 4 (bootstrap 10,000) on each of the five domains of morality using the difference between the participant and post tested influencer morality as a mediator.

Exposure to a moral violation influences a change in PSR indirectly through its effect on moral difference in the domain of harm ($ab = -0.068$, 95% bootstrap CI = -0.115 to -0.031). Exposure to a moral violation led to a larger perceived moral difference in the domain of Harm between the participant and the influencer ($a = 0.452$), with a larger perceived moral difference associated with a negative change in PSR ($b = -0.151$). There was no definitive evidence that exposure to a moral violation directly influences a change in PSR independent of its influence on moral difference in the domain of Harm ($c' = -0.021$, $p = .591$, 95% CI = -0.098 to 0.056).

Exposure to a moral violation also influences a change in PSR indirectly through its effect on moral difference in the domain of Fairness ($ab = -0.044$, 95% bootstrap CI = -0.085 to -0.0110). Exposure to a moral violation led to a larger perceived moral difference in the domain of Fairness between the participant and the influencer ($a = 0.261$), with a larger perceived moral difference associated with a negative change in PSR ($b = -0.167$). There was no definitive evidence that exposure to a moral violation directly influences a change in PSR independent of its influence on moral difference in the domain of Fairness ($c' = -0.046$, $p = .241$, 95% CI = -0.122 to 0.031).

Exposure to a moral violation influences a change in PSR indirectly through its effect on moral difference in the domain of Ingroup ($ab = -0.022$, 95% bootstrap CI = -0.050 to -0.003). Exposure to a moral violation led to a larger perceived moral difference in the domain of Ingroup between the participant and the influencer ($a = 0.202$), with a larger perceived moral difference associated with a negative change in PSR ($b = -0.107$). There was no definitive evidence that exposure to a moral violation directly influences a change in PSR independent of its influence on moral difference in the domain of Ingroup ($c' = -0.068$, $p = .100$, 95% CI = -0.149 to 0.013).

Exposure to a moral violation did not influence a change in PSR indirectly through its effect on moral difference in the domain of Authority ($ab = -0.003$, 95% bootstrap CI = -0.020 to $.0118$) or Purity ($ab = -0.009$, 95% bootstrap CI = -0.031 to 0.009). Exposure to a moral violation had no significant effect on the perceived moral difference in the domains of Authority or Purity. Interestingly, a larger perceived moral difference in both domains was still associated with a negative change in PSR (authority: $b = -0.095$, $p = .002$; Purity: $b = -0.103$, $p < .001$). There was no definitive evidence that exposure to a moral violation directly influences a change in PSR

independent of its influence on moral difference in the domain of authority ($c' = -0.087$, $p = .035$, 95% CI = -0.167 to -0.006) or purity ($c' = -0.080$, $p = .049$, 95% CI = -0.160 to -0.0002).

To understand if exposure to a moral violation had an effect on enjoyment (RQ5) a one-way ANOVA was conducted. There was a significant effect of exposure to a moral violation on enjoyment at the $p < .05$ level, such that enjoyment decreased as the magnitude of the moral violation increased [$F(2, 294) = 3.842$, $p = .023$]. A post-hoc Bonferroni test showed that there was a significant difference between the means of the control group ($M = -0.092$, $SD = 0.333$) and the SMV condition ($M = -0.303$, $SD = 0.663$), $p = .018$. There was no significant difference between the MMV condition ($M = -0.201$, $SD = 0.474$) and the control, $p = .440$, or the MMV condition and the SMV, $p = .444$. This suggests that a moral violation had a negative impact on the participants' enjoyment of the influencer, but only in the severe moral violation condition.

In order to test if the perceived authenticity of the influencer moderated the relationship between exposure to a moral violation and a change in PSR (RQ7) an OLS regression was run. The interaction was not significant [$\beta = .346$, $t(295) = 1.295$, $p = .196$] suggesting that when accounting for authenticity there is not a relationship between exposure to a moral violation and a change in PSR.

To test if the level of engagement that participants typically had with social media moderated the relationship between exposure to a moral violation and a change in PSR (RQ8) an OLS regression was run. The interaction was not significant, [$\beta = -.199$, $t(295) = -0.567$, $p = .571$], suggesting that level of engagement did not moderate a relationship between change in PSR and exposure to a moral violation.

To answer the question if gender moderated the relationship between exposure to a moral violation and PSR (H2) an OLS regression was run. All categories were Included. The

interaction was not significant [$\beta = -.195$, $t(295) = -0.855$, $p = .393$] suggesting that gender does not influence a change in PSR after exposure to a moral violation.

Qualitative Results

There were 289 usable responses to the question about predicted outcomes for the influencer (Control=80 (of 84, 95%), MMV=111 (of 112, 99%), SMV=98 (of 101, 97%)). To examine what kind of outcome participants predicted for influencers who had committed a moral violation (RQ6), I began by coding the qualitative results using a process inspired by principles from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Specifically, an iterative coding process was used where codes were initially developed to reflect the kinds of outcomes participants predicted. While coding for outcomes, I also found that many respondents mentioned issues and ideas other than just the outcomes. These secondary codes reflected broader social issues.

After initially coding the 290 responses, I used an iterative process to refine the codes. In this process, I first assigned initial codes to the answers. Then, I went back through the data, refining the codes and grouping them into themes. This is when two broad themes emerged: possible outcomes and references to broader social issues. All responses were coded for a specific outcome code, but there were several responses that received secondary codes because they referenced broader social issues.

Overall, fans predicted few negative outcomes in the control condition, mixed outcomes in the MMV condition, and generally negative outcomes in the SMV condition which is in alignment with what affective disposition theory would have predicted; immoral actions lead to negative consequences, and the more severe the action, the more severe the consequences.

Possible outcomes for the influencer

No Impact. Many people suggested that essentially nothing, or nothing of consequence would happen to the influencer. This was the second most common code after *negative impact on career/following/image*, but it is important to note that the vast majority of these responses were in the control condition. Additionally, a large number of responses were simply the word “nothing” or a short sentence that did not elaborate on why respondents thought it would be nothing. *No impact* was the most common code in the control condition, which is in alignment with what was to be expected in the case that the manipulation worked. It showed up in a few of the responses in the MMV condition, and only made a couple of appearances in the SMV condition. This is in line with what was to be expected and provides additional evidence for the manipulation. The more severe the moral violation the less fans thought there would be no impact on the influencer.

Within the SMV condition the few responses in the *no impact* code suggested that either people would forget or they simply wouldn't believe it as can be seen in one response which stated, “people would know she didn't do it on purpose as she is an avid animal lover and already has a large enough house for her 4 dogs and 2 cats.” This comment would seem to suggest that the predicted impact was not so much in relation to the moral violation but its believability. This speaks to issues with the development of the stimuli which will be addressed in the discussion. Responses for the MMV followed a similar thread with one participant saying, “I don't think anything would happen to my influencer because he doesn't have anything to do with dogs, he does have a dog or two but its (sic) such a small part of his content that it would make no difference.” These comments speak to the external validity of the manipulation. Since participants chose their own influencer there was no way to control for influencers who were

avid animal lovers or responsible animal owners, and thus the idea of them committing either of the moral violations was beyond the suspension of disbelief. This issue will be discussed further in the discussion.

Little to no impact on career. This code was less common than all the others, but there were several responses that suggested that although there would likely be a small impact it would be largely insignificant. Although this code appeared a few times in the control condition it was more present in both the MMV and SMV conditions.

Two of the respondents in the MMV condition wrote, “I think that people would not have as favorable an impression of him but otherwise not much.” and “Nothing, maybe some people will unfollow but people will forget so quickly. Or they wouldn't see the post.” Both of these suggest minor consequences but that the issue would likely not gain enough traction for there to be any real impact on the influencer's career.

There were fewer answers from respondents in the SMV in this code but those that did generally suggested that either their influencer was so polarizing that it wouldn't matter, or that the influencer would deny it and be believed. This speaks to the nature of the influencer, either that it wouldn't stick to them because little seems to stick to their influencer, or that their fan base typically believes their explanations for their behavior. One respondent even called the legitimacy of the news article into question saying, “The news article would probably be somewhat, if not totally exaggerated. I think he would be fine, barring some very concrete evidence.” This again speaks to believability, but in a different way, suggesting that allegations need concrete evidence to have any real effect.

Negative but recoverable impact on career. This code represents those participant responses that suggested that there would be a negative impact, but that that impact would fade

over time or if the influencer took certain steps. Although there were again a few of these responses within the control group, a significant majority were in the two moral violation conditions. Several responses alluded to past influencer scandals, like James Charles and Shane Dawson (Koul, 2023; Lewis & Christin, 2022). These scandals seemed like a big deal at first, but the influencers continued to make content and people eventually forgot. This was most common in the MMV condition, “I think at first her career would take a negative hit. But over time, the internet forgets about everything and moves on to the next big problem. over time Livvy would regain her popularity.” and, “I think that a lot of people would view him differently and he would probably be ‘cancelled’ (sic) for a little bit but then everyone would just forget about it like usually happens.”

This trend continued into the SMV condition, which had slightly fewer of these responses than the MMV. One participant even outlined what they had seen happen with influencers in the past, saying:

Based off of what I know has happened to other influencers when they have a scandal, I would assume that a lot of people would react poorly and call the creator out on their actions and start to unfollow them. There will be some people who defend them no matter what and continue to follow them. The creator will come out with an apology video that will probably fan the flames for a while. After about two weeks everyone will probably forget and never talk about it again. Ultimately, the creator will come out of the scandal relatively unscathed.

Another even specifically mentioned popular influencers who had significant scandals and still have careers and followings, “Probably she would lose a significant amount of followers since

her 'brand' is very 'wholesome', however as we see people like shane dawson (sic) and james charles (sic) still having platforms- maybe not a lot would go down.” This comment in particular may allude to a lack of fairness on the internet when it comes to internet scandal, that ultimately, as was the case for the two referenced influencers (Koul, 2023; Lewis & Christin, 2022), people forget and there are few lasting consequences when influencers misbehave.

Negative impact on career/following/image. This code was used for those comments that suggested that there would be some negative impact on the influencer’s career, following, and/or image, without suggesting that it was recoverable or suggesting that the influencer’s career would or might end. This was the most common code, and again it only made a few appearances in the control group. It showed up nearly equally in both of the moral violation conditions. Some comments alluded more to reputation damage, while others suggested that their career or following would take a hit.

Within this code participants occasionally mentioned specific aspects of the influencer, like their kindness or their animal loving(ness) that would contribute to the impact with one saying, “I think it would definitely take a big hit as my influencer is known to be a very nice guy who likes dogs a lot.” The mention of expectations in this comment speaks to expectancy violations theory (E. L. Cohen, 2010), as this fan anticipated a negative impact specifically because this moral violation would be so outside of their image and people’s expectations of them. Another respondent suggested that their influencer would no longer be seen as a caring person. Many within this code simply said some iteration of, “they would lose a lot of followers”. Within the SMV condition that trend continued. One participant even mentioned that their influencer could lose brand deals, saying,

I think a lot of the brand deals they have signed and NIL [name, image, and likeness] deals would be terminated. However, I think he would still pursue his career despite this even though he would have no alternative income. He would probably also be kicked from his current institution of higher learning, but picked up by another I imagine.

This suggests an awareness of the various aspects of influencers' careers.

Loss of career/following. The comments that fall into this code suggested that a loss of career was possible or likely, without mentioning any possibility of recovery. Again, it was marginally present in the control group, but again the answers were short and contained no explanation. This code appeared in the medium and severe moral violation conditions, although it was less common than those that predicted a negative or negative but recoverable outcome in the MMV condition, and more common in the SMV condition. It was the most common code in the SMV condition. This suggests a general trend toward more severe predictions for more severe moral violations. Many of the comments in the MMV were similar to one participant's when they said, "There (sic) career would uncertain (sic) I do believe if this actually happened that the influencer in question would have to end his career." while others offered very short answers like, "it would end." This trend again continued into the SMV condition. Additionally, several made references to the influencer's content, "Because this certain influencer is a animal (sic) lover and that's what most of her content consists of I think her career would definitely be at risk." A few also mentioned potential legal issues, "the influencers life would be ruined and they would probably be put in prison for animal abuse."

Reference to Broader Social Issues

Within some of the responses in the above outcome codes, participants made references that related to broader social issues. These were given a second code, and these codes were represented across several of the above-mentioned codes.

Influencer Apology or Explanation. This code contained suggestions that the influencer might be able to or would at least try to explain or apologize their way out of the situation, or that if the influencer did not explain or apologize that there would be big consequences. This code appeared within the outcome codes *little to no impact on career*, *negative but recoverable impact on career/following*, and *Negative impact on career/following/image*. This suggests that the apology or explanation exists outside of a particular outcome and are a part of the larger processes at play in these types of influencer scandals. The references to the apology video are particularly intriguing given how common influencer apologies are, with some researchers suggesting that the apology video is a type of performance or script for influencers to follow rather than a sincere act of accountability (Lewis & Christin, 2022). Interestingly, some of the participants seemed to have the same idea as one in the SMV condition said, “I think he could be canceled for a little while but after some time he would probably make and (sic) apology video even though its unjustifiable but after some time it would blow over.” Another in the MMV condition suggested that an apology video may even cause the scandal to help the influencer’s career overall:

I think the influencers (sic) career would take a dip at the moment as the news story about the puppy would cause a hard uprise (sic) from the public. This uprising would cause him to intially (sic) lose followers. But if he were to explain the situation fully and make an apology video he

might gain followers in the long run as other youtubers could make a video covering his controversy. This coverage would give him more exposure overall gaining him followers if he were to be forgiven. If he didn't show an remorse (sic) I think his career would end soon.

Others were less disillusioned with the process, suggesting that an apology was a real means of making things right with one in the MMV group saying, “Many fans would call them out on their behavior and stop supporting them until and (sic) explanation, apology, or acknowledgement was made.” and another in the same group suggesting, “I would hope that they would put out a statement regarding the news story and explaining it. However, I believe they would lose followers.” However, the trend was toward the first kind of comment in which the apology video was merely a part of the influencer scandal cycle.

Reference to Cancel Culture. Almost in opposition to the apology video there were references to cancel culture throughout. This code was used to indicate any response that mentioned cancel culture, canceling, or being canceled. Many responses simply used the term in some version of “they would be canceled,” without elaborating. There were also several responses that spoke to the issue of cancel culture and its implications. In contrast to the apology video code, in which many suggested that a performative apology was all it would take for the internet to forget, those who referenced cancel culture at times suggested that the internet may be too harsh and unforgiving. Unlike the apology video code which only appeared in the moral violation conditions, references to cancel culture appeared in all three conditions, although it appeared less within the control condition. One response in the control condition was particularly intriguing, “I'm not sure she would probably be ‘canceled’ according to internet standards.” This comment gets at how some believe that the internet judges moral violations in an unfair or

unreasonable way; that these moral judgments may be random and not connected to anything truly meaningful. This can be seen in the above comment suggesting that maybe even something as innocuous as apple picking is a cancelable offense. This comment speaks particularly well to the idea present within this code that there's a certain harshness to the internet's reactions to moral violations.

This code also appeared equally in both moral violation conditions. Canceling seemed to be seen as permanent for some participants and impermanent for others. One respondent in the MMV put it, "He would probably be cancelled (sic), which would be the start of the end of his career," while another in the same condition said, "She would be cancelled (sic) for a time, but then return to social media." This trend continued into the SMV condition with one fan suggesting impermanence, "They would be cancelled (sic) and probably come back with a smaller following like they always do." while others suggested permanence, "They would be canceled right then and there, her career would be ruined forever." Still another suggested that the end of the career was the canceling, "They would become less popular until the point where they become cancelled (sic)." All of this speaks to the general ambiguity surrounding the term "cancel culture" that has been reflected in academic literature on the topic as well, with some using the term to refer to the cycle of being canceled, apologizing, and regaining popularity through a process of accountability (Clark, 2020), and some suggesting that being canceled is life ruining and/or career ending, lacking any kind of nuance (Ng, 2020). This issue will be further examined in the discussion.

Interestingly both moral violation conditions had a response that included both a reference to cancel culture and to the apology/explanation with one participant in the MMV condition saying, "I think they would be 'cancelled' (sic), then they would explain themselves

and people would forgive them over time” and another in the SMV condition saying, “I think he could be canceled for a little while but after some time he would probably make and (sic) apology video even though its unjustifiable but after some time it would blow over.” In addition to being very similar, these comments both speak to this sort of tension within the term cancel culture, where perhaps the apology is part of the cycle of cancellation and response.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study examined how moral violations affect parasocial relationships with influencers. This research adds to previous literature on media, morality, and enjoyment, and extends the research on moral violations and parasocial relationships beyond characters and major celebrities to look at social media influencers. It also examines the roles of authenticity, media engagement, moral similarity and gender in the relationship between moral violations and changes in parasocial relationships. Through an online, three-condition between-subjects experiment in which participants imagined one of their favorite influencers committing a moral violation, I found that moral violations impact enjoyment and parasocial breakup. Furthermore, moral difference may be key to understanding when and how a moral violation impacts a parasocial relationship.

Findings and Implications

Contrary to what was expected, exposure to a moral violation did not cause a significant decrease in PSR. Though nonsignificant, the relationship was in the expected direction with PSR decreasing for those exposed to a moral violation. This indicates that those relational feelings of PSR do not immediately decrease with a moral violation, although this is contrary to what Hu (2016) found in their study where there was a significant decrease in PSR toward George Clooney when exposed to a moral violation. One explanation would be that parasocial relationships with influencers may be more resilient than those with celebrities and thus they are more resistant to a decrease in PSR. It is also possible that the type of influencer matters. Allowing participants to choose their own influencer led to a variety of chosen influencers (see Appendix B). Possibly, in those varying influencers there are also distinct types of parasocial relationships, and since morality is largely context specific and relational context changes the

expectations and the moral relevance of certain acts (E. L. Cohen, 2010; Tepe & Aydinli-Karakulak, 2019); a single moral violation may have vastly different impacts on those varying parasocial relationships. It is also possible that influencers have higher moral capital than celebrities, since they are seen as regular people, and thus have more to fall back on when they commit a moral violation. Finally, since this study used an imaginary scenario, it may have been difficult for fans to imagine a decrease in PSR.

Unlike a decrease in PSR, my findings did predict a parasocial breakup for participants who were exposed to a moral violation. Specifically, participants anticipated intentionally engaging less with the influencer or cutting them out entirely. In line with expectancy violations theory (E. L. Cohen, 2010), this suggests that moral violations do damage parasocial relationships. These findings are also similar to Hu's (2016), who found that parasocial breakup may be the result of moral violations. However, Hu measured PSB differently than I did in this study. Hu used differences in the pre and posttest PSR across their conditions and a shortened 5-item version of the Parasocial Breakup Distress Scale (J. Cohen, 2003), to suggest that a parasocial breakup had happened. In their study the moral violation led to both a decrease in PSR and increase in PSB-distress. For this study, I designed a 3-item scale that included PSB-behaviors that would indicate that the participants chose to break up with an influencer. The rationale behind this was that the Parasocial Breakup Distress Scale was designed to measure the distress that fans feel when TV characters are taken off the air, which didn't apply to this study. Furthermore, none of the items in this scale are suggestive of someone choosing a parasocial breakup, which is what this study was primarily interested in examining.

PSB-behaviors were not correlated with a decrease in PSR. This makes sense given that the moral violation predicted PSB-behaviors but did not predict a decrease in PSR. This suggests

that a decrease in PSR may not be an effective way to assess if a parasocial relationship has ended, which is what past studies have assumed (Hu, 2016). This makes sense when compared to social relationships. Although relationships may have their high points and low points, not every relationship that experiences a low point comes to an end. Since parasocial relationships function psychologically in ways that are similar to social relationships (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002), the nuances of relational closeness and relationship dissolution likely are also similar.

This study found that the participants' initial moral similarity to the influencer did not have a significant moderating effect on a change in PSR. However, I did find that moral similarity/difference between the participant and the influencer had a mediating effect on a change in PSR. Essentially, participants who perceived that their chosen influencers were no longer morally similar to them after the moral violation, predicted a significant decrease in PSR with that influencer. In line with this, a moral violation decreased participant's predicted enjoyment of the influencer's content. Both findings reflect affective disposition theory; media consumers like media personalities who are perceived as morally similar to them, leading to enjoyment, and they like those who are morally dissimilar less. There is a complicated relationship between morality and liking though, with some studies suggesting that we like those who we see as more moral, and others suggesting that we see media personalities as more moral because we like them (Eden et al., 2017; Grizzard et al., 2020). Although it is still possible, and even likely, that this relationship is more reciprocal and mutually reinforcing, this study provides some initial evidence for the former, that liking is based on moral similarity, particularly as people gain new moral information about media personas. Additionally, affective disposition theory is typically applied to fictional media programming. This study suggests that it may have

applications beyond more traditional forms of media and may also apply to the more reality-based content of influencers.

It is important to note that the moral violation only had a significant influence on moral difference within three of the five moral domains: Harm, Fairness, and Ingroup. Although the moral violation did not cause a significant difference in morality in the domains of Authority and Purity, the relationship between moral similarity/difference and change in PSR was significant in all five domains. This suggests that any perceived moral difference may be damaging to a parasocial relationship. The nonsignificant effect of the moral violation on the domains of Authority and Purity largely makes sense as the moral violation in the stimuli was not particularly an issue of Authority (respecting/following authority) or Purity (acting in ways that are clean, chaste, or not disgusting), but a particular issue of Harm (causing harm to another). According to Graham et al (2011) Harm and Fairness (treating others fairly/creating a fair society) are closely related concepts, so it is no surprise that Fairness behaved similarly to Harm. What is surprising is the results for Ingroup. Ingroup (respect/loyalty to your social group) is typically more correlated with Authority and Purity. In fact, when this scale is broken up into two factors rather than five, Harm and Fairness are grouped together, and Authority, Purity, and Ingroup are grouped together (e.g., Graham et al., 2011). Therefore, it is surprising that in this study Ingroup behaved more in line with Harm and Fairness. There is a possible explanation for this. Fans of influencers often form close communities in online spaces, and influencers reference and interact with the community constantly in their videos (Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Rohde & Mau, 2021). It is possible that any moral violation committed by an influencer could be seen as a threat to the community, therefore it would not only be seen as harmful more broadly, but it could be seen as harmful to the social group. Since the domain of Ingroup has more to do

with loyalty and protecting the group (Graham et al., 2011), this would explain its closer relationship with Harm in this study when the domain of Ingroup is generally more correlated with Authority and Purity.

I did not find evidence for authenticity, engagement, or gender moderators. This is despite the key roles that authenticity and engagement play when it comes to the formation and strength of PSR with influencers, and despite E. L. Cohen's (2010) finding that gender played a role in expectancy violations. Since the decrease in PSR was not significant, it is possible that these may still play a role when there is a more meaningful relationship between a moral violation and a change in PSR. It's also possible that I asked the wrong question. The question I asked had an outcome variable of a change in PSR, but it is possible that these moderators would have had more of an impact on PSB since it was PSB that was significant impacted by the moral violation.

Finally, the qualitative analysis saw trends for both the types of outcomes that participants thought the influencer might experience, and for social issues that participants mentioned. In line with affective disposition theory (Tamborini et al., 2013), participants predicted more severe outcomes for more severe moral violations, trending toward negative, but not career ending outcomes. These results may also have something to do with the broader social issues that they mentioned. Participants spoke of both cancel culture and apology videos across several different outcomes. Both had this almost dual tone to them. For cancel culture, some comments suggested that people get canceled for silly things, while others suggested that even more egregious moral violations may result in impermanent cancellations. Mention of apology videos echoed this duality since some suggested that sincere apologies would set things right, and others suggested that an influencer may apologize their way out of experiencing any real

consequences. These responses are interesting and seem to mirror the broader debates surrounding cancel culture, that it is an effective way to hold those in power accountable, that it is unfair and heavy handed, or that it makes no real or meaningful impact. More research is needed to first provide conceptual clarity on what exactly cancel culture is and what types of results it produces.

In addition to the theoretical implications, there are practical implications as well. First, given the prevalence of influencers in marketing and their overall need to maintain their image to sell their brand, influencers and companies utilizing influencer marketing should be mindful of morality. Specifically, they must consider how morality can affect public image and likability, and how that, in turn, can impact their ability to market both themselves and sponsored products.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, and foremost is that participants were able to choose their own influencer and then were asked to imagine that the news post in the stimuli was about their chosen influencer. This was problematic because there was no way to ensure that the moral violation was both believable and an expectancy violation. In the qualitative analysis it was clear that some people had chosen influencers who were animal lovers, and thus it was hard for them to imagine the stimuli happening in real life. It is also possible that the influencer chosen was not very moral or responsible to begin with, thus the stimuli may not have been shocking. In addition, the fact that the participants were aware that the scenario did not happen may have influenced both the validity and the believability of the stimuli. It is possible that the results would have been different had the participants been convinced that the incident in the news post was real.

There were also issues with this in terms of what counts as an influencer. Although a definition of an influencer was given to participants some participants still chose celebrities like LeBron James and Taylor Swift (See Appendix B). However, in preparing for this study it became clear that unlike celebrities, influencer followings are much more fragmented and it was difficult to find an influencer that would be known by enough participants, let alone one with whom they would have a parasocial relationship; therefore, the choice was made to let people select their own influencer. This study design ensured that a parasocial relationship existed, but at the expense of having a common influencer be the subject.

A final issue with letting participants select their own influencer was that without knowing the influencer people would pick I had to choose a moral violation that was believable enough to have been committed by a wide variety of people and was something that enough people would see as a moral violation. This led to the choice of animal-related moral violations. However, many participants seemingly did not perceive abandoning a puppy at an animal shelter as a moral violation, and the act of animal hoarding was beyond the suspension of disbelief for others. Future studies that use a single influencer and do not ask participants to imagine the stimuli being about their influencer could add greatly to what we know about moral violations and parasocial relationships. Influencer scandals are so prevalent that future studies could likely take advantage of studying a real-life event.

Another limitation was the morality scale (Graham et al., 2011) which participants had to take three times, once for themselves and twice for the influencer. Since it is also a very long scale it significantly lengthened the survey, which may have resulted in participants losing interest and giving less thoughtful answers by the end. This scale can also be broken down into factors in several different ways; however, the validity of some of these ways of breaking it

down is questionable. In this study I chose to combine the judgment and relevance items. Some studies use only one or the other. There is also a shortened version of the scale which may have been a better choice for this study. However, the shortened version, when split into the five factors has only four items per factor, which is acceptable, but not ideal when it comes to something as complex as morality. Future studies attempting to use this scale, especially ones that use it repeatedly throughout the study should consider the shortened version of the scale but understand that there are tradeoffs to the different ways to use this scale. It is also possible that this scale isn't fit for measuring the morality of someone else, which I did here. However, using the same scale for both the participant and the influencer was the best way to establish a measure for moral similarity/difference that could be used in the ways this study is using it. Finally, it is possible that the morality scale had a priming effect since it appeared twice before the stimuli, such that participants may have figured out that the study was about morality by the time they engaged with the stimuli.

Another limitation is the sample of college students. It is possible that age makes a difference particularly when it comes to parasocial relationships with influencers. Past studies have found that parasocial breakups can be more distressing for younger fans (J. Cohen, 2003; Croes & Bartels, 2021). Future studies should examine these possible age differences. It seems plausible that the interaction between moral differences and change in PSR would be different when examining participants that are both younger and older than college students.

Theoretically there are other perspectives that could lend themselves well to this type of study in the future. Particularly, an approach that focuses on social norms and cognitive dissonance could yield compelling results. Although this study did not focus on cognitive dissonance it is very likely that cognitive dissonance is at play, especially since these findings

point to moral difference as a driving factor for a decrease in PSR. Moral difference would likely cause cognitive dissonance, and a decrease in PSR or even a parasocial breakup may be a fan's way of decreasing cognitive dissonance. There are likely other ways that fans would cope with cognitive dissonance caused by a moral violation, and future studies should examine these different ways of coping. Additionally, these events do not exist in a vacuum, as these scandals play out in the real-world people are able to look to others to gauge their own reactions. It may be that the reactions of others would communicate what the normative reaction is. Therefore, whether others downplay the scandal or exhibit outrage may influence reactions to the moral violation. Future research should examine how referent others may play a role in reactions and possible parasocial breakups. Related to this, future work should consider source credibility as a variable as well. The current study relied on stimuli that supposedly came from major news sources, i.e., BBC and NPR; it is worth considering whether the source of the information (e.g., a national news organization, a friend, to another influencer) matter in people's responses.

There are also several variables that this study did not look at that future studies should consider examining. PSB-distress is one of these variables. The PSB-distress scale developed by J. Cohen (2003) was not employed in this study because the scale was designed to measure distress when TV programs are taken off the air, and the items in the scale could not be modified to make sense in this context. It has, however, been employed in studies similar to this one in the past. It's possible that a new scale on PSB-distress needs to be developed to measure distress in the context of chosen breakups rather than the loss of a character. Since this study did not measure parasocial breakup distress the relationship between the more emotion based PSB-distress, and the more behavior based PSB-behavior is still uncertain. However, since this study found a decrease in PSR does not lead to an increase in PSB-behaviors it's possible that PSB-

distress does not indicate that a parasocial breakup has happened either. Future researchers should examine this relationship to better understand how PSB-distress, a decrease in PSR, and PSB-behaviors relate to one another. As of the writing of this thesis, I found no other studies that measured PSB-behaviors. My findings suggest that studies should examine these behaviors specifically rather than merely measuring the feelings of PSB-distress. There is also a need for conceptual clarifications when it comes to parasocial breakups.

Future studies may also want to examine the impacts of moral violations beyond parasocial relationships such as an impact on the self-esteem or the morality of the participant. Since moral violations committed by close others in social relationships have been shown to influence self-esteem, it is possible that this is true of parasocial relationships as well (Forbes & Stellar, 2022). Additionally, it was seen in this study that a moral violation caused a perceived moral difference between the fan and the influencer for some of this study's participants. However, since influencers are very persuasive opinion leaders, it is possible that some fans may shift their own morality toward their influencer as a way of downplaying the moral violation, or fans may participate in moral decoupling or other behaviors that relieve cognitive dissonance but allow the relationship to continue. Future studies should examine these different reactions.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explain factors that play a role in the relationships between moral violations, parasocial relationships, and parasocial breakups with influencers. However, since morality is not a monolith but rather multidimensional, complex, and context specific, the relationship between moral violations and parasocial breakups is not completely straightforward. Rather than moral violations influencing parasocial relationships directly, perceived moral differences that are caused by a moral violation appear to be a key mechanism at play that

explains the relationship between moral violations and parasocial relationships. This is in line with affective disposition theory which suggests that moral similarity influences liking. This can help us to understand why these influencer scandals shock fans but may or may not result in real consequences. This research also suggests that more nuance and conceptual clarity is needed when it comes to the study of parasocial breakups, particularly those that involve fans choosing to part ways with influencers.

Bringing it back to the cases of Ned Fulmer and Colleen Ballinger, what drew fans to them? In the case of Fulmer, it was likely the wholesome nature of his content, and for Ballinger, it was her cringe humor. Fulmer's scandal involved not only an expectancy violation of him as a wife guy, but it also likely caused fans to feel that he wasn't as morally similar to them as they originally believed. Ballinger on the other hand, was cringe, is cringe, and if the predictions are correct, will continue to be cringe. And so, the cycle goes on for those influencers who continue to be seen as similar to their fans: moral violation, outrage, apology. A delicate dance of parasocial relationships, expectations, and moral similarity. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, M. (2011). Is family a moral capital resource for female politicians? The case of ABC's *Commander in Chief*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 223–241.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710393383>
- Balaban, D. C., & Szambolics, J. (2022). A proposed model of self-perceived authenticity of social media influencers. *Media and Communication*, 10(1).
<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4765>
- Barta, K., & Andalibi, N. (2021). Constructing authenticity on TikTok: Social norms and social support on the “fun” platform. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479574>
- Billingham, P., & Parr, T. (2020). Enforcing social norms: The morality of public shaming. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28(4), 997–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12543>
- Bonus, J. A., Matthews, N. L., & Wulf, T. (2021). The impact of moral expectancy violations on audiences' parasocial relationships with movie heroes and villains. *Communication Research*, 48(4), 550–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650219886516>
- Bouvier, G., & Machin, D. (2021). What gets lost in Twitter ‘cancel culture’ hashtags? Calling out racists reveals some limitations of social justice campaigns. *Discourse & Society*, 32(3), 307–327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977215>
- Chery, S. (2023, July 12). Colleen Ballinger cancels tour amid ‘grooming’ and racism allegations. *The Washington Post*.
- Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2017). Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: Implications for celebrity endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34(4), 481–495.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21001>
- Clark, M. D. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture.” *Communication and the Public*, 5(3–4), 88–92.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562>
- Cocker, H. L., & Cronin, J. (2017). Charismatic authority and the YouTuber: Unpacking the new cults of personality. *Marketing Theory*, 17(4), 455–472.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593117692022>

- Cohen, E. L. (2010). Expectancy violations in relationships with friends and media figures. *Communication Research Reports*, 27(2), 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824091003737836>
- Cohen, J. (2003). Parasocial breakups: Measuring individual differences in responses to the dissolution of parasocial relationships. *Mass Communication and Society*, 6(2), 191–202. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0602_5
- Cohen, J. (2004). Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21(2), 187–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504041374>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3–21.
- Croes, E., & Bartels, J. (2021). Young adults' motivations for following social influencers and their relationship to identification and buying behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 124, 106910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106910>
- Derrick, J. L., Gabriel, S., & Tippin, B. (2008). Parasocial relationships and self-discrepancies: Faux relationships have benefits for low self-esteem individuals. *Personal Relationships*, 15(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2008.00197.x>
- Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016). Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship: Conceptual clarification and a critical assessment of measures. *Human Communication Research*, 42(1), 21–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12063>
- Eden, A., Daalmans, S., & Johnson, B. K. (2017). Morality predicts enjoyment but not appreciation of morally ambiguous characters. *Media Psychology*, 20(3), 349–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2016.1182030>
- Eden, A., Oliver, M. B., Tamborini, R., Limperos, A., & Woolley, J. (2015). Perceptions of moral violations and personality traits among heroes and villains. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(2), 186–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2014.923462>
- Eden, A., Tamborini, R., Grizzard, M., Lewis, R., Weber, R., & Prabhu, S. (2014). Repeated exposure to narrative entertainment and the salience of moral intuitions. *Journal of Communication*, 64(3), 501–520. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12098>
- Ellithorpe, M. E., & Brookes, S. E. (2018). I didn't see that coming: Spoilers, fan theories, and their influence on enjoyment and parasocial breakup distress during a series finale.

- Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 7(3), 250–263.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000134>
- Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When good “friends” say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(3), 502–523.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5003_9
- Feng, Y., Chen, H., & Kong, Q. (2021). An expert with whom I can identify: The role of narratives in influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 972–993.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1824751>
- Forbes, R. C., & Stellar, J. E. (2022). When the ones we love misbehave: Exploring moral processes within intimate bonds. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122(1), 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000272.supp>
- Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279–305.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04
- Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 366–385.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021847>
- Grizzard, M., Huang, J., Ahn, C., Fitzgerald, K., Francemone, C. J., & Walton, J. (2020). The gordian knot of disposition theory: Character morality and liking. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 32(2), 100–105.
<https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000257>
- Grizzard, M., Matthews, N. L., Francemone, C. J., & Fitzgerald, K. (2021). Do audiences judge the morality of characters relativistically? How interdependence affects perceptions of characters’ temporal moral descent. *Human Communication Research*, 47(4), 338–363.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqab011>
- Hawthorne, N. (1878). *The Scarlet Letter*. James R. Osgood and Company.
- Hayes, A. (2018). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A regression-based approach*. The Guilford Press.
- Heiphetz, L., Strohminger, N., Gelman, S. A., & Young, L. L. (2018). Who am I? The role of moral beliefs in children’s and adults’ understanding of identity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 78, 210–219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.007>

- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, *19*, 215–229.
- Hu, M. (2016). The influence of a scandal on parasocial relationship, parasocial interaction, and parasocial breakup. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *5*(3), 217–231. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000068>
- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *87*, 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029>
- Jones, S., Cronin, J., & Piacentini, M. G. (2022). Celebrity brand break-up: Fan experiences of para-loveshock. *Journal of Business Research*, *145*, 720–731. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.03.039>
- Kircher, M. M. (2022, September 27). Trying to explain the Try Guys drama: It happened online. *New York Times*.
- Koul, S. (2023, August 19). Controversial YouTuber Colleen Ballinger built a young fan base with her antics. Now that they're older, some can see through her act. *Insider*.
- Lather, J., & Moyer-Guse, E. (2011). How do we react when our favorite characters are taken away? An examination of a temporary parasocial breakup. *Mass Communication and Society*, *14*(2), 196–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205431003668603>
- Lee, J. A., & Eastin, M. S. (2021). Perceived authenticity of social media influencers: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, *15*(4), 822–841. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-12-2020-0253>
- Lewis, R., & Christin, A. (2022). Platform drama: “Cancel culture,” celebrity, and the struggle for accountability on YouTube. *New Media*, *24*(7), 1632–1656.
- Liu, X., & Zheng, X. (2024). The persuasive power of social media influencers in brand credibility and purchase intention. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *11*(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02512-1>
- Lukpat, A. (2022, September 28). Ned Fulmer is out of comedy group the Try Guys amid affair with employee; The internet comedy group said it couldn't work with one of its founding members after word spread on social media that he had a relationship with an employee. *Wall Street Journal*.

- McIntyre, A. P., & Negra, D. (2022). Of wife guys and family defenders: Towards a typology of 21st century celebrity husbands. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2106957>
- Nabi, R. L., Stitt, C. R., Halford, J., & Finnerty, K. L. (2006). Emotional and cognitive predictors of the enjoyment of reality-based and fictional television programming: An elaboration of the uses and gratifications perspective. *Media Psychology*, 8(4), 421–447.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532785xmep0804_5
- Ng, E. (2020). No grand pronouncements here...: Reflections on cancel culture and digital media participation. *Television & New Media*, 21(6), 621–627.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420918828>
- Ni, X., Shao, X., Geng, Y., Qu, R., Niu, G., & Wang, Y. (2020). Development of the social media engagement scale for adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 701.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00701>
- Norris, P. (2023). Cancel culture: Myth or reality? *Political Studies*, 71(1), 145–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211037023>
- Oliver, M. B., & Bartsch, A. (2010). Appreciation as audience response: Exploring entertainment gratifications beyond hedonism. *Human Communication Research*, 36(1), 53–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01368.x>
- Park, J., Lee, J. M., Xiong, V. Y., Septianto, F., & Seo, Y. (2021). David and Goliath: When and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 584–602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980470>
- Raney, A. A. (2011). The role of morality in emotional reactions to and enjoyment of media entertainment. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 23(1), 18–23. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000027>
- Rohde, P., & Mau, G. (2021). “It’s selling like hotcakes”: Deconstructing social media influencer marketing in long-form video content on YouTube via social influence heuristics. *European Journal of Marketing*, 55(10), 2700–2734.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-06-2019-0530>
- Rubin, A., Perse, E., & Powell, R. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, 12(2).
<https://umaine.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=360592>

- Scheuerman, M. K., Jiang, J. A., Fiesler, C., & Brubaker, J. R. (2021). A framework of severity for harmful content online. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479512>
- Tamborini, R., Eden, A., Bowman, N. D., Grizzard, M., Weber, R., & Lewis, R. J. (2013). Predicting media appeal from instinctive moral values. *Mass Communication and Society*, 16(3), 325–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2012.703285>
- Tepe, B., & Aydinli-Karakulak, A. (2019). Beyond harmfulness and impurity: Moral wrongness as a violation of relational motivations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117(2), 310–337. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000169.supp>
- Traversa, M., Tian, Y., & Wright, S. C. (2023). Cancel culture can be collectively validating for groups experiencing harm. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1181872. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1181872>
- Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of authenticity: Social media influencers and the production of sponsored content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078>

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Data Filter

0=didn't finish, duplicate ID, or Missed a significant number of questions

1=Good

2=Manipulation check: Neutrals

3=Manipulation check: Failed, non-neutral

Moral_Rel_Part (Graham et al., 2011)

First, we would like you to answer a series of questions about your personal sense of morality. Please rate how relevant the following statements are to your personal sense of morality. You can rate them from "not at all relevant" to "extremely relevant".

Not at all Relevant (1) Not very relevant (2) Slightly relevant (3) Somewhat Relevant (4) Very Relevant (5) Extremely Relevant (6)

Harm

1. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
2. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
3. Whether or not someone was cruel

Fairness

4. Whether or not some people were treated differently from others
5. Whether or not someone acted unfairly
6. Whether or not someone was denied their rights

Ingroup

7. Whether or not someone's action showed love for their country
8. Whether or not someone did something to betray their group
9. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty

Authority

10. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
11. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
12. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder

Purity

13. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
14. Whether or not someone did something disgusting
15. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of

Moral_Jud_Part (Graham et al., 2011)

Next, please read the statements below and rate how much you agree with each of them.

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6)
Strongly agree (7)

Harm

1. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
2. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
3. It can never be right to kill a human being.

Fairness

4. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
5. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
6. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.

Ingroup

7. I am proud of my country's history.
8. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
9. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.

Authority

10. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
11. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
12. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.

Purity

13. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
14. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
15. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.

Q30 Think of an influencer that is one of your favorites.

Influencer

Please type the name of the influencer you selected below.

Influencer_Platform

What social media do you follow this influencer on?

- Facebook (1)
- Instagram (2)
- Snapchat (3)
- TikTok (4)
- Twitter (7)
- YouTube (5)
- Other (6) _____

PSI_pre (Rubin et al., 1985)

Next, we would like to know more about what you think about the influencer you identified. Keeping this influencer in mind, please rate them on each of the following statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Strongly disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Somewhat agree (4) Strongly agree (5)

1. The content produced by the influencer shows me what the influencer is like.
2. When the influencer is funny, it makes their content easier to engage with.
3. When the influencer shares their opinion on something related to their content, it helps me make up my own mind.
4. I feel sorry for the influencer when they make a mistake.
5. When I'm scrolling through the influencer's social media content, I feel as if I am part of their community.
6. I like to compare my ideas with what the influencer says.
7. The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
8. I see the influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person.
9. I like hearing the voice of the influencer when I'm by myself.
10. The influencer keeps me company when I view their content.
11. I look forward to connecting with the influencer on social media.
12. If the influencer appeared in another influencer's content, I would look at that content.
13. When the influencer creates content, they seem to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
14. I sometimes make remarks to the influencer when looking at their content.
15. If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper, magazine, or website I would read it.
16. I miss seeing the influencer when they are taking a break from posting.
17. I would like to meet the influencer in person.
18. I think the Influencer is like an old friend.
19. I find the influencer to be attractive.
20. I am not as satisfied when I view content from a different influencer.

Moral_Rel_Infl_Pre (Graham et al., 2011)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about your chosen influencer's sense of morality. Based on what you know about the influencer, please rate how relevant the following statements are to your chosen influencer's sense of morality. You can rate them from "not at all relevant" to "extremely relevant".

Not at all Relevant (1) Not very relevant (2) Slightly relevant (3) Somewhat Relevant (4) Very Relevant (5) Extremely Relevant (6)

Harm

1. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
2. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
3. Whether or not someone was cruel

Fairness

4. Whether or not some people were treated differently from others
5. Whether or not someone acted unfairly
6. Whether or not someone was denied their rights

Ingroup

7. Whether or not someone's action showed love for their country
8. Whether or not someone did something to betray their group
9. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty

Authority

10. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
11. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
12. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder

Purity

13. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
14. Whether or not someone did something disgusting
15. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of

Moral_Judge_Infl_Pre (Graham et al., 2011)

Next, please think about your chosen influencer again. Based on what you know, how much or how little do you think they would agree with the following statements? You can rate their agreement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6)
Strongly agree (7)

Harm

1. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
2. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
3. It can never be right to kill a human being.

Fairness

4. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
5. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
6. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.

Ingroup

7. I am proud of my country's history.
8. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
9. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.

Authority

10. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
11. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
12. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.

Purity

13. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
14. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
15. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.

Authenticity (Lee & Eastin, 2021)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about the authenticity of your chosen influencer. When thinking of your chosen influencer please rate how descriptive each of the following statements are about them from "not at all descriptive" to "extremely descriptive".

The influencer...

Not at all descriptive (1) A little descriptive (2) Somewhat descriptive (3) Descriptive (4) Moderately descriptive (5) Very Descriptive (6) Exactly descriptive (7)

1. Seems kind and goodhearted.
2. Is sincere.
3. Comes off as very genuine.
4. Is down-to-earth.
5. Although they post ads, they give meaningful insights into the products.
6. Gives very honest reviews on brands.
7. The products and brands they endorse vibe well with their personality.
8. Promotes products they would actually use.
9. Not only posts about the good in their life but also about hardships.
10. Talks about real-life issues going on in their life.
11. Talks about their flaws and is not ashamed for showing them to the public.
12. Reveals a lot of their personal life to the public.
13. Is skilled in their field.
14. Is very knowledgeable in their field.
15. Demonstrates a natural ability in their field.
16. Is unique.
17. Has distinctive characteristics.
18. Their content is original and not a copy of someone else's.

Enjoy_Pre (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about how much you enjoy the influencer's content. When thinking of your chosen influencer please rate each of the following from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

strongly disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Somewhat agree (4) Strongly agree (5)

1. It is fun for me to engage with this influencer's content.
2. I have a good time engaging with this influencer's content.
3. This influencer is entertaining.
4. Engaging with this influencer's content is meaningful.
5. I am moved by this influencer.
6. This influencer is thought provoking.
7. This Influencer's content will stick with me for a long time.
8. I know I will never forget this influencer.
9. This influencer's content leaves me with a lasting impression.
10. This influencer's content has me on the edge of my seat.
11. This influencer's content is heart pounding.
12. This influencer's content is suspenseful.

<Stimuli>

Q34 On the next page you will see an Instagram post from a news organization called the BBC. Imagine that the influencer you chose is the subject of this news article.

1= Control

2= Med MV

3= Severe MV

Moral Violation (manipulation check)

Was this a moral violation?

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

Moral_Rel_Infl_Post (Graham et al., 2011)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about your chosen influencer's sense of morality. Based on what you know about the influencer, please rate how relevant the following statements are to your chosen influencer's sense of morality. You can rate them from "not at all relevant" to "extremely relevant".

Not at all Relevant (1) Not very relevant (2) Slightly relevant (3) Somewhat Relevant (4) Very Relevant (5) Extremely Relevant (6)

Harm

1. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
2. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
3. Whether or not someone was cruel

Fairness

4. Whether or not some people were treated differently from others
5. Whether or not someone acted unfairly
6. Whether or not someone was denied their rights

Ingroup

7. Whether or not someone's action showed love for their country
8. Whether or not someone did something to betray their group
9. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty

Authority

10. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
11. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
12. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder

Purity

13. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
14. Whether or not someone did something disgusting
15. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of

Moral_Judg_Infl_Post (Graham et al., 2011)

Next, please think about your chosen influencer again. Based on the post presented earlier in the survey, how much or how little do you think they would agree with the following statements? You can rate their agreement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6)
Strongly agree (7)

Harm

1. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
2. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
3. It can never be right to kill a human being.

Fairness

4. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
5. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
6. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.

Ingroup

7. I am proud of my country's history.
8. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
9. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.

Authority

10. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
11. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
12. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.

Purity

13. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
14. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
15. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.

PSI_Post (Rubin et al., 1985)

Next, we would like to know more about what you think about the influencer. When thinking of your chosen influencer please rate each of the following from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4)
Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6) Strongly agree (7)

1. The content produced by the influencer shows me what the influencer is like.
2. When the influencer is funny, it makes their content easier to engage with.
3. When the influencer shares their opinion on something related to their content, it helps me make up my own mind.
4. I feel sorry for the influencer when they make a mistake.
5. When I'm scrolling through the influencer's social media content, I feel as if I am part of their community.
6. I like to compare my ideas with what the influencer says.
7. The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
8. I see the influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person.
9. I like hearing the voice of the influencer when I'm by myself.
10. The influencer keeps me company when I view their content.
11. I look forward to connecting with the influencer on social media.
12. If the influencer appeared in another influencer's content, I would look at that content.
13. When the influencer creates content, they seem to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
14. I sometimes make remarks to the influencer when looking at their content.
15. If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper, magazine, or website I would read it.
16. I miss seeing the influencer when they are taking a break from posting.
17. I would like to meet the influencer in person.
18. I think the Influencer is like an old friend.
19. I find the influencer to be attractive.
20. I am not as satisfied when I view content from a different influencer.

Enjoy_Post (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about how much you enjoy the influencer's content. When thinking of your chosen influencer please rate each of the following from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Strongly disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Somewhat agree (4) Strongly agree (5)

1. It is fun for me to engage with this influencer's content.
2. I have a good time engaging with this influencer's content.
3. This influencer is entertaining.
4. Engaging with this influencer's content is meaningful.
5. I am moved by this influencer.
6. This influencer is thought provoking.
7. This Influencer's content will stick with me for a long time.
8. I know I will never forget this influencer.
9. This influencer's content leaves me with a lasting impression.
10. This influencer's content has me on the edge of my seat.
11. This influencer's content is heart pounding.
12. This influencer's content is suspenseful.

PSB

Unfollow: On a scale of 1 to 10, if the news story you read happened in real life how likely would you be to unfollow this influencer? On this scale 1 indicates, "I would definitely continue to follow" and 10 indicates, "I would definitely unfollow."

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

likecomment: On a scale of 1 to 10, if the news story you read happened in real life how likely would you be to no longer like/comment on the influencer's content? On this scale 1 indicates, "I would definitely continue to like/comment" and 10 indicates, "I would definitely no longer like/comment."

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

Read: On a scale of 1 to 10, if the news story you read in real life how likely would you be to no longer watch/read the influencer's content? On this scale 1 indicates, "I would definitely continue to watch" and 10 indicates, "I would definitely no longer watch."

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)

- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

ADT

If the news story you read happened in real life, what do you think would happen to the influencer's career, if anything?

Engagement (Ni et al., 2020)

Now you will be asked a series of questions about your social media use. Please rate your agreement with the following statements from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Undecided (3) Agree (4) Strongly agree (5)

1. Using social media is my daily habit.
2. I browse social media whenever I have time.
3. Even if it's late, I'll take a look at social media before sleep.
4. I often use social media to relax in habit.
5. I get fulfilled from the attention and comments of others on social media.
6. The support and encouragement of others on social media is very important to me.
7. Using social media, I am satisfied with the relationship between myself and my friends.
8. Compared to the real world, social media makes me feel more comfortable.
9. I feel bored when I can't use social media.
10. Compared to the real world, I am happier when I socialize on social media.
11. I feel anxious when I can't use social media.

Demographics

Age: What is your age? (please type the number)

Gender Select your gender.

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Race Select your race. Check all that apply.

- Asian (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latinx (3)
- Native American or Alaska Native (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
- White (6)
- Other (7) _____

Appendix B: List of Influencers

6lack	Aphmau	David Goggins
Abby Howard	Arnold Schwarzenegger	David Goggins
Adam Iz	Audrey Trullinger	David Goggins
Addison Rae	Austin Matthews	David Goggins
Addison Rae	Auzio MF	david googins
Adobo Moto	Avery Katherine	David Laid
Albino VEVO	Avia Butler	David Portnoy
Alex Cooper	Baseball Bat Bros	Deion Sanders
Alex Earl	Ben Shapiro	Destiny (Steven Bonnell)
Alex Earl	Bob Does Sports	Detail Geek
Alex Eral	Bob Does Sports	Donald Trump
Alex Eubank	Bobby Lee	Doug Demuro
Alex Eubank	bradley martin	Douglas Wreden
Alex Eubank	bredan miller	(DougDoug)
Alex Eubank	Brianna LaPaglia	drake
Alex Honnold	Britney Broski	Dream
Alex Morgan	Brittany Broski	eel
Alex Terrible	brodieshredz	Elle Sampiere
Alix Earl	Brooklyn and Bailey	EllyProductions49
Alix Earl	McKnight	Emilie Kiser
Alix Earle	Bryce Hall	emilie kiser
Alix Earle	BTS	Emma Chamberlain
Alix Earle	Caitlyn Rae	Emma Chamberlain
Alix Earle	CallMeKevin	Emma Chamberlain
Alix Earle	Charli D'amelio	Emma chamberlain
Alix Earle	Charli Damelio	Emma Chamberlain
Alix Earle	Charlie McAvoy	Emma Chamberlain
Alix Earle	Chase Stokes	Emma Chamberline
alix earle	Chris Bumstead	Enya Umanzor
Alix Earle	Chris Heria	Ernest Khalimov
Alix Earle	chris stapelton	Eva Meloche
Alix Earle	Cletus McFarland	Eva Nys
Alix Earle	Cody Ko	Exurb1a
alix earle	Cody Ko	Family Fizz
Alix Earle	Cole Sprout	Faze Rug
Alix Earle	ConnorEatsPants	fiona jordan
Alix Earle	Cristiano Ronaldo	Garrett Clark
Alix Earle	Dan Bongino	goshdamn
Alix Earle	Daniel Mac	grandma Droniak
Alix Earle	Danny gonzalas	Grizzly
Alix Earle	Danny Gonzales	growingannanas
Aliz earl	Danny Gonzalez	Hasan Piker
Anthony Koz	David Dobrik	hivemind
Anything4Views	David dobrik	Ice spice

Isaac HP	Lionel Messi	Oompaville
Iskra Lawrence	Livvy dunne	Pat Mcafee
itsjusta6	Livvy Dunne	Pat McAfee
IZZIPOOPI-Instagram	Logan Paul	Patrick kane
Username	Logan Paul	penguinz0
Jake Paul	Logan Paul	Post Malone
Jalen Noble	Lola Clark	remi cruz
Jenna Ortega	Ludwig	Rhegan777
Jerma985	Maddie Dragsbaek	Rhett and Link (Good
Joe Bartolozzi	Madison White	Mythical Morning)
Joe Rauth	Marcus Rashford	roosevelt
Joe Rogan	Mark Rober	RTGame
Joe Rogan	Markiplier	ryan trahan
Joe Rogan	Markiplier	Sabastian Enges
Joe Rogan	Markiplier	Sadie Crowell
Joe rogan	Markiplier	sadie crowell
jon b	Mary Skinner	Sadie Mckenna
Jordan Howlett	Mathew Mercer	Sam Sulek
Jordan Loufas	Matilda Djerf	Sam Sulek
JPEGMAFIA	Mei Mei Monstaa	Sam Sulek
Kai Cenat	Messi	Sam Sulek
Kai cenat	Mia Maples	Sam Sulek
Katie Ritchiie	Micah Collins	Sam Sulek
Katie vanslyke	Miniminter	Sam Sulek
Keith Lee	MoistCritical	Schlatt
Keith Lee	Morgan Wallen	Selena Gomez
Kelly Matthews	morgan wallen	Selena Gomez
kendall jenner	mr beast	Selena Gomez
Kennedy Eurich	Mr Beast	seth rogan
Kenny Beecham	Mr Beast	Shaq
killjoy	Mr. Ballen	sofia carson
Kim Kardashian	Mr. Beast	Spencer Barbosa
kim Kardashian	Mr. Beast	Spencer Charnas
Kouvr Annon	Mr.Beast	staytuned
kouvr annon	MrBeast	Steph Bohrer
KSI	MrBeast	Sydney Adams
KSI	Nathan Karhu	Tabitha Swatosh
Kurtis Conner	Niall Horan	Tana Mongeau
Kwite	Nick Kroll	Taylor swift
Kyle Stumpenhorst	Nico Young	Taylor Swift
Kylie Jenner	Nik Nocturnal	Taylor Swift
Kylie Jenner	Noah Kahan	Taylor Swift
lebron james	Noel Deyzel	Taylor Swift
Lebron James	Noel Deyzel	TAYLOR SWIFT
leo skepi	Olivia Ferry	Taylor Swift
lexi hidalgo	OneBadNoodle	Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift
Taylor Swift
Taylor Swift
Taylor Swift
taylor swift
Taylor Swift
Team Edge
The Organic Chemistry
Tutor
The Rock
The Rock


Theo Von
Theo Von
theo von
ThinkBeforeYouSleep
Timothée Chalamet
Timothee Chalamet
TJ hunt
Tom Brady
Tom Brady
trav4oilers
Tyler, The Creator

Vector
Victoria Browne
Weston Koury
xQcq
Zach King
Zendaya
Zendaya
Zendaya
Zendaya
zoe bread

Appendix C: Stimuli

Control



BBCnews 
for the stories that matter to you



npr 
News. Arts & Life. Music & more. This is NPR.



4,678

BBCnews A whole lot of apples and a whole lot of fun. Today, a popular influencer went apple picking with several of their friends. Apple picking is a common fall pastime in many places, and this year is gearing up to be no exception.

492



3,962

npr Today, a popular influencer joined several of their friends in the fall pastime of apple picking. Apple picking is an activity often enjoyed with friends and family. Whether it results in pies, ciders, or just a lot of produce that you don't know what to do with, apple picking is fun for the whole family

387



Medium Moral Violation



BBCnews ✓

for the stories that matter to you



4,678

BBCnews A popular influencer abandoned a puppy at an animal shelter yesterday. This occurred after just three weeks of owning the puppy. Many animals are abandoned every day at animal shelters, some of whom will never find their "forever home."

492



npr ✓

News. Arts & Life. Music & more. This is NPR.



3,962

npr After only a few weeks of pet ownership, a popular influencer abandoned a three month old puppy at an animal shelter. Sadly, this is all too common as many people are unprepared for the realities of caring for young animals.

387

Severe Moral Violation



BBCnews ✓

for the stories that matter to you



4,678

BBCnews A popular influencer faces charges related to animal hoarding after authorities found 17 animals on their property. The animals were taken to a local shelter where they are being treated for various health conditions likely the result of neglect and improper housing.

492



npr ✓

News. Arts & Life. Music & more. This is NPR.



3,962

npr Animal hoarding is still a large problem across the U.S. Yesterday, seventeen underfed and neglected animals were confiscated from a popular influencer's home. The influencer is facing charges of animal abuse and cruelty. The animals were taken to a local shelter where they are receiving emergency medical care.

387

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julie Aprill was born and raised in Kremmling, Colorado. She received a General Associate of Art from Western Nebraska Community College in 2017 and a B.A. in Communication and Media Studies from Colorado State University in 2020. Julie began her studies at the University of Maine in 2022, where she worked as an instructor of record for public speaking and an academic advisor. During her time at Umaine she was also involved in the Communication and Journalism Graduate Student Association and worked on various research projects in a psychophysiology lab. Julie is a candidate for the Master of Art degree in Communication from the University of Maine in May 2024.