BEAUTIFUL ORDINARY PEOPLE:
Beauty Capital and Modern Fame on Instagram

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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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Spring 2019

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the sociological implications of Instagram influencers, and the estimated 1-billion-dollar influencer industry. Building from Bourdieu's field theory and concept of capital, I suggest that beauty capital is the dominant form of capital operating in the influencer field. Beauty, as well as an aestheticized Instagram feed, allows influencers to work with brands and to expand their Instagram followings, elevating the influencer to micro-celebrity status. Influencers work in a mutually beneficial relationship with brands, each one promoting each other. The relationship between influencer and brand represents a pattern of reflexive accumulation and blurring of lines between individuals and businesses. Given that beauty capital is the central theme of this study, changing beauty standards on Instagram are explored. Personal beauty is, in fact, the dominant element featured in influencers' Instagram feeds rather than discussions of their interior selves. In this study, I will argue that in the internet age beauty is a greater asset than ever before.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"Beauty is truth, truth is beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." –John Keats

"It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness."- Leo Tolstoy

In 2016 the Frye music festival launched a promotional video featuring a strategic handful of social media influencers prancing in bikinis. At the time of the video release the festival organizers asked each influencer to post an ambiguous orange tile promoting Frye to their Instagram feed. In 48 hours the brand new, and in the end completely fraudulent, music festival sold 95% of their tickets (*Fyre)*, leaving thousands of ticket holders scammed out of thousands of dollars. The festival did not need a long-term marketing plan, or even legitimacy as a business to sell out; it just needed influencers. As an estimated 1-billion-dollar industry and with an ROI 11 times higher than traditional advertising (tapinfluence.com): the power of influencers is real.

Influencer @akiralopez grew up in a small town in Australia. As an aspiring model and filmmaker they wanted, or needed, to expand their world beyond Australia. They used Instagram to do so. After gaining popularity on the app, they were scouted by a modeling agency in LA, leading them closer to both their modeling and filmmaking aspirations. There are two sides to the story of influencers: the story of the influencer and the story of the brand. The two work hand in hand in a mutually beneficial relationship. The brand gains revenue and the influencer gains capital: social, economic and cultural capital.

@akiralopez is, needless to say, a beautiful person. The average Instagram user does not need to look far to find an Instagrammer similar to @akiralopez: a gorgeous person with thousands of followers. Beautiful women in particular dominate Instagram, and they therefore dominate the influencer market as well. Female influencers often charge up to four times that of their male counterparts (entrepreneur.com). As I will argue in this study, in an increasingly image driven world beauty has become a greater asset than ever before. Although beauty by my

definition is something more complicated than mere natural attractiveness; it is a talent, a performance. The influencer market brings to light both how companies are becoming increasingly, insidiously interwoven into individuals lives and the power of beauty in the internet age—and when it comes to the power of beauty women have the advantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Beauty Capital

Beauty's place in society has long been contemplated and venerated, and never fully understood. While some features like facial symmetry have been proven to be universal beauty ideals (Grammer & Thornhill 1994), mostly beauty definitions change dramatically across time and cultures. In American history alone feminine beauty standards have transformed from the pressures to be full bodied in the late 1800's to a short stint of praising boyish figures with flappers in the 1920's to the total breast obsession of the 1950s (Mazur 1986). Today we have trended towards the ultra slim, represented by the tall, skinny super models that grace our fashion and pornography magazines (Owen & Laurel-Seller 2000, Sypeck et al 1999). In truth, beauty is in the eye of the society.

In a globalized world the way American society defines beauty largely becomes the way every society defines beauty due to the dominance of American media (Yan & Bissell 2014). These American beauty standards are white and Eurocentric, which leads to self-esteem issues and practices such as skin bleaching in societies in the global south (Hunter 2011). Therefore, American beauty also has cache on a global platform such as Instagram and conforming to white beauty standards may present a particular benefit to becoming Instagram famous. But, as always beauty *is* changing, especially as American society becomes more multicultural. There has been a greater acceptance of darker skin tones in the media (Maymone et al 2017), and the current

trend of praising "thick" (meaning curvy) women could also signify a shift. There is perhaps more room now than in the past century to be non-white and widely considered beautiful. Social media itself has a large hand in expanding beauty ideals as it allows people of all backgrounds to present themselves to a wide audience, no longer need they squeeze through the gate-keeping of Hollywood (Spector 2017).

Beauty has long been the women's domain (Hakim 2010, Tyler & Taylor 2002, Mazur 1986). Women are deemed the more beautiful gender, but in turn are held to a higher beauty standard, and the pressure has perhaps only grown in recent years. Body projects, the obsession and maintenance of one's body, have exploded in importance for teenage girls in the last century as demonstrated in the historical analysis of diaries (Brumberg 1997). Advertising is one huge factor in increasing beauty pressures, as the beauty industry targets women's insecurities to sell product (Vacker & Key 1993), implying that women can increase their unsatisfactory beauty with the purchase of a certain commodity. Further, the rise of pornography and the infiltration of pornified images into mainstream media increases the pressure for women to be constantly sexy and leads to self-objectification through the male gaze (Levy 2005); and certainly pornified images exist within Instagram as well. In *The Beauty Myth,* Naomi Wolf goes as far as to claim that distractions from impossible beauty standards are the new dominant way women are held back in society, supplanting domesticity and motherhood. There are massive issues with the way we define beauty and pressure women into that narrow definition. However, I argue that beauty is a double-edged sword and, especially on the internet, the other side is worth exploring.

Precisely because beauty is the woman's domain, the study of what sorts of benefits and implications it has in society is underdeveloped. The patriarchal establishment of academia has ignored something more cultivated and understood by women, even the concept of beauty as

only 'skin deep' demonstrates no acknowledgement of the real work and emotional labor that go along with it (Spry 2017). While limited in breadth, certainly studies have been conducted both within sociology and psychology that suggest real benefits to attractiveness, regardless of gender. Beautiful people are more likely to be considered intelligent, funny and credible (Etcoff 1999, Dion et al. 1972, Hamermesh 2011). They are generally more self-confident, less socially anxious and have an easier time establishing friendships (Feingold 1992). Beautiful people are also more likely to be hired for a job and more likely to be rated highly in their positions (Bóo et al. 2013, Sala et al. 2013, Frieze et al. 1991). However, there is a gender discrepancy to beauty benefits. Being too beautiful can actually lead women to less job success and attractive women's successes are more likely to be attributed to favoritism rather than merit (Spencer & Taylor 1988). Overall though, in the field far fewer studies suggest negative consequences to beauty than do benefits (Anderson et al 2010). Beauty is an asset, an asset like the many other sociologically verified ones such as wealth and whiteness.

If beauty is a privilege, then it must be considered within more established forms of privilege, specifically Pierre Bourdieu's forms of capital. Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital are all relevant to Instagram influencers. Economic capital is overall wealth, cultural capital is the ability to understand and excel at certain knowledge types within a community or dominant culture, social capital is the amount and type of social connections one has, and symbolic capital is prestige or positive recognition of an individual by a community (Bourdieu 1986). Forms of capital are convertible to each other; social connections to wealthy people can result in the growth of economic capital, for instance.

Forms of capital exist within fields. Fields are structured social settings, like a specific religion or the academic world. Everyone exists within certain fields, and those fields affect one

another (Swartz 1997). Bourdieu argues that all fields exist within the greatest field of power, and that individuals within fields struggle for power and compete to define what is important within that field, what indicates status. Individuals use their capital to compete for that power, as well as strategies in the field such as conservation, succession, and subversion. Conservation is a strategy of continuing the norms of the field, while subversion is attempting to subvert and fundamentally change those norms. Succession is a strategy of altering the rules of the field without dramatically changing those rules in order to fit oneself (as an outsider) into said field (Swartz 1997). The most successful individuals are closer to the autonomous pole, the place in the social fabric that defines the rules of the field for everyone else (Hilgers & Mangez 2015). In terms of social media and social media influencers this applies to who sets the rules of what is a good feed and what users should be striving for. Who starts the trends first? Most often on Instagram, those are the most beautiful people.

Many forms of capital exist beyond the ones Bourdieu defined. One such type of capital is erotic capital. Catherin Hakim's definition of erotic capital includes six facets: beauty, sexual attractiveness, social skills, liveliness, social presentation (style), and sexuality (actual sexual performance) (2010). Aesthetic capital is another closely related form of capital which represents the purely physical attractiveness about a person, from clothing choices to hair styling to facial beauty (Anderson et al 2010). Beauty itself can be understood as a precious commodity within an economic framework because beauty is scarce and scarcity gives goods their value (Hammermash 2013). Though aesthetic and erotic capital are both incorporated into the making of an Instagram star, neither term fully represents the platform. First, erotic capital may be too dynamic a term for the mostly 2D performance of many Instagram girls, and aesthetic capital doesn't capture the aspect of performance and talent present in influencers. Influencers are

talented at using their beauty to maximize their social media presences. Influencers aren't just beautiful, they are *extremely* beautiful—because influencers know how to curate an image of extreme beauty around themselves, using their natural beauty but also knowledge of fashion, makeup, photography and more. For influencers, it is not an issue of just being attractive, but an issue of being *more* attractive than others, and therefore worth following. Instagram influencers loudly and proudly boast a different form of capital: what I will term beauty capital.

Celebrity On Instagram And Beyond

Celebrity has always been linked to media (Marwick 2015), and America has long been obsessed with celebrity. It follows that the rise of celebrity in the US is largely correlated with the rise of Hollywood film, which was first the institution able to brand and globalize stars (Burr 2012). Stars have always reflected the society they are glorified within, and therefore they have also transitioned through time. During a large portion of film history, stars were untouchable and godlike beauties, with women exhibiting either perfect virtue or loads of sensuality and men demonstrating impossible bravery and intelligence. Importantly, at the turn of the century, fame changed dramatically in what Graeme Turner called the "demotic turn," meaning the stars are now ordinary people, exemplified by reality stars like the Kardashians who are famous for the sake of fame (Burr 2012, Gamson 2011). With the rise of the internet, modern fame has evolved again into what we have today: the micro-celebrity.

The micro-celebrity is a distinctly modern phenomenon mostly inhabited by internet celebrities. Many internet celebrities have relatively low levels of fame, or relatively few followers, but act and present themselves as real celebrities (Marwick 2015). They consider themselves famous and consider their followers fans. The micro-celebrity is "retweeted,

followed, liked, poked and instant messaged—and they draw satisfaction and fulfillment from this process" (Ingleton 2014). The celebrity mindset has actually invaded many members of society towards a point where everyone sees themselves to some degree as a celebrity and everyone acts accordingly. After all, in today's world everyone does in fact have a platform. Regular individuals are increasingly willing to publish intimate details of their lives and share with the public (Khamis et al 2016): a phenomenon coined "the unwatched life is not worth living" (Gamson 2011).

Micro-celebrities are emblematic of the internet, and some of the original ones inhabited camgirl spaces or were Youtube stars, such as lonelygirl15 or Zoella. Both of these stars were able to gain a platform from a careful use of intimacy and authenticity which attracted fans to them (Ann Hall 2015, Berryman & Kavka). Lonelygirl15's platform was revealed to be a scripted hoax in order to promote a television show, thereby revealing the manufactured element of this authenticity. While Zoella's platform is "real," she preforms the same way as Lonelygirl15. She still carefully manages what she will reveal and what she won't. A major draw to these girls comes exactly from the drive for authenticity and intimacy under capitalism, where even those precious feelings have been commodified, shown by the rise of the girlfriend experience in the sex work industry (Carbonero & Garrido 2017). Social media influencers are not alone in the feminized authenticity-making work.

Even past the internet celebrity, influencers came as another evolution. Influencers are internet users with relatively large platforms that are paid to promote different commodities. Crystal Abidin's *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* is one of the few texts analyzing these individuals. She explains that the term "influencer" actually comes from business scholarship and simply indicates consumers that are within social arenas where they can

easily influence other consumers to buy a product. Unlike traditional celebrities who may sign a million-dollar deal to promote one item for a long time, influencers need a steady stream of products to endorse. In order to be chosen to sell product, their most important asset is their follower count: a number representing how much an influencer is worth—though high engagement (high amounts of likes or comments given a follower count) also proves an important measure. As Abidin discusses, influencers then must compete in the attention economy, as the more attention they receive the more likely they are to receive endorsement deals. The concept of competing within the attention economy is another way of conceptualizing Bourdieu's field theory, where influencers compete for power within the influencer field.

The concept of an influencer is deeply tied into capitalism, but perhaps more importantly into advertising itself: in the mediated, cinematic world of advertising. In order to sell brands influencers must brand themselves, which marks a transition in consumer culture as Susie Khamis et al. write: "self-branding operates through principles and practices distinct to the 'promotional culture' (Wernick 1992) of advanced consumer capitalism. It shows how private individuals have internalized ideas that were designed for the marketing of commodities, and thus represents a seminal turning point in how subjectivity itself is understood and articulated" (2016). The practice of self-branding leads to individuals understanding themselves as commodities; for the women of Instagram, this could represent a transition from the practice of self-objectification to one of self-commodification. While in today's world everyone enacts some level of self-branding, influencers do so on a professional scale, which in fact bridges these 'ordinary' celebrities with the global superstars of yesteryear.

Mediatization And Social Media

Instagram was purchased by Facebook in 2012 for $1 billion. At the time the company had only thirteen employees. The 1-billion-dollar price tag implies the cultural demand for images, as the simple concept of Instagram is a social media based around images. The platform includes a personal feed of only the accounts a user follows as well as an explore page to find new accounts and content, which allows influencers to pick up new followers. The Instagram algorithm is somewhat of a mystery and is constantly updated to hyper-specifically tailor content to each user. Instagram does not follow chronological order and instead shows people the content they engage with most first, prioritizes content with overall more engagement, and even includes the amount of time a user spends looking at a photo into their calculations (Later.com).

Social media platforms like Instagram importantly change the way we communicate. For example, social media platforms enable a sort of context collapse, where our social worlds collide (Marwick 2010)—such as a person being followed by friends, family members and work collogues all on one platform. Most importantly, Instagram and other technologies like Emojis have led to the rise of visual culture, where visuals become increasingly important forms of communications alongside words (Baetens 2013). Not only do we enjoy an increasingly visual communication style, but more so we demand it at a level that is historically unprecedented (Szabó 2016, Miller et al 2016), exemplified by uniquely modern phenomenon of memes (Baran 2011) and selfie culture (Katz & Crocker 2016).

The rise of Instagram, and social media in general fits within a trend of mediatization in society. Mediatization represents the ever-growing presence of media in our lives, and the ways media becomes intricately linked to who we are as a society (Lundby 2009). Society is now highly media-saturated, with media constantly being consumed on our phones, televisions and

laptop screens. What follows is a sort of media logic, understanding how to approach these mediums and what expectations they include (Couldry 2008). Media logic has invaded nearly every part of society from politics to religion. Mediatization is even considered by Friedrich Krotz to be one of the looming meta-processes shaping the modern world, like globalization, commercialization and individualization (2009).

Jean Baudrillard theorized about the effects of media saturation even before the internet. He argues that because of extreme media saturation, modern society is overrun with symbols and semiology, to a point of simulacra where we can no longer distinguish between symbols or representations of ideas and what is actually real (Siedman 2008). Baudrillard argues that empty symbols, symbols without true meaning, are replicated the most, as when "things…are freed from their…point of reference" they can be easily reproduced (1990). This proliferation of symbols expands to the point of hyperreality, where all of society exists in a simulation of reality and is unable to distinguish between the simulation and true reality. Baudrillard thinks of advertising as one of the largest conveyors of symbols in society, and in turn advertising creates a 'system of objects' where objects exist to be symbols. Advertisements attach meaning to the objects they promote, and consumers therefore want the object not for the object itself but for what it symbolizes. Advertisements are more than just a system to persuade buyers, they are a system of greater meaning to which we all subscribe (1996).

Mediatization in turn fits within a larger trend of reflexive accumulation referring to a condition in which "economic and cultural processes are more closely interwoven than in earlier phases of modern capitalism" (Jansson 2002). The internet has allowed consumers and corporations to more quickly and directly interact with one another, which leads to corporations defining more of who we are as a society. Capitalism itself is dematerializing as goods become

more often ideas or apps than physical items (Doogan 2009, Junne et al. 1989). This allows capitalism to easily invade our media, particularly our social media, as seen with the entire practice of influencers selling product.

No part of society escapes the reaches of dominant power structures, and therefore race comes into play on platforms such as Instagram. In *Algorithms of Oppression,* Safyia Noble writes about how Google and other search engines enable racism. The mostly white engineers who create the search algorithms overlook the necessity of banning search results that promote racial hatred, and allow advertising money and profit margins push hateful results towards the top. While Instagram differs from Google, it still exists within the tech industry of Silicon Valley and therefore could commit similar mistakes. Outside of algorithms, dominant cultural messages about black and brown people can easily influence who users *want* to follow on Instagram. Though the very dispersed social world of social media also allows users to find virtual niches and communities that value people of color.

While the internet and social media has been lauded for endless democratizing possibilities, there are important power structures to consider. Most importantly, we must keep in mind how deeply embedded capitalism is in these platforms, perhaps more extensively than ever before. Of course, in a capitalist society we cannot shame people for wanting to have money or make a living in any way they see fit, especially when these people are the ones previously most punished under capitalism: women and often women of color specifically. As I will argue, women are using social media to make money and gain recognition. In this particular context, it is actually beneficial to be a woman. Through social construction women have become the fairer sex, and in an increasingly image driven world it pays to be beautiful.

METHODOLOGY

  This study examines trends in the practices of Instagram influencers through a content analysis of influencers' Instagram profiles. Instagram influencers in this study are defined as female Instagram users with a public account who both post their own image and promote products on their page. They cannot be famous from a separate sphere (i.e. a famous actress). The main data collected for this project came from the nine most recent posts of a sample of 70 different influencers for a total of 630 posts. I coded the appearance of eight variables (listed in *Table 1*) to find trends in what influencers post. The presence of a trend is operationalized by a high average count of the variable (from zero to nine) out of nine posts. Other elements of the Instagram accounts of the influencers in the sample are also analyzed in this study, such as comments on posts and words in bios.

  The sample of 70 influencers includes five influencers each of different body types (skinny, curvy and fat positive), different races (white, black, Latina and Asian), different follower counts (under 10K, 10K to 100K, 100K to 500K and 500K+), and different age groups (under 18, 18 to 24, and 25 to 30+). The categories were chosen to limit bias in choosing a sample of influencers, especially because the Instagram algorithm tailors an Instagram account to the user. Different races and body types were also chosen to ensure that beauty outside of the Euro-centric standard is represented. The age group was capped at near 30 years old because the Instagram user base is quite young. A range of follower counts was examined to account for differences in levels of popularity of influencers. To limit any cultural misunderstandings, only influencers located in the United States were included in this sample. While the categories were chosen to limit bias, the sampling method is not random. Because I chose the influencers within the categories there is bias in the sampling method. Further, the categories do no proportionally

represent the total population of influencers because there is not a universal definition of an

'influencer,' and therefore no reliable data on the demographic breakdowns of all the influencers

on Instagram.

As supplementary data, demographic information on the followers of the influencers in

the sample was collected and in-depth interviews were conducted with five Instagram

influencers. Demographic information, specifically the gender break down of followers, was

collected from the website HypeAuditor.com, a website that creates reports on individual

influencers using Instagram account analytics. Interview subjects were found through Instagram,

by sending Instagram messages to influencers. The sample includes four white women and one

mixed race woman, three of the influencers fit within the group of 10K to 100K while two have

less than 10K. Interviews were conducted to ensure that the voices of real influencers are heard

in this research, as well as to ask questions that arise from the content analysis that could not be

understood from observing posts alone. The interview sample size is small due to the fact that

Instagram influencers are semi-famous people who receive many messages and often do not

respond. Given the small interview sample, the interviews should be considered supplementary

data that cannot reliably represent the whole population of influencers.

Table 1. Variable Counts and Averages

Variable	Sum (N)	Average Count (Out of 9 posts)
Picture of the influencer	560	8.00
Picture of influencer with others	57	0.81
Advertisement	270	3.86
Nudity	51	0.73
Reference to own beauty	12	0.17
Link to outside work	26	0.37
Personal entry	43	0.61
Thanking fans	15	0.21

ANALYSIS
Selling Beauty

Social media influencers are curators of the self. On average eight out of nine of an influencer's most recent posts are pictures of themselves; they've gained a following from posting pictures of themselves and must continue to post to maintain and grow that following. In contrast, on average only 0.81 out of nine recent posts includes pictures of themselves with another person—one tenth the number of pictures of themselves alone. An example of a typical feed can be seen in *Figure 1*. The feed features exclusively pictures of the beautiful influencer's face and body with little other imagery. The culture of the self has perhaps come to full fruition with Instagram influencers. Rather than using Instagram to promote an image of a full social life, they use it almost purely to promote themselves: who they are and, of course, what they look like. In fact, in a visual realm such as Instagram who you are and what you look like are nearly the same thing.

Figure 1

Social media influencers are also curators of product: they are advertisers. Influencers sell product by wearing or supporting certain brands and tagging them in their photos. In fact, an

average of 3.86 out of nine recent posts include a tagged brand. Posts with a tagged brand are

likely, though not always, a collaboration between the influencer and the brand. Of course,

whether a collaboration exists or not, a tagged brand still functions as an advertisement as it

allows followers to find and purchase the tagged product for themselves. Influencers can

promote brands in a more traditional way in which the caption elaborates on the product and

includes the hashtag #ad or the phrase "paid sponsorship" at the top of the post to clearly indicate

an advertisement.[1] More traditional advertisements will typically elaborate on the benefits of the

product being sold in the caption as seen in *Figure 2,* with the caption "so much easier being on

time this season with my @danielwellington rose gold watch." The influencer in *Figure 2* even

includes a discount code. Often instead an advertisement post includes merely a tagged brand

with absolutely no context given, a more subliminal advertising method, as seen in *Figure 3*.

Figure 2

Figure 3

The example of *Figure 3* demonstrates that verbal communication can be entirely

removed from the advertising process within Instagram, given that the caption is only one emoji.

In a realm where visual communication dominates verbal communication, there really is no need

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[1] Recently advertising regulation legislators, including the Federal Trade Commission, have begun to push for mandating influencers to add #ad to sponsored posts.

to elaborate. If a follower finds the clothing desirable they will click the link, and the image alone will be the persuading factor—just like a billboard or magazine spread. In this way, the imagery of Instagram influencers adds to Baudrillard's all-consuming simulacra, and considering that influencers are 'ordinary' people they represent an even greater blurring of lines between advertisement based semiology and reality. The brands themselves seem to endorse this practice. In an interview with the influencer @isabelleestrin when asked about what sort of expectations or guidelines brands give to her for endorsing posts she replied, "it depends on the brand and what they are asking for but usually it's pretty flexible[2]." Likely, brands trust influencers to create advertisements for them because influencers themselves are branded with particular aesthetics. That is the nature of the influencer-brand relationship: brands no longer need to create advertisements because influencers create engaging, branded advertisements for them.

Influencers create an aesthetic and stick to it. The aesthetic is another form of visual communication. It enables an Instagram user to stumble upon an influencer's page and immediately understand the norms of that page. Consider the differences between the soft and girly feed pictured in *Figure 4* and the dark and goth feed pictured in *Figure 5*.
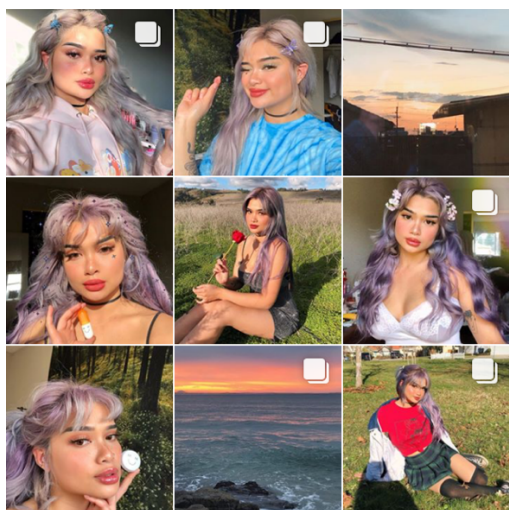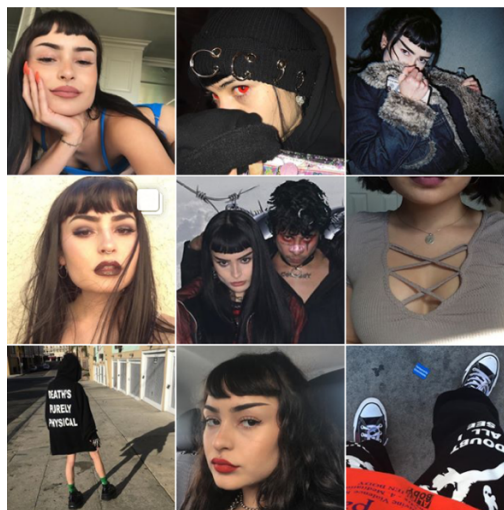

Figure 4

Figure 5

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[2] Quotes are [sic] because most are taken from instant messages with influencers.

With one glance a viewer can understand the differences of these feeds because aesthetics on Instagram are visual communication. Visual communication almost necessarily precedes verbal communication because before clicking on the individual posts that includes a caption an Instagram user sees the overall feed (with no captions). Looking at these feeds one understands that one influencer is girly and the other is goth. Further, if one digs deeper in these images they can see that the influencer in *Figure 4* includes nature in their aesthetic given inclusion of grass and ocean while the influencer in *Figure 5* has a more urban aesthetic given the concrete. While these may seem rather simple attributes, girly or goth, nature-lover or city person, importantly in this context they can be considered both visual characteristics and personality characteristics. The characteristics are communicated visually here, but they are in fact personality characteristics as well. In the same way clothing can be used to communicate personality, Instagram aesthetics can be used.

Curating clear and desirable aesthetics allows for easy collaborations with brands, as a certain aesthetics can easily align with the aesthetic of a certain brand. As seen in *Figure 6* the goth aesthetic of the influencer lends itself to promoting the dark clothing style of the brand seen in *Figure 7.* The brand's use of the phrase "not for everyone" as well as the overtly dark imagery clearly align with the goth and edgy aesthetic of the influencer. The collaboration in *Figures 6 & 7* is just one example of shared aesthetics. There are so many different brands with specific aesthetics that seemingly every influencer can find brands to work with that suit them, from goth brands to girly brands to artsy brands.
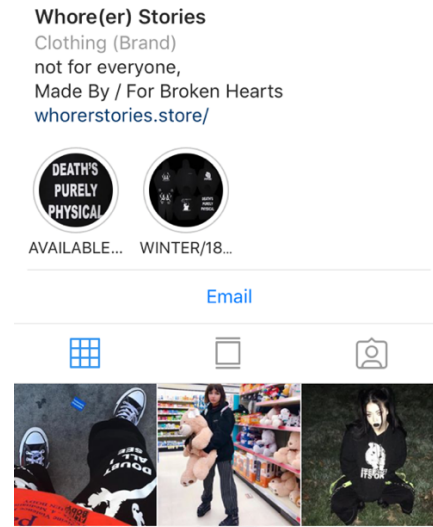
Figure 6

Figure 7

Smaller brands easily cater to specific aesthetics, but certainly mainstream brands also participate in the influencer economy; even the behemoth Amazon is involved in influencer collaborations. With the inclusion of brands from Amazon to Tiffany and Co, influencers can include class implications as part of their aesthetic. An influencer who promotes Amazon promotes an everyman sort of image, while as in *Figure 8,* the promotion of Tiffany and Co obviously implies a certain level of class to their image. Again, a form of visual communication, of semiology. The promotion of brands fits within a system of objects, where advertisements create meaning not just about products but meanings with greater sociological implications. Tiffany stands for class, and therefore an influencer who promotes Tiffany is classy. The influencer in this picture is in a nice restaurant wearing subtle Tiffany jewelry and a put-together outfit (including an appropriately Tiffany blue blazer). Regardless of the actual class status of the influencer, the brand chosen communicates a certain level of economic status. The brands and aesthetics influencers choose have symbolic power.

Figure 8

Influencers are diverse in more ways than just aesthetics; there are influencers of many different races and body types. My sample includes influencers categorized in three different body types, skinny, curvy and fat positive, and four different race categories, white, black, Asian and Latina. The presence of influencers of non-white races and non-skinny bodies inherently offers alternatives to the predominantly euro-centric beauty standards of mainstream media. However, that is not to say that euro-centric beauty standards do not dominate Instagram in general; given that each Instagram account is hyper-tailored to the user and therefore features a very different set of influencers (if any at all) it would be impossible for this study to conclude which types of beauty truly dominate Instagram. Simply, if an Instagram user wants to follow influencers that are not white and not skinny that option is open to them.

Beauty standards are combatted on Instagram both visually and verbally. The simple presence of, for example, a fat positive influencer visually communicates a new beauty paradigm because an influencer, as someone who posts mostly their own image, presumes there is something desirable about their image. In *Figure 9* the profile picture chosen, a cutesy cartoon fat girl, suggests extra weight can be attractive. The influencer's feed in *Figure 9* does not differ

from the feed of skinny influencers; she also includes almost exclusively pictures of herself and does not shy away from pictures in lingerie. In a society that consistently privileges skinny bodies, the presence of images of a chubby woman in a beauty realm (the realm of the influencer) fights beauty standards. On the contrary, *Figure 10* shows an account where body positivity is explicitly promoted given the phrase "Body Positive Activist" and "I do it for the chicks who lack confidence!" Instagram influencers, as people in the field of beauty, are situated to promote different beauty standards. They have to option to use their following to be "Body Positive" activists or to change beauty standards simply by promoting themselves.
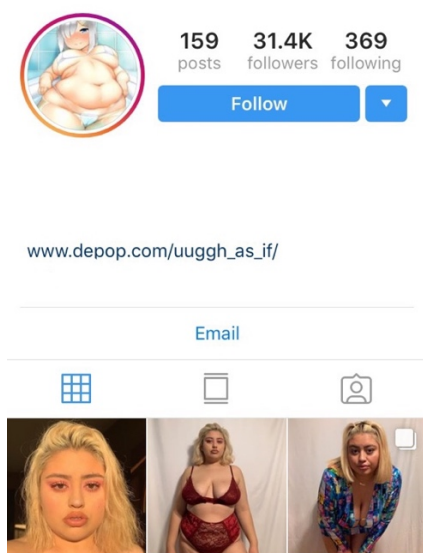

Figure 9

Figure 10

Similarly to influencers of larger body types, non-white influencers can use the platform to promote non-white beauty, both visually and verbally. Again, the presence of black, Latina or Asian women in the beauty field of an influencer alone pushes an expansion of beauty standards by publishing images of beautiful non-white women which are then publicly lauded by large groups of followers. Further, women of color on Instagram do explicitly call out euro-centric beauty standards as well, as seen in *Figure 11*.
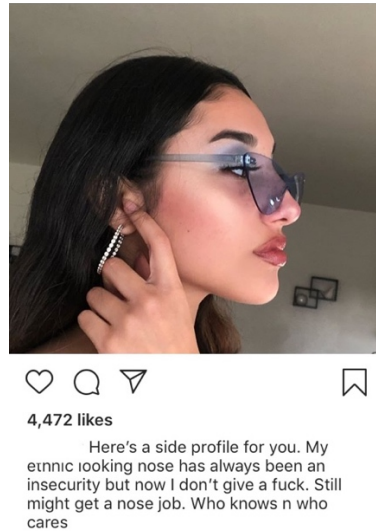
Figure 11

Figure 11 states, "my ethnic looking nose has always been an insecurity." Clearly, the influencer here calls attention the euro-centric standard of having a petite nose, identifying her own nose as "ethnic." The influencer goes on to say "but now I don't give a f**k," demonstrating power over these beauty standards. Yet she continues on to say "still might get a nose job. Who knows n who cares." While the post calls out euro-centric beauty standards, she does not claim to be fully above them with the confession of wanting a nose job. An edit to the post underneath the visible caption reads: "I really appreciate all the love everyone has to say about my nose…to anyone who shares this insecurity or any for that matter, don't stress it. We got this." It can be assumed the edit to the caption came after followers commented encouraging things on the post. (Negative comments on the other hand are exceedingly rare, though this may be the result of influencers deleting hateful comments.) Women on Instagram are not challenging beauty standards alone, they are supporting one another in the face of white beauty standards. While an influencer's account mostly promotes their own image, communities and somewhat deeper connections can be formed around those images, especially in the case of challenging beauty standards.

Just as there are brands for different aesthetics, there are brands targeted to women of different body sizes and races. For example, the influencer in *Figures 12 & 13* is promoting products targeted at black women. The brand DSoar Hair is a line of haircare for black women. The clothing tagged 'wyd.dontatme' is a brand whose mission statement is: "DON'T@ME empowers women, especially darker skin gyals…our mission is to provide representation for complexions and body types that break through society's outdated ass standards." The brand itself wants to combat Euro-centric beauty standards, which is another way brands and influencers can easily collaborate. However, it is worth noting that the influencer in these pictures does not call herself an activist or discuss insecurities and beauty standards in her posts. Still, she can promote a different beauty standard simply by being a visible and beautiful black woman and by promoting forward thinking brands.

Figure 12

Figure 13

One of the more prominent examples of brands for women of unconventional beauty on Instagram is Fashion Nova Curve, a plus size clothing line. Out of the five curvy influencers in my sample all five promote Fashion Nova Curve at some point in their feed (as well as two of the fat positive influencers in the sample). The brand seemingly dominates the curve clothing market on Instagram, hiring many curvy influencers to promote them. An example of a woman

promoting Fashion Nova Curve can be seen in *Figure 14* and the caption can be seen in *Figure 15*. The woman is clearly a beautiful plus size women. The way she promotes Fashion Nova Curve does not differ from the way skinny influencers promote clothing lines. She does not discuss the clothing line as plus size, she simply models it on herself inviting followers to also purchase Fashion Nova Curve. Here the influencer is using a tactic of succession within the influencer field. She does not attempt to uproot the entire system of an attention economy based on beauty but rather introduces her own form of beauty, curvy beauty, into that system.

Figure 14   *Figure 15*

As seen in *Figure 15* the brand Fashion Nova Curve itself comments on the influencer's post with fire emojis. Clearly there exists comradery between the brand and the influencer. Other times brands that want to work with an influencer will comment things along the lines of, "Hey gorgeous <3 Let's collab." The influencer @isabelleestrin said of working with brands, "usually a brand will reach out to me about collaborating or vice versa and that's always rly nice and fulfilling." The idea that working with brands is fulfilling suggests some amount of affection for brands. She also added, "I only work with brands that i align with ethically and aesthetically." Specific brands and specific influencers can have quite a lot in common: ethics and aesthetics.

Tagging certain brands or even being promoted on a brand's Instagram page can in turn promote an influencer and help them gain a larger following. In an interview with the influencer @akiralopez they explain that they achieved 17.3K likes on a post when they were reposted by the brand Unif, and similarly the influencer @roinielyse says she really started gaining followers after working with the brand Glossier. The idea that brands and influencers can have mutually beneficial relationships that are even described as "fulfilling" suggests a blurring of lines between businesses and individuals. Now the businesses and the individuals are on the same platform, messaging each other and commenting on each other's posts.

Importantly, influencer marketing works extremely well. Brands, from the smallest to the largest, choose to use influencers because it is a relatively cheap investment that has real results. Rather than funding an entire advertisement campaign a brand need only reserve a few thousand dollars (if not less) for a handful of influencers. The influencer @maitreyabrooks, located in Portland, has only 6,000 followers yet she works with the giant brand Urban Outfitters. She explains of the phenomena of micro-influencers:

> "A lot of my followers are in Portland…we run into each other around town…people really do trust what you're talking about because you wouldn't be doing it if you didn't mean it. That's like the whole wave of micro-influencers. It's just more personal and more like organic."

The fact that influencer marketing is more personal is precisely why it works. Influencers do (for the most part) carefully consider the products they promote. The marketing strategy also presents a rather insidious advertising technique, where consumers have a level of relationship with their advertiser. This advertisement technique fits within a trend of hyperreality, where it is hard to distinguish what is 'real.' Influencer marketing blurs the lines between brand and influencer, and even between brands and the average individual.

Brands and influencers are a natural fit because influencers are visual communicators with curated aesthetics; in a way, they are advertisements. Consider again the typical feed of an influencer seen in *Figure 1*. The highly colorful, curated and aestheticized feed mimics the look of a fashion magazine. Given that on average 0.73 posts out of nine include nudity, defined as swimsuit or lingerie pictures, influencers may have even adopted the tendency of using the female body to sell product. Influencers are advertisers, and above all else sell their own image. Individuals under capitalism internalize the norms handed down from the media saturated and advertisement saturated world, influencers perhaps even more so. An influencer can mimic the makings of an entire fashion industry in their own bedroom without professional photographers, set designers and without an agent. Also unlike fashion magazines and traditional advertising, now consumers choose not the magazine but the model. Followers have the freedom to choose to follow influencers of different body types, skin colors and aesthetics. As seen by the popular influencers in *Figures 9* through *14* often followers choose to follow women who challenge typical beauty standards. However, while beauty standards may be expanded on Instagram, they have not been subverted. Again, a tactic of succession has been employed by non-white, non-skinny influencers to expand beauty standards, but not to subvert them all together. The pressure on women to be beautiful remains fully intact.

One important piece of the influencer industry is the followers. Who are the followers? Out of my sample 62 influencers had available data on the demographics of their followers. Fifty-two of those 62 had followings that were predominantly female. These impossibly beautiful influencers are followed mostly by women because they are selling to women, both their image and individuals products. Again, a traditional advertising paradigm exists in the sphere of the influencer: selling an idea of beauty to women. By tagging the makeup and clothes

they wear, the skincare they use and the hair dressers they go to, they allow the possibility of a

follower to model themselves after the influencer. Consider *Figure 16* in which nearly

everything on the influencer's body is tagged: four different make up brands, a hair extension

brand and a lingerie brand. Of course, even if you were to purchase every item listed you

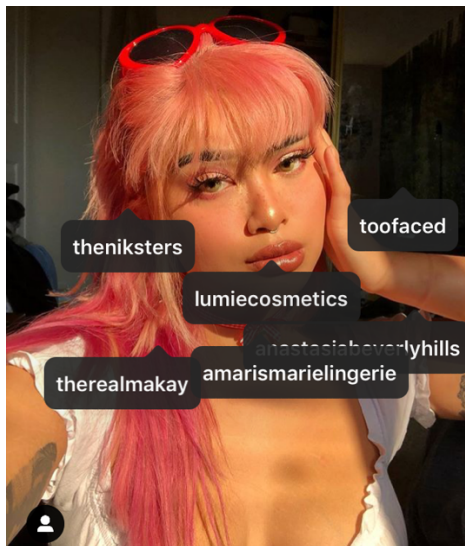wouldn't look like the influencer pictured.

Figure 16

Just like the classic paradigm of advertising directing at women: influencers sell the

possibility that you too can be beautiful. Except now you choose your own models, your own

sort of beauty to aspire to, and you do in fact have the freedom to choose someone that looks like

you—like you but prettier. On Instagram women choose their own impossible beauty standards.

Creating A Following

Instagram influencers are generally two things: extremely beautiful and talented social

media-ites. They understand how to manipulate social media for personal gain, a talent that

outside of the realm of Instagram has been fully codified into a career with most businesses

hiring social media managers. The influencer @akiralopez talked about their Instagram as a

"game" they play "to win likes." Influencers must have pretty faces but they certainly are not merely pretty faces. They have talents in curating an aesthetic, in beauty and fashion, and in understanding the nuances of social media—all talents that become strategies within the influencer field to gain power and to get closer to the ever-desired autonomous pole.

As mentioned before influencers work with brands in a mutually beneficial relationship to gain followers, but that is certainly not the only method of growing a following. One major way influencers grab attention is by hopping onto trends. Trends on Instagram can take many forms, from flashy fashion trends to the use of certain photo editing applications. Because Instagram is a visual platform, trends on Instagram are usually visual trends. One example of a fashion trend can be seen in *Figures 17 & 18.*
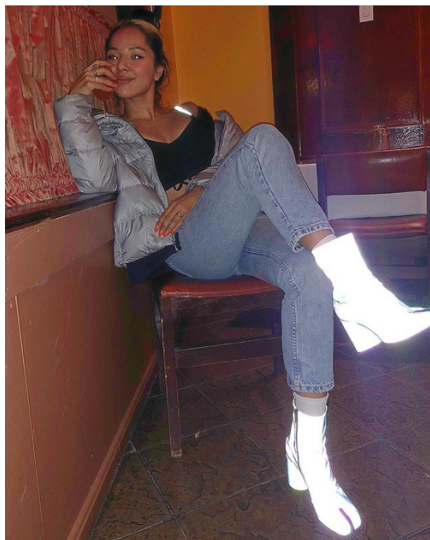

Figure 17

Figure 18

The influencers here wear extremely reflective items of clothing which glow against light sources. This trend fits particularly well for Instagram because the clothing items themselves only reach their full glowing potential under certain lights and conditions. With photography, they can be captured at the maximum amount of glowing—in a way the clothes exist to be photographed. Further, the eye-catching nature of the trend allows influencers to grab attention

on the Explore feed. Instagram as a visual platform lends itself to visual trends such as reflective clothing, though also as a fast-moving platform Instagram likely allows for a quick turn over of trends. The influencer @akiralopez explains, "I go through explore and change my aesthetic according to what is exploding on explore." Influencers are people extremely in tune with trends, and the "game" is knowing trends will change and being willing to change with them. In truth, influencers likely are not just in tune with them, but start them. However, more research would need to be done tracing trends on Instagram to understand where they begin.

Influencers also use the system of Instagram itself to gain followers, such as the use of hashtags. This method is most popular with influencers who have less than 10K followers. On average influencers in my sample with under 10K followers had 13.2 hashtags for 9 posts. A few of the influencers under 10K would post a large number of hashtags under one post in an attempt to get more attention and be pushed into the explore feed. The excessive number of hashtags demonstrate that these influencers clearly do want to gain more followers, and will attempt to do so through the system of Instagram itself. On the other hand, the average use of hashtags is 0.8 for 9 posts for influencers with 500K+ followers. Likely the use of hashtags may be a beginner's tool to gaining a following that more successful influencers do not use.

Whatever means an influencer uses to grow their following, the real question is why does an influencer want a following in the first place? Two of the influencers who were interviewed mentioned wanting to use Instagram as an outlet to get beyond their small towns, as @miss.royalt puts it, "I wanted to express myself creatively, and network in an Australian wide social group, instead of the small town I'm from." Instagram is a global platform, the possibility of expanding your network beyond your immediate surroundings certainly exists. A major function of the internet is to connect people with the world and break free of geographical

constraints. Whether the connections and successes found on Instagram are illusory or not, they are undeniably desirable to many young women.

One concrete benefit of having an Instagram following is visibility. With a large following an influencer can help create success in other areas of their life, such as promoting an art or music career or business aspirations. An influencer can use Instagram to transfer their beauty capital into other forms of capital, such as economic or symbolic capital. In my sample, there were 26 posts which promoted some sort of outside work. While not a common post (only .37 out of nine posts on average), still it was a type of post that happened with some regularity. Posts promoting outside work ranged from simply linking an influencer's second Instagram account, to mentioning a magazine interview an influencer had been a part of to directly selling their art work to fans in the post.

In fact, there is a significant trend of Instagram influencers who are also artists and incorporate their art into their account. The visual and aesthetic nature of an Instagram feed lends itself to the lifestyle of an artist. Six influencers in the sample post their art to their accounts. The influencer in *Figure 19* uses her Instagram to promote her artwork and has previously sold her art on her account.

Figure 19

As the picture demonstrates, the influencer's position as an artist is clearly aestheticized. She wears pants with paint all over them and she is in her art studio, which is featured in many pictures in the feed. This particular influencer is a painter, and as a visual artist is able to easily integrate her art into her account—not just by posting pictures of her art, but putting her artistic vision into the account as a whole. She posts pictures in her studio, wears artistic clothing (with paint on them) and bends herself into unique shapes. Her aesthetic brand is that of an artist, just as earlier we've seen goth or girly branded girls. Visual art lines up well with being an Instagram influencer because every sort of influencer could be viewed as a visual artist, as curating an aesthetic is a visual talent. In fact, many talk about their pages as an artistic endeavor or at least they "try to be artistic" (@miss.royalt). Plus, if you do want to gain success as an artist the two endeavors work hand in hand. An influencer can use their success in the field of Instagram to gain success in the art field. The influencer in *Figure 19*, for example*,* is able to easily share her paintings to her 98.7K followers, an audience that couldn't possibly fit in one gallery opening.

In *Figure 20* the same influencer tags her location at Art Basel Miami Beach, a world-famous art event. In the caption the influencer writes, "today I went to Miami Art Basel for the first time thanks to @asos_us @asos! Such a dream plus also got to live my dream of owning a red suit." The tagged brands are both Asos, which is the brand she thanks in the caption. She mentions both the opportunity to attend the art show and the opportunity to wear a red suit (presumably from Asos). Her position as an influencer, particularly as a brand promoting influencer, sent her to the art world. Asos also sent a whole group of influencers to Miami Art Basel, one of which is featured in *Figure 17*. Not only does Instagram enable influencers to show their artwork to a larger audience, in this case it enabled them to attend an important art event. And in turn, attending (and being seen at) a prestigious art event allows influencers to gain

symbolic capital within the art field. Being an Instagram influencer certainly has benefits

outside of Instagram.

Figure 20

Many influencers include permanent links to their outside work in their bios. One of the

most common links influencers posts is their Depop accounts. Depop is an outside application

that allows users to sell clothing to other users. Depop interestingly has a very similar interface

to Instagram, with mostly square photos, continuous scroll and many highly aesthetic images.

The two platforms easily work hand in hand, with popular influencers becoming popular Depop

users. The influencer in *Figure 21* links her Depop account in her bio and posts pictures on her

Instagram of clothing that is for sale on her Depop. The easy connection between Instagram and

Depop, and the highly aestheticized nature of the two platforms enables the influencer to transfer

her influencer skills beyond Instagram into amateur business success: to transfer her beauty

capital into economic capital. Especially in an app-based gig economy, Instagram has real

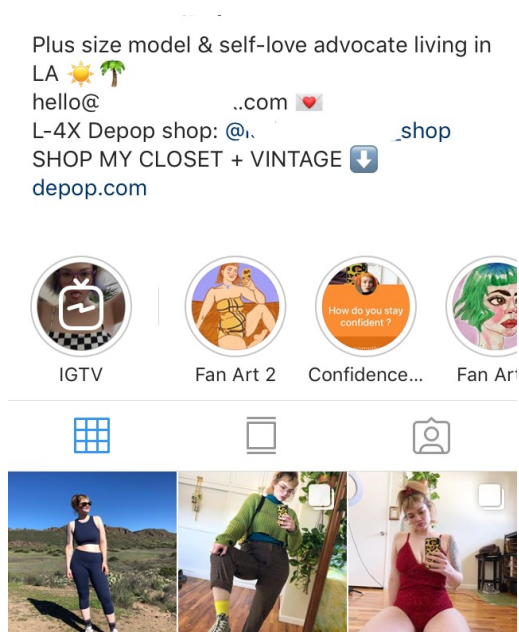potential to have cross-over success in business.

Plus size model & self-love advocate living in
LA ☀️🌴
hello@ ..com 💌
L-4X Depop shop: @____shop
SHOP MY CLOSET + VINTAGE ⬇️
depop.com

IGTV Fan Art 2 Confidence... Fan Art

Figure 21

  The best way to understand the sorts of outside success influencers can achieve is to ask

them. All of the five influencers interviewed felt that Instagram brought them success in other

areas of their life, particularly social success. Three out of the five discussed product benefits

they receive, which could be anything from clothing to, "getting discounts on hotels stays or

dinners ☺." @maitreyabrooks expressed gratitude for the fact that she receives, "a lot of benefits

through Instagram. As in like I haven't had to buy clothes in a while or like jewelry or like

beauty supplies." Interestingly clothes and beauty products are a large portion of what

influencers receive from companies, products which help influencers maintain their beauty

capital: another way influencers and brands can work hand in hand. Of course, influencers also

exchange their Instagram success for economic capital. In her recent collaboration with Urban

Outfitters @maitreyabrooks was allowed to pick out 1500 dollars worth of clothes and paid an

extra 1000 dollars in exchange for 25 photos sent to Urban—and that's an influencer with only

6,000 followers. The influencer @rohinielyse makes her entire living through her Instagram

account.

Whether or not an influencer can convert their success into other arenas, they still pursue success on Instagram itself because the platform allows influencers to create their own celebrity. No longer need they make it through the gatekeeping of Hollywood or work with an agent or modeling agency, they work from their bedrooms with merely a smartphone. While this uniquely modern form a fame may never reach the heights of a superstar in the golden age of Hollywood, it does allow influencers to collect fans and even fandoms in their own right. For example, consider the comment sections in *Figures 22* and *23* of two posts by one influencer with 207K followers.
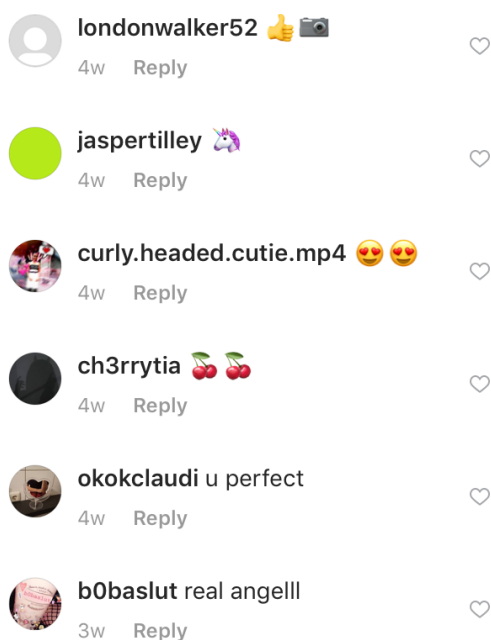

Figure 22

Figure 23

Comments like "u perfect," "real angell" or even "my princess fairy angel from above, you shine you beautiful <3 ily" are extremely complimentary, especially considering they come from individuals who are strangers to the influencer. The result is very similar to the sort of crazed praise fans of traditional celebrities often express. However this influencer conceives of their own relative fame, the appearance of fame certainly exists on her page. The fact that any

picture the influencer posts of herself will be met with hundreds of complementary comments

likely encourages the influencer to continue to post and curate her image. As the influencer

@isabellestrin says "the more it happened the more content I wanted to put out because people

were responding to it which made me feel like I was doing something right." The immense

positive feedback influencers receive from followers keeps influencers engaged in creating more

content for those followers. That back and forth, that relationship between influencer and

follower, represents a different sort of fame dynamic than that of the traditional super-star and

fan. Influencers maintain their followings, respond to followers more often and create content

with their followers in mind. Because ultimately an influencer's following is what brings them

power. Beauty capital is merely a path to gaining a following, to gaining power. In fact, the

followers themselves could be considered an aspect to beauty capital, given that beauty capital

entails using one's beauty to grow a social media presence.

 Many popular, and even not that popular, influencers even have fan pages created

dedicated to their image: pages which merely repost images of a single influencer as seen is
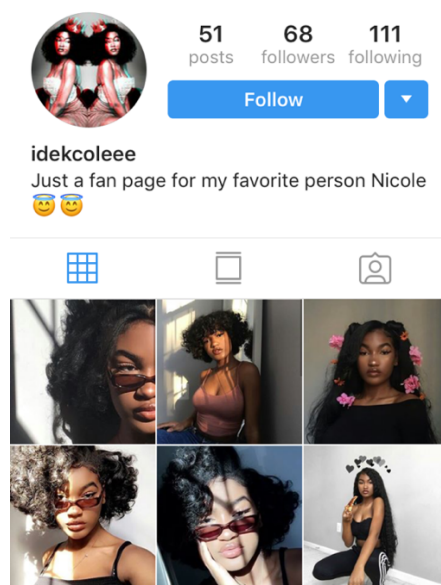
Figure 24.

Figure 24

The account this page is dedicated to has 66.9K followers. While certainly a substantial following, comparing that number to a traditional celebrity who is known across the world or at least across the nation, a following the size of a small city seems less substantial. Still, it is enough to garner a fan page and to be termed a fan's "favorite person." The same influencer this fan page is dedicated to also has an entire section on her own Instagram page for fan art. Clearly, influencers have fans in the same way "real" celebrities do. Fandoms even reach across platforms to other areas of the internet. For example, a website called PrettyUglyLittleLiars.net creates chat room spaces for followers who want to discuss influencers with other followers. The chatrooms can often devolve into degrading gossip with comments such as, "[Influencer] was your average rich private school girl…she used to hang out with the real NYC rich kids…but they're no longer friends and posted some pretty public beef on each other IG stories." Instagram influencers even get their own gossip columns. The presence of these gossip columns may represent a form of position-taking in the field, where there exist attempts to bring down influencers closest to the autonomous pole with degrading gossip.

Influencers know they have fans and conceptualize followers as fans. Many influencers speak to followers as fans by thanking followers for their support. While not a common post (on average .21 out of nine posts were thanking fans), there were 15 instances of followers posting a thank you note to fans. Typically thank-you's come at a point where an influencer hits a new record number of followers, such as 10K, 100K or 200K. One example of a thank you post can be seen in *Figure 25*.

Figure 25

Here the influencer thanks her followers for her accumulation of 180K followers, a similar practice of traditional celebrities who thank their fans regularly for their support. Here, however, the fan base is quantified simply by the follower count. Rather than crowds in person and paparazzi, fans show their love through follows and likes. Further the language used here implies a connection between the influencer and her fans. They are on a "journey" together "growing and improving." This language choice promotes a feeling of authenticity and connection with followers, despite the fact the vast majority of her followers have no real interactions with her. Or rather, the interactions only go one way. Similar practices of inclusion and thankfulness are used by YouTube stars and other internet celebrities.

However, influencers differ from the other internet celebrities in that they exist mostly as pictures not videos. Influencers are curators of an aesthetic and visual communicators, and their success therefore rides on their visual appeal: both their beauty and their aesthetic. It follows that on average eight out of nine posts are a picture of themselves, and only 0.61 out of nine recent

posts features any sort of deeper personal entry. Not that personal entries are not a part of the Instagram career at all, but they are certainly a much smaller aspect than the explicitly 2-dimensional performance of a visual presence. Rather than an influencer's success resting on manufactured intimacy and strategic authenticity like that of lonelygirl15, it rests on the visual. Instagram influencers are yet another evolution in fame, from the over-sharer internet celebrity to the aesthetic celebrity.

Beautiful women have an advantage in the realm of aesthetic celebrity. Obviously because they are beautiful, but also because they are women. Female beauty has been privileged over male beauty in society, and greater beauty pressures on women also mean women generally have more practice managing and optimizing their own appearance—a habit that likely translates to managing the aesthetic appearance of an Instagram feed. Further, consumeristic advertising has long been targeted more towards women and, as seen earlier, influencers sell traditionally feminine products. On Instagram, unlike most other places, women have the advantage. However, the advantage itself is a double-edged sword in that to have the advantage a woman must perform extreme beauty. Many influencers understand their status as beautiful women, and understand that they have built a platform around it. In the sample, there were 12 instances of women referencing their own beauty, meaning calling themselves beautiful. Perhaps even more importantly, influencers often participate in creating images of symbolic power such as in *Figure 26.*

♡ ◯ ⊲   ⊓

Go fuck yourself

View all 376 comments

Figure 26

The influencer here, considering the lack of clothing, the facial expression and the caption "go f**k yourself" portrays a sense of power, particularly erotic power. Beauty has afforded influencers a platform, a sort of power. Beauty is treated on Instagram as power because beautiful people garner likes and follows, which are the currency of Instagram. Therefore, images in which an influencer looks good are powerful. The influencer in *Figure 26* captions the picture with an aggressive phrase to match the power exuding from the image. There is symbolic power in posting these images, and Instagram as a visual platform where semiology runs rampant, invites such displays of symbolic power.

Extremely young women also hold power on Instagram. The sample includes five influencers under the age of 18, three of whom are 15, one of whom is only 14. *Figure 27* features a fifteen-year-old influencer with 219K followers. Despite her young age she has a large following and therefore a large platform to share her thoughts on. Further, she includes an email address for business inquiries and a link to a Spotify account (a music application). This fifteen-year-old is managing business inquiries and promoting her music career through her Instagram

platform; she is converting her beauty capital into economic and cultural capital, which has powerful implications. Social media, and particularly Generation Z's indoctrination with social media at a young age, has allowed young people to grasp some real power. While child stars may have existed before they weren't managing their own fame; on Instagram the child has complete control. Fifteen-year-old girls with hundreds of thousands of followers have cultural power, perhaps more cultural power than has ever been afforded to fifteen-year-old girls before in history.
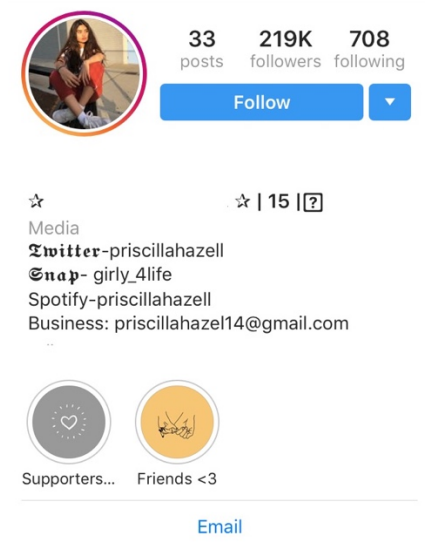

Figure 27

Social media is a driving force of modern society, which shapes who we are. It is no longer a question of whether beauty capital can be converted into other forms of capital using Instagram, Instagram is the capital; followers are the capital. Creating divides between the "real" world and the online world ignores the inseparability of the two—especially for the youngest generation whose first phones were iPhones. Dismissing internet celebrities as "not real" celebrities, compared to say movie stars, dismisses the fact that society spends more time on our phones than at the theater. Having an exorbitant number of followers means your thoughts will be heard by more people, your artwork and creations seen by more people and your activism

engaged with by more people. Being Instagram famous is 'real' because it means you have real influence, over your followers and likely over culture as a whole. The power of influencers is just that: influence.

CONCLUSION

As businesses rush to join the potential gold mine of the influencer economy, the idea of 'influence' has come under fire. What is influence? What are these businesses really paying for? Influence, of course, is a vague concept, which is at least to some degree immeasurable. Influence in the realm of Instagram likely comes down to trend setting: who sets the trends of what to wear, what to do and what to look like. In Bourdieu's field theory the idea of influence and influencer aligns almost perfectly with the idea of the autonomous pole, establishing the rules of the field. In the field of Instagram there exists a constant battle within the attention economy. While influence may not be easily visible, it does exist. Influence as a form of power can be more easily seen once it is converted to other forms, such as artistic success for an influencer or cold, hard cash for a company such as the Fyre festival.

One example of a business harnessing the power of influence is the beauty brand Glossier. Glossier's CEO is a tech-savvy millennial woman who decided to almost exclusively use social media to build her brand. Therefore, all of Glossier's product are clean, white and Instagrammable. Seven days after the release of their product Cloud Paint in 2017 there were 1,700 user generated images of the product. In four weeks, there were 6,368 (entrepreneur.com). The company uses Instagram influencers to advertise and has implemented a brand ambassador program where influencers get a cut of the profit they generate. Glossier's involvement with Instagram goes even further than collaborations with influencers. One major strategy of Glossier

is to take the 'customer is always right' philosophy to the extreme with the aid of the internet. The Glossier brand takes time to respond to comments and messages sent to their social media profiles, and then the business creates products directly in response to what followers say they want. As seen previously in this study, brands and influencers have become increasingly in sync to a point where the line is hard to draw, because influencers *are* brands. As consumers become more involved on Instagram, the line between everyday consumers and brands also becomes blurred. The internet has allowed individuals and businesses to operate on the same platform, thereby bringing them closer together.

Glossier may choose "real" women, meaning influencers, to promote their brand, but of course the influencers chosen are beautiful. Beauty remains of undeniable importance on Instagram. Just because influencers expand beauty standards, does not mean they abolish them. As mentioned before, on Instagram women choose their own impossible beauty standards. The pressure to be beautiful on Instagram is immense, even if the definition of beauty is wide. Certainly, still much beautifying effort is put forth by female consumers shopping through Instagram, given the promotion of products for just about every body part. Beauty is the driving factor of the influencer field, meaning the power given to women within the influencer industry is still contingent on high beauty pressure on women. Further, beauty on Instagram is dynamic: beauty is more than just beauty. It is power, symbolic power. Changing beauty standards, and more importantly changing consequences of beauty, are necessary to understand because they deeply affect women's position in society.

Beauty on Instagram is a talent and a performance. Rather than being one pretty face in a million, influencers must figure out how to be a uniquely pretty face. Unlike traditional internet celebrities, influencers do not use intimate details about themselves to get ahead, instead they use

mostly their aesthetic gifts. The extremely visual platform of Instagram lends itself to such behaviors. Influencer's have figured out how to visually communicate who they are, or at least who their Instagram account is—and the result is that the exterior becomes the interior. This could represent important changes in how individuals in society express themselves under image culture. Given the topic of this study, a major worry of mine was readers falling into stereotypes about the shallowness of women. Influencers are talented women, they are visual artists. We should not shame women for using their talents to gain recognition and economic capital through a system perfectly laid out for them by modern technologies. There are positives to the influencer industry, such as that many influencers consciously promote smaller businesses that are more ethical in terms of sustainability or body positivity practices.

Of course, any beautiful person couldn't just post a picture on Instagram and expect to gain thousands upon thousands of followers. The talent of the influencer is their ability to create engaging visual content and to understand the nuances of social media. In this regard, it is hard to say that Generation Z, the iGeneration, does not have the advantage. Jean M. Twenge, author of *iGen,* argues that the presence of the internet is the single most defining factor of Generation Z. As iGen ages into adulthood, they will likely take the importance of social media with them. While Instagram fame may seem a young, and by extension frivolous, interest now, as Generation Z ages it will likely become more serious. The internet and social media may change, but they are not likely to go away. Therefore, the people with the most power on the internet should not be ignored, as that power is only going to become more "real." Perhaps a major reason that power has been overlooked is because currently it is largely gifted to women, and in particular young women. In the internet age, women have a unique power that should not be ignored: women have the power of influence.

While working on this study I found remarkably little previous research about Instagram influencers. Therefore, this study is an initial theory about the influencer industry and the influencers themselves, which I hope will be further explored by future researchers. My research methods, of course, have limitations. As a content analysis research project, it represents only my interpretation of the data; another researcher may look at the same data and come to different conclusions. Further, my sampling method was not random and my interview sample was quite small. My study could be improved upon by a random sampling method and by a larger data pool that includes both more photo content and particularly more interview content. Certainly, there are further questions to be explored in the realm of social media influencers, specifically research could be done to trace trends on Instagram and analyze where they truly begin. Over the next couple of decades, an interesting question that will arise is what becomes of influencers as they age: will they become too old to 'influence'? A quantitative analysis perspective on Instagram, using Instagram analytics, could also prove to be particularly interesting. Quantitative methods could be used to determine which sorts of influencers statistically have the most popularity on Instagram, and whether or not those influencers do fall outside of Euro-centric beauty standards.

Despite their surface shallowness, I do believe Instagram influencers are a population worth studying. Instagram influencers represent the most prominent changes in society under the internet and social media—changes that fundamentally address our social reality in the modern world. The importance of influencers and 'influence' has established its place in our late capitalist society, and the presence of these concepts is likely to only expand in each of our lives. It seems that the number of followers someone needs to become an influencer keeps shrinking and the desirability of working with brands keeps growing. Given the trends, one can imagine a

world in which every single person is an influencer, all selling each other products. Glossier CEO Emily Weiss welcomes such a world: "what's very motivating to us is the idea of every single woman being an influencer."

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