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PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF INSTAGRAM POSTS BY CELEBRITIES AND
MICRO-CELEBRITIES / INFLUENCERS

by

Taylor Nicole Ackerman

A Thesis

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Abstract

The study compared Instagram posting strategies between celebrities and influencers in terms of subject matter, authenticity, self-disclosure/intimacy, use of sponsored content, and interactions. The method of content analysis was used on a 456-post-sample collected from both celebrity and influencer Instagram posts over the course of one year, i.e. 2019. It found that celebrities and influencers differed in terms of subject matter, authenticity, and intimacy, and influencers tended to be more authentic and self-disclosing than celebrities. Additionally, celebrities and influencers used sponsored content in a similar way, but celebrities' interactions far outnumbered those of influencers. Both celebrities and influencers posted organic content and both with intimacy in order to grow parasocial relationships with followers, though it is the sponsored content and professional works that take most of their time and efforts. Lastly, influencers added more authenticity and intimacy into their sponsored posts to maintain parasocial relationship with the audience.

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Introduction

As of 2020, there are one billion active users on Instagram each month, and half of them use the platform every single day (Mohsin, 2020). On average, users spend 53 minutes per day on Instagram, and 71% of US businesses have an Instagram account (Mohsin, 2020). Instagram users not only follow real-life friends, family members, and colleagues, but also celebrities and influencers. It is unprecedented that celebrities, brands, and influencers are in the same communicative feed as interpersonal partners like friends and family members (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). This is noteworthy because it could lead to individuals forming friendship or real bonds with distant celebrities, viewing all of the posts in their feed with the same amount of credibility and trustworthiness.

Though celebrity endorsements in traditional mass media of print and television have been around since the start of advertising, the direct and interactive communication between celebrities and fans via social media channels is much newer, only spanning the past decade and a half. Instead of being passively promotional as in traditional media, celebrities are now actively revealing parts of their personal and private lives with audiences on social media, leading to increased parasocial interactions (Chung & Cho, 2017). Though parasocial interactions were originally coined to describe the way audiences developed in relationships with celebrities while watching television, parasocial relationships have evolved to include social media interactions (Lueck, 2015). The frequent personal posts on social media enhance parasocial interactions development, as parasocial interactions thrive on constant exposure and self-disclosure (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hopkins, 2019; Ledbetter & Redd, 2016).

Social media also brings in a different kind of celebrity: micro-celebrities, also commonly referred to as influencers, who are famous because of their large social media following. These

micro-celebrities are normally known to a niche group of people, create content based on “lifestyle” topics such as fashion, travel, beauty, parenthood, or food, share large parts of their lives on their social media platforms, and interact directly with their audiences in order to maintain their status (Duffy & Kang, 2020; Raun, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Influencers’ careers are based on making money from their Instagram profiles and sponsored posts, but often enter the field seeking career autonomy or by promoting their own online businesses. Audiences form parasocial bonds with the micro-celebrities through repeated social media interactions.

Many studies on social media and influencers note that self-disclosure is a common characteristic of Instagram use (Chung & Cho, 2017; Ledbetter & Redd, 2016; Duffy & Kang, 2020; Raun, 2018). Self-disclosure means sharing one's personal life with followers, and personal life can include one’s thoughts, feelings, and ideas as well as aspects of their personal lives including their family members, pets, homes, or travel. Self-disclosure seems to be especially crucial for micro-celebrities. Research has identified the importance of micro-celebrities offering higher levels of self-disclosure in order to gain trust with their followers and portray themselves as authentic (Raun, 2018; Hund & McGuigan, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Hopkins, 2019). In fact, self-disclosure helps authenticity, which is a key strategy for micro-influencers. Basically, authenticity refers to social media users feeling as though the people they are following are being “real” with them, telling them the truth, sharing their own opinions, having a genuine personality, and not putting on a facade (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Raun, 2018). In Duffy’s 2019 study on professional Instagram content creators, one creator revealed that analytics on social media posts show that personal posts secured 50% more responses than other non-personal posts.

This trend was echoed in Hopkins' 2019 study in which a blogger was cited as explaining: "You connect with people through stories. It's not so much about my face, it's about my life you know. My whole brand is about my life" (p. 4716).

The strategies of self-disclosure and authenticity by micro-celebrities seem to be widely adopted. Considering that self-disclosure and authenticity yield stronger parasocial bonds, it is likely that celebrities would employ the same strategies to strengthen their ties to fans and followers. This study seeks to examine whether this is a trend among celebrity social media posts as often as it is in influencer social media posts.

Specifically, the main purpose of this study is to compare traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities posts on Instagram to determine how they differ from one another in terms of social media use strategies. Secondly, this study seeks to find out if celebrities are under the same "visibility mandate" as influencers are, and what this looks like in terms of audience engagement. Last but not least, this study will compare the performance of different types of posts and determine what types of posts perform best for influencers and traditional celebrities. By analyzing what celebrities and influencers post, it will offer substantial insight to social media strategy and online self-disclosure patterns.

Literature Review

Instagram and Celebrities and Influencers

Instagram

Instagram is a very relevant, visually oriented platform on which lifestyle topics are discussed (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). Instagram users very carefully piece together their feed, "curating" their images to impart their personalities and values (Pirolli, 2017). Users upload and share their own photographs, videos, and captions, and they also use comments and likes to

communicate with others (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Photographs have become an important means of self-presentation. Instead of simply taking photos to document special moments and events, photographs are now used for instant communication with friends and followers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). In order to facilitate similar interests, Instagram implements hashtags to identify posts about a specific subject so that users are able to find relevant content (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Instagram is predominantly apolitical and focuses on topics like fashion, food, travel, fitness, and beauty (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). Instagram is also more personal than other social media platforms because it features things like selfies, informal family photos, and images of the insides of peoples' homes (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). People take Instagram as a place for positive, aspirational content; somewhere to connect with friends and follow interests or assist with shopping (Pirolli, 2017). Instagram lends itself to word of mouth marketing because products can be shown visually and named/described/promoted in the caption of the photo and video-oriented platform (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Instagram and social media as a whole have become a stage on which individuals can engage more self-presentation in order to build/maintain audiences (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). In a study on the uses and gratifications of Instagram, Sheldon and Bryant (2016) found that the main reasons are "Surveillance/Knowledge about others", "Documentation", "Coolness", and "Creativity" (p. 89). Previous studies have shown that Instagram users follow the well-known online; both traditional celebrities and micro celebrities or influencers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Huang & Su, 2018). Users prefer to follow accounts that have high-quality photos and engaging texts (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Celebrities

Traditional celebrities are defined as individuals who got famous from mainstream media such as movies, modeling, music, TV shows, or sports (Jin et al., 2019). Celebrities' professional careers and fanbases ensure them a large following on social media (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). Not only do celebrities use their celebrity media platforms to promote their movies and projects and provide awareness to charity causes, many celebrities also use social media to communicate personal facts and information (Chung & Cho, 2017). Very often, they have to perform a dual performance - being synchronously public and private, extraordinary and ordinary (Duffy & Kang, 2020).

Celebrities have cultural, symbolic, economic, and political power, as well as the ability to establish norms for success and define what is considered attractive (Duffy & Kang, 2020). Celebrities' performances of themselves are there to be interpreted and decoded... their personalities and portrayals draw attention and shape people's way of thinking (Duffy & Kang, 2020).

As social media becomes more popular, mass audience access barriers are much lower, which provides celebrities a more direct communication with their fans and has led to the creation of a new genre of celebrities —micro-celebrities (Instagram, 2018).

Micro-Celebrities / Influencers

A micro-celebrity is an everyday internet user who has gained a large following on social media and is famous to a niche group of people (Duffy & Kang, 2020). Micro-celebrities gain popularity by narrating their personal lives and lifestyles through textual and visual means on Instagram (Duffy & Kang, 2020). These presentations often consist of original content that entices, educates, or entertains users with similar interests (Instagram, 2018). In addition to

building a sizable network of people following them, micro-celebrities are considered to be a trusted taste maker in their field (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Micro-celebrities have a specific way of performing on Instagram in order to gain the attention of followers, and they have a strong commitment to maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good (Raun, 2018).

Micro-celebrities are the most prevalent on Instagram, but also exist on Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Some micro-celebrities get their start on one platform, such as Youtube, and then use this momentum to gain followers on other platforms. Micro-celebrities' identities are based on the admiration, recognition, and aspiration of their followers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

Micro-celebrities are studied under the broader umbrella of "celebrity studies" because they are considered commodities that are consumed by large audiences who have an interest in both their personal and public life (Duffy & Kang, 2020).

Micro-celebrities' lives belong to social media, because without social media the fame of these micro-celebrities would not exist (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). As Raun puts it, "Social media afforded celebrification is characterized by continuous and multiple uploads of performances of a private self; it is about access, immediacy, and instantaneity" (Raun, 2018).

Another influencer explains, "You connect with people through stories... It's not about my face, it's about my life; my whole brand is about my life" (Hopkins, 2019).

Micro-celebrities' everyday lives revelation on social media shows a picture of success and what is culturally valued (Duffy & Kang, 2020). In particular, micro-celebrities celebrate popular culture, and their lives become glorified even though they are showing their "mundane" life (Duffy & Kang, 2020). Additionally, because micro-celebrities are considered "ordinary," their followers consider them to be "like them" and representative of their lives, which makes

micro-celebrities more powerful in terms of persuasion and endorsement opportunity (Duffy & Kang, 2020).

Influencers are a form of micro-celebrity, but the two terms are used interchangeably. Influencers work hard to appear down to earth and relatable, and they tend to share shots that demonstrate their charming lives with photos of their ordinary, common everyday activities (Instagram, 2018). These photos of everyday activities and struggles do get very personal, because micro-celebrities or influencers are expected to reveal personal information and intimate details. As one influencer explains, “Everyone has similar content to some extent, but it’s your personal stories that allow others to get to know you” (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Nonetheless, this relatability and intimacy does get them somewhere. By commodifying their everyday lives, they are able to legitimize their position as “tastemakers” and create aspirations about certain kinds of lifestyles, activities, styles, and behaviors (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). They then take advantage of this position to partner with brands and create advertising opportunities. Though there are many commercial motivations behind influencers’ social media activities, for many influencers there does seem to be a genuine concern to help audiences live a better life (Maares & Hanusch, 2020).

Common reasons cited for following micro-celebrities are “beautiful pictures,” “inspiration”, and “obtaining useful recommendations” (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Additionally, in the same survey, micro-celebrities were described by followers as “classy”, “beautiful”, “sexy”, “good sense of humor”, “authentic/original”, knowledgeable”, “unique”, and “successful” (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019)

Micro-celebrities may come from these popular fields: food, fashion, travel, healthy living, interior design, motherhood, beauty, and lifestyle to endorse their products just like a

traditional celebrity would (Duffy 2020, Djafarova 2019). However, it is common that micro-celebrities have to find a way to weave the products they represent into their daily lives, as many users prefer “recommendations” provided by their favorite micro-celebrities rather than “advertising” (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). If the message comes across as views shared by influencers, the message is perceived much more positively than if the message comes across as “purposeful” or “aggressive” (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). The more personal and interwoven into the influencers’ personal life an endorsement gets, the more likely it is to be perceived as an unbiased opinion and perceived as having relevant persuasive power (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Social media advertising is most effective when the micro-celebrities comment on their own lifestyle and offer advice on how to create this lifestyle with the use of brands (Lueck, 2015). Influencers are a trio of sellers, buyers, and commodities: They consume products, then promote those products to others, and at the same time they are selling themselves as a commodity (Bridging, 2018).

Differences Between Traditional Celebrities and Micro-Celebrities

However, one major difference between micro-celebrities and traditional celebrities is that traditional celebrities rely on mainstream media to reach fans and consumers and micro-celebrities take control of their own media representations by making their appearances on their own, mostly controlled, social media accounts and platforms (Duffy & Kang, 2020). Whereas micro-celebrities rely on their relationship with the brands they feature and followers for their livelihood, celebrities engage in social media as more of an instrumental and promotional tool for their work in mainstream media (Jin et al., 2019). Celebrities have a plethora of cultural meanings they have created in mainstream media they can draw on, while micro-celebrities can only rely on what they’ve created through social media (Jin et al., 2019).

Another difference is their relation to the audience. Traditionally, a mainstream celebrity is distanced from their audience, creating a sense of scarcity and making extraordinary performances while remaining more private (Raun, 2018). Influencers, however, depend on their connections to the audience rather than separation from them (Raun, 2018).

Micro-celebrities are expected to perform various kinds of labor that are time and energy consuming but not necessarily profitable. For example, influencers have to prove connectedness and authenticity to fans, making intimacy a form of labor (Raun, 2018). Additionally, micro-celebrities are expected to reveal their personal tastes, relationships, and likes and dislikes (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). By engaging in affective labor, micro-celebrities are able to leverage authenticity by strategically sharing aspects of their life to encourage parasocial interactions with their followers (Hopkins, 2019).

Additionally, micro-celebrities' content is held to a high standard, as many social media users cite "quality of posts" as the most important characteristic of a micro-celebrity (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Instagram users tend to consider high quality posts to have both visually beautiful posts and engaging and thoughtful captions (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). While micro-celebrities technically have the freedom to post what they wish, the reality is that they must conform to the calculative protocols which social media users use to determine the characteristics of those they like to follow and the content they want to receive (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). However, though social media personalities are beholden to their audiences and advertisers, they often praise freedom and self expression granted to them on social media as motivators for their work, and they probably feel that traditional celebrities work in much more rigid environments (Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

Marketing and Endorsement on Social Media

Economic Impact and Benefits of Marketing on Social Media

Instagram and other social media platforms have made a strong economic impact due to their capacity to facilitate eWOM - electronic word of mouth marketing. Prior research has concluded that information gained from interpersonal sources, known as word of mouth marketing, has strong effects on consumer purchase decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017). Social media, which rely on user-generated content and makes it possible for individuals to connect with family members, friends, acquaintances, companies, and brands, lends itself to be the ideal tool for eWOM (Benedek, 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017; Instagram, 2018). The engrossment of social media, marketing, and the lifestyle industry have led to what some call a “shoppable life”: the notion that there is commercial opportunity in each social media post or interaction (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). eWOM is even more powerful than traditional word of mouth marketing because it reaches a larger number of people and is more potent — opinions cultivated from social connections on social media platforms are considered more important to users (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Instagram, 2018).

As many consumers have begun to bypass traditional advertising efforts and obvious commercials, advertisers are focusing on harder-to-evade methods that make ads blend in with their surroundings through content marketing (Hopkins, 2019). Content marketing, as a new form of marketing, refers to creating content for advertisements, such as Instagram posts/captions, blogs, or stories, that blend in with the surrounding content (Hopkins, 2019). For example, influencers will post photos with products that closely resemble the other types of photos they post by using similar imagery, photo filters, and aesthetics. By making their advertisements blend in with their feeds, they stick out less and stay within the influencer’s

“brand”. Social media advertising and influencer marketing have become major industries, with 75% of major advertisers claiming some involvement in influencer marketing (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). According to eMarketer and Business Insider Intelligence, a comprehensive source of vetted data about digital marketing, 2019 marked the first year that advertisers spent more on digital media than traditional media (Enberg, 2019).

Celebrity Endorsements of Products on Social Media

In traditional celebrity endorsement research, celebrities are defined as individuals who have created value for themselves via sports, music, movies, or television prior to engaging in advertising activities (Jin et al., 2019). A celebrity endorser refers to anyone who has public recognition and uses this recognition to promote a consumer good or service by appearing on behalf of it or with it in an advertisement (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Celebrities endorse a variety of products or services, from nonprofit organizations, to business-to-business services, political parties, retail goods, and even everyday consumer services (Bergkvist, 2015). Bergkvist and Zhou (2015) define celebrity endorsement as “An agreement between an individual who enjoys public recognition (a celebrity) and an entity (e.g. a brand) to use the celebrity for the purpose of promoting the entity” (p. 644).

Research has found celebrity endorsement is more popular in Asian countries than in the U.S., specifically, celebrities appear in less than 15% of television ads in the U.S versus 25% in Asian countries (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2015). When choosing celebrities to endorse their brands, advertisers tend to look at three characteristics: Target audience-celebrity match, celebrity-product/brand match, and the overall image and public opinion of the celebrity (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2015).

Social media has made consumer-celebrity interactions much more frequent, and these interactions have become more intimate and self-disclosing (Chung & Cho, 2017). It seems that many celebrities are more willing to share personal information with their audiences on social media than in mainstream media. By sharing inner thoughts and honest expressions of emotion, selfies and photos of their families, and disclosing personal opinions, celebrities engage in self-disclosure at a much higher level (Chung & Cho, 2017). Such social media activity can easily transition into celebrity endorsements, and many celebrities promote products within their social media feeds and stories. When celebrities embed the products and brands they are promoting into their personal stories or posts, they strategically use parasocial interaction to their advantage (Lueck, 2015).

Instafamous and Influencers Marketing

The term “instafamous” is used to describe someone that has become famous through their Instagram profile (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Previous studies have defined “instafamous” as an individual with 30,000+ subscribers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). The phenomenon of Instafamous has developed because of Instagram’s ability for social interaction and aesthetical presentation (Jin et al., 2019). Instagram allows its users to build personal narratives and identities that are attractive to audiences.

Simply put, influencer marketing is a “new” form of paid advertisements that relies on micro-celebrities to market to their niche audience, instead of a celebrity marketing to the entire public (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Instagram is an ideal tool for electronic word of mouth, and is the most popular and widely used platform for influencer marketing (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Instagram, 2018). Influencer marketing began blossoming in the late 2000s and early 2010s as the social media platforms got more popular (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Influencers can be

involved in marketing in several different ways, such as getting free products to try, being sent on trips to experience, or getting paid for their posts (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Influencers look for commercial opportunity in every post (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Influencers end up sharing every part of their life - career, parenthood, romantic relationships, house decor, cleaning, cooking, pet care, etc. - and suggesting products and creating partnerships for every category they mention. Jenna Kutcher, one of the influencers mentioned in this study, is an online educator who specializes in entrepreneurship. Not only does she recommend courses, business tools, and books, she also has deals to represent food delivery services, baby products, clothing lines, suitcases, podcast equipment, makeup, travel products, and exercise equipment. A successful shoppable life is one that is constantly assessed to disclose different parts of one's life (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Kutcher lives a successful shoppable life.

The strategic decision to use influencer marketing has turned online self-presentation into a form of shoppable, consumable goods that are only a few clicks away (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). Often influencers use content marketing to blend their sponsored advertising brands or products in with the look and feel of their organic content (Hopkins, 2019). Influencers are often seen or perceived to be accessible, believable, and easy to relate to, and such a parasocial interaction makes them more persuasive (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Influencer marketing is powerful because shoppers see the advice that bloggers and influencers give as “unbiased” and “independent” from an unedited perspective (Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

Theoretical Framework of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial interaction is a term that defines one-sided relationships, particularly between celebrities and their fans (Lueck, 2015). Parasocial interaction focuses on the way audiences

react to celebrity performances, relate to celebrities, and develop relationships with the celebrity (Lueck, 2015). Horton and Wohl first coined the term in 1956 to describe pseudo-interpersonal relationships between characters/celebrities and fans (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). In these relationships, normally the fans seek out information about their favorite celebrities, while the celebrity does not know details about the fan (Lueck, 2015). These parasocial interactions often include having feelings of friendship, companionship, interest, understanding, increased familiarity, identification, empathy, intimacy, and wishful identification (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016, Chung & Cho, 2017).

Though parasocial interactions were originally applied to discuss the relationships between TV stars and fans, there has been much research in the past few years that look into how parasocial interactions are acted out within social media. Parasocial relationships are strengthened when individuals are repeatedly exposed to the media persona, which is why parasocial relationships thrive on social media sites where individuals often have the opportunity to catch many intimate glimpses into a celebrity's personal life (Chung & Cho, 2017). Some celebrities may even purposely try to foster parasocial interactions with fans in order to create increased liking, intimacy, and credibility (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). Though social media permits two-way interaction, the two-way interaction is rare because celebrities' social media communication resembles the traditional one-way interaction (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016; Lueck, 2015). A study that examined Kim Kardashian's Facebook posts found that parasocial interaction took place as a one-way communication because she provided personal information to her audience and then never interacted after the original post (Lueck, 2015). And even the one-way communication seems to work for followers. Hearing directly from celebrities on social media helps fans feel closer to them, and seeing the way they speak (including grammatical

errors/spelling methods) and reading the use of first person nouns (“I”, “We”) further erase invisible boundaries between the celebrity and fan (Chung & Cho, 2017).

A massive factor in parasocial interactions on social media is the illusion of intimacy with the celebrity as well as the emotional attachment that occurs when social media users directly observe the celebrity’s conduct and behavior in a variety of situations (Lueck, 2015). Because of the openness of micro-celebrities on their own social media profiles, it is likely that parasocial interactions play a large role in establishing the strong connections between Instagram users and their favorite influencers and celebrities and helping the success of their marketing campaigns. Experts have found the key to parasocial advertising is to promote a lifestyle rather than a single brand (Lueck, 2015).

Visibility Mandate and Authenticity Bind

For influencers whose careers have started on social media, there tends to be a “visibility mandate”. The visibility mandate is essentially a demand for influencers to put their personal lives “out there” into the social media world, and share personal moments, thoughts, and experiences with their followers (Pirulli, 2017). This visibility mandate calls for a higher level of self-disclosure on the part of the influencer. In the same manner, social media celebrities are also required to share more information that would commonly be considered private and intimate (Chung & Cho, 2017). The call for influencers to signal connectedness and presence with their followers requires intimacy. In many ways, influencers use intimacy as capital with their followers, and a form of labor with them is the emotional work they put in their content (Raun, 2018). Successful influencers end up using strategic intimacy and increased self-disclosure in order to appeal to followers, and often share intimate details of their thoughts and personal lives

(Raun, 2018; Pirolli, 2017). By doing this, they present personas that are less guarded and controlled than traditional celebrities and are more honest and relatable (Raun, 2018).

For influencers that tend to share a mix of personal posts and endorsed messages, there is a plight to balance self promotion and expressive distinction within their social media profiles (Pirolli, 2017). As many social media users have described, there is a bit of irritation when it comes to advertising on Instagram, and some say they would ‘unfollow’ a micro-celebrity if advertising appeared on their feed (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Elaborating further, many users said “one or two advertising posts a month would be acceptable”, but more than that amount tend to turn people off to the micro-celebrity and make them seem less trustworthy and honest (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). A content creator from Duffy’s 2019 study agrees with this idea of keeping advertising posts to a minimum, “I try to keep eighty to ninety percent of my posts real, authentic, organic, and maybe 10% - 20% maximum I post things where you can tell it’s an ad” (6, p. 4993).

This plight is often referred to as an “authenticity bind”, that is, a need to balance promotional type posts with posts that reveal more of the influencers’ personality and provide opportunities for identification and parasocial interactions (Pirolli, 2017). Some common appeals employed to boost personality and identification include calculated authenticity, curated imperfection, commodifying privacy, perceived intimacy, and aspirational ordinariness (Pirolli, 2017; Hopkins, 2019). Calculated authenticity refers to influencers purposely creating posts that reveal more about them or make them appear more “real” to followers, such as revealing personal thoughts, sharing a struggle, or revealing a private moment that would not be otherwise obvious. Curated imperfection refers to showing parts of one’s life that is less than perfect, for example, a no-makeup-selfie, a messy room at home, or a revealing some kind of social “faux

pas” that makes one seem more relatable. Commodifying privacy refers to sharing a private, hidden moment in exchange for some kind of benefit, such as increased connection with followers or marketing gain. Perceived intimacy is making followers think that you are revealing a part of yourself to them, and creating a special bond with them through your posts. Aspirational ordinariness means sharing normal moments of your life, such as home decor or moments with family, that are tied to consumer goods or experiences.

For many influencers, this authenticity and intimacy is at the heart of their social media strategies and dynamics (Raun, 2018). As one influencer puts it, “You have to post what’s happening in your life so that your feed is not all ads” (Pirolli, 2017). Research also suggests that influencers trying to strengthen their relationship with followers or expand their audience base should limit their posts promoting a brand or product (Instagram, 2018).

In order to strengthen the feel of “authenticity”, many influencers turn to sharing posts that feature “behind the scenes” images of themselves and their families (Pirolli, 2017). An influencer from Duffy’s 2018 study explains: “I’ve noticed just looking at the analytics of my posts that when you post things personal, or your family, or what’s been going on in your life, or lessons you’ve learned, or trials you’re going through... those posts actually do probably 50% better than any of those other posts” (Pirolli, 2017). Other influencers feel it necessary to remind their followers they are “like a normal person” by posting photos of them staying at home or photos of them without makeup (Hopkins, 2019). In many cases, micro-celebrities have to work harder than traditional celebrities to prove their position and trustworthiness which leads to micro-celebrities revealing more to followers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). As such, micro-celebrities engage more in the so-called parasocial interactions (Hopkins, 2019).

Jerslev (2016) notes that one of the most valuable assets in social media celebrification is the “attention-creating performances of a private authentic self” (p. 108). People tend to feel more comfortable transacting with an online source if they think it is an actual person on the other end (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Luckily for influencers, authenticity, like anything else, can be branded, and often serves as the basis for a brand (Raun, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Self-disclosure

For celebrities, social media such as Instagram and Facebook have opened up an avenue that was previously inaccessible—a channel to communicate and share directly with fans (Pirolli, 2017). The enhanced connection with fans via this new avenue is likely to bring potential career windfall and other positive returns (Pirolli, 2017). Research has found that the amount of self-disclosure from a celebrity on social media can positively affect the perceived credibility of said celebrity (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). In other words, self-disclosure can shape the perceptions audiences have of celebrities’ social media messages (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016).

When there is a higher self-disclosure attitude on the part of the celebrity posting, people tend to provide that celebrity with more credibility (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). When there isn’t much self-disclosure or personality present in the posts, audiences can feel as though the posts are “robotic” or lacking a real human feel (Jin et al., 2019).

In extensive research on influencers, several personal attributes have been identified to be associated with influencers’ persuasiveness and likeability: attractiveness, trustworthiness, popularity, similarity and expertise.

While attractiveness was explained as physical attractiveness, beautiful, classy, elegant, unique, original, and sexy (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Pirolli, 2017), trustworthiness, sometimes referred to as credibility, was equated with the adjectives such as

consistent, authentic, good intentions, dependable, reliable, sincere, transparency, and honest (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Instagram, 2018; Jin et al., 2019). The personal trait of being well liked is often associated with inspirational, engaging, sociable, friendly, charismatic, approachable, open, warm, and personable (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Jin et al., 2019; Pirolli, 2017). For similarity to oneself, it has another term called familiarity (Pirolli, 2017; Jin et al., 2019). Last but not least, expertise, also referred to as knowledgeable, has the following synonyms such as experienced, qualified, skilled, dependable, reliable, and professional (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Instagram, 2018; Jin et al., 2019).

There have been studies that note that consumers consider Instagram influencers to be more trustworthy than traditional celebrities due to identification and closeness, but it is not confirmed whether it is because celebrities aren't disclosing as much information about themselves as influencers are (Jin et al., 2019). The question remains whether traditional celebrities feel the weight of the authenticity bind. In other words, studies on how traditional celebrities compare with influencers in terms of self-disclosure on Instagram are needed. Research does suggest that celebrities who have a higher self-disclosure attitude would appear more credible to audiences. But the comparative approach on higher self-disclosure posts versus lower self-disclosure posts is not yet taken (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). In her research on travel bloggers, Duffy (2020) suggests that celebrities are beginning to feel pressure to disclose more due to influencer's behavior, "The use of the internet by microcelebrities has impacted on mainstream celebrities, obliging them to use social media to interact authentically with fans... future studies would consider how they maintain credibility through self-mediated performances of ordinariness and extraordinariness" (p. 175).

Purpose of Study & Research Questions

To fill that research gap about Instagram posts, this study will zoom in on both influencer and celebrity Instagram posts by taking the comparative approach. It will examine how authenticity and intimacy play in their social media strategies. Specifically, the study will examine how often “behind the scenes” images are posted and how well these posts perform. In other words, the study will compare the amount of “organic” and “intimate” posts that traditional celebrities and influencers make, and see if there is similarity in the way both types of celebrities employ emotional labor and manage the “visibility mandate.” Comparing the type of posts that both celebrities and influencers make are important because currently, social media users receive messages from friends, family, celebrities, and influencers all in a single news feed, meaning that they likely employ similar psychological processes when interpreting messages from all of the groups whether they are friends or not (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016).

Additionally, this study will compare the performance of “organic” (non-sponsored material that is not linked to an outside brand) and “sponsored posts” (posts that have advertising intent and are linked to a brand or commercial item). Such an approach of comparing organic and sponsored posts is to confirm whether it is true that organic posts perform better than sponsored posts. A 2018 study found “significantly more likes, comments, positive sentiments, and levels of compliance with influencer requests on organic posts than sponsored posts” (Instagram Influencers, p. 2). This was also documented in Lueck's 2015 study that sponsored posts overall had fewer likes and comments than organic posts... “this suggests that followers prefer when their favorite Instagram celebrities post personal genuine spontaneous content opposed to content that has been incentivized by a brand” (19).

This research is both timely and relevant due to the prevalence of influencer marketing, increased Instagram use, and the rise of celebrity endorsements (Lueck, 2015; Mohsin, 2020). Additionally, the gap between celebrity and micro-celebrity is narrowing which is significant for celebrity studies (Duffy & Kang, 2020). A study on influencer marketing concludes that “the blurring lines between celebrities and micro-celebrities push researchers to consider how different Instagram celebrities are from traditional celebrities” (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). The comparison of the types of posts influencers and traditional celebrities make can lead to evaluating the post content and post strategy and identifying the trends of social media performance for both influencers and micro-celebrities. Previous studies have pointed out the importance of future researchers examining Instagram post content by micro-celebrities and traditional celebrities (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). De Vierman (2017) suggests that progress in this field would be made by “evaluating the topics they are posting on, the quality of the content they post, their fan engagement, and photography style” (p. 999).

The main purpose of this study is to compare traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities posts on Instagram to determine how they differ from one another in terms of their social media use strategies. Secondly, this study seeks to find out if celebrities are under the same “visibility mandate” as influencers are, and what this looks like in terms of audience engagement. Last but not least, this study will compare the performance of different types of posts and determine what types of posts perform best for influencers and traditional celebrities.

By analyzing what celebrities and influencers post, the study will offer substantial insight to social media strategy and online self-disclosure patterns.

RQ1: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of subject matter in their Instagram posts?

RQ2: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of authenticity in their Instagram posts?

RQ3: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of self-disclosure and intimacy in their Instagram posts?

RQ4: How do celebrities and influencers compare in their use of sponsored content in their Instagram posts?

RQ5: How do celebrities and influencers compare in the amount of interactions they get in their Instagram posts?

Method

Sampling

To address the five research questions proposed, the research method of content analysis on the Instagram posts was used. The top-ten-most-followed traditional celebrities and ten highly followed influencers on Instagram throughout 2019 were included for the analysis. The identification of the top 10 celebrities and the top 10 influencers was based on the number of followers because the followers' number is indicative of success on social media. These are generally the metrics that signal credibility to both followers and potential advertisers (Pirolli, 2017).

This sample of 10 traditional celebrities and 10 influencers was used to compare their Instagram use techniques and posting patterns.

A list of the top ten followed celebrities was acquired from Social Blade. Social Blade (sometimes spelled as SocialBlade) is a website that tracks social media statistics and analytics. Social Blade most notably tracks the [YouTube](#) platform, but also has analytical information

regarding Twitch, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Mixer, Dailymotion, DLive, TikTok, and Story Fire. Social Blade functions as a third-party to the respective social media platforms (Alexander, 2018).

The top ten celebrities are:

1. Cristiano Ronaldo, soccer player, 233 Million Followers
2. Ariana Grande, singer, 196 Million Followers
3. The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), actor, 192 Million Followers
4. Kylie Jenner, reality show star and business owner, 188 Million Followers
5. Selena Gomez, actress and singer, 185 Million Followers
6. Kim Kardashian, reality show star and business owner, 182 Million Followers
7. Leo Messi, soccer player, 161 Million Followers
8. Beyonce, actress and singer, 151 Million Followers
9. Justin Bieber, singer, 143 Million Followers
10. Neymar Jr, soccer player, 140 Million Followers

The top 10 Instagram influencers were chosen due to their large follower count and their representation of different professional niches. Specifically, the influencers were chosen based on followers' count (greater than 100,000), representation of different professions (fashion, beauty, food, business, travel, and fitness), and convenience (i.e. exposed to influencer in that niche).

1. Jenna Kutcher, entrepreneur/business, "Goal Digger" podcast, 945K Followers
2. Huda Kattan, beauty, "Huda Beauty" makeup, 2.1 Million Followers
3. Kevin Curry, food/health, "Fit Men Cook" blog, 1.6 Million Followers
4. Rach Parcell, fashion "Pink Peonies" blog, 1.1 Million Followers

5. Emily Carmack, “The Freckled Fox” mom blog, 250K Followers
6. Jack Morris, travel, 2.7 Million Followers
7. Katrina Scott, fitness, “Tone It Up” fitness community, 405K Followers
8. Kierston Rich, travel “The Blonde Abroad” blog, 555K Followers
9. Negin Mirsalehi, fashion & beauty, 6 Million Followers
10. Brian Kelly, business & travel “The Points Guy” blog, 237K followers

Once the sampled people are identified, the second step is to decide the time frame of the sample. The length of one year from Jan. 1, 2019 to Dec. 31, 2019 was chosen because that provides the one-year complete cycle of four seasons including both active and non-active posting times.

The third step was to sample particular months from this one year period. In order to get a sound sample with the limited time and efforts, this one year was divided into four quarters and one month was selected from each quarter. Specifically, posts from the months of February (representative of the 1st quarter or winter season), May (representative of the 2nd quarter or spring season), August (representative of the 3rd quarter or summer season) and November (representative of the 4th quarter or fall season) in 2019 for each celebrity and micro-celebrity listed above were analyzed.

The fourth step was to narrow the amount of posts to create a workable sample. In order to create the sample, the strategy of “constructed week” was employed. For each month analyzed, a constructed week was put together that was representative of each day of the week (Sunday - Saturday) and was chosen from different times in the month. For each month in the sample, a day of the week to start with was chosen at random such as Sunday, then Sunday and Monday in the first week were put into the sample. In the second week, Tuesday and Wednesday

were to be selected. In the third week, Thursday and Friday were selected. In the fourth week Saturday was taken. This sampling allowed for different days of the week to be covered in the month. Overall, 456 posts were analyzed.

The following dates were used to make constructive weeks for each of the four quarters: Sunday, February 3; Monday, February 4; Tuesday, February 12; Wednesday, February 13; Thursday, February 21, Friday, February 22; Saturday, February 23; Wednesday, May 1; Thursday, May 2; Friday, May 10; Saturday, May 11; Sunday, May 19; Monday, May 20; Tuesday, May 28; Friday, August; Saturday, August 3; Sunday, August 11; Monday, August 12; Tuesday, August 20; Wednesday, August 21; Thursday, August 29; Friday, November 1; Saturday, November 2; Sunday, November 10; Monday, November 11; Tuesday, November 19; Wednesday, November 20; Thursday, November 28.

Instagram Stories were not included in the above sample nor analyzed in this paper as there is no way to access these posts once they have expired. Instagram stories are a feature that users can use to share a photo or message temporarily, lasting only for 24 hours. There is not a public record kept of Instagram stories after they have expired.

Measurements

The unit of analysis in this study is a post. In other words each individual Instagram post from the 20 sampled celebrities and influencers were assigned an ID number and counted and coded based on the codebook and put into the Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

RQ1: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of subject matter in their Instagram posts?

Subject matter is conceptually defined as the primary field of topic under discussion. In this study, subject matter was examined under two main categories: Organic Content and Sponsored

Content. The variable was coded at the nominal level. Organic content refers to content that does not have advertising or promotional value attached, and is exclusive to one's personal life (i.e. their family setting, amusement setting, or home setting). Under organic content with no commercial products mentioned or embedded, there were six subcategories:

1. Family Setting: Posts that feature the celebrity/influencer's immediate family (including children, parents, spouses, significant others, siblings, pets)
2. Routine Setting: Posts that feature regular activities a celebrity/influencer engages in (i.e. errands, mundane daily tasks, hobbies, home, events or outings with friends or acquaintances)
3. Personal Setting: "A Selfie" - Posts with a photo of the celebrities/influencers by themselves
4. Landscape Setting: Posts including a scenery photo that don't feature the celebrity or their family
5. Quotes or Textual Setting: Posts that are purposed for communicating a message and that message is generally to inspire, encourage and motivate followers
6. Other: Posts that do not fall into any of the five categories above

Sponsored content refers to posts that are related or linked to a commercial good, product, brand, service, or team and the post is usually related to a professional setting or venture. Under sponsored content, four subcategories were coded.

1. Professional Setting: Posts that mention and promote a product or event that the celebrity/influencer helped to produce in some way. Could consist of a movie, television show, magazine cover, music production, sports game/team, a makeup or cosmetic line designed by the celebrity, or a course or digital good created by the celebrity.

2. Third Party Sponsorship Setting: Posts that promote and advertise a third party brand. They can include advertising photos, mentioning a product they enjoy, or tagging another brand in a post.
3. Charitable or Social Setting: Posts that feature and promote a social, political, or religious cause that is intended to educate people.
4. Other: Posts that do not fall into the above categories but are still linked or related to a commercial good or brand

In order to address RQ1, each post was coded based on if it is organic and sponsored content, and then was placed into one of the above sub-categories based on its subject matter.

RQ2: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of authenticity in their Instagram posts?

Authenticity is conceptually defined as the quality of being genuine, truthful, and based on fact. In this study, authenticity referred to celebrities and influencers being genuine by sharing their opinions, private thoughts, honest expressions of their emotions, and transparency of personal struggles (Abed, 2020; Chung & Cho, 2017; Duffy & Hund; Hund & McGuigan, 2019; Hopkins, 2019). In order to determine if a celebrity or influencer is being authentic, researchers focused on the radical transparency of the post. In other words, for this study, authenticity was revealed when the celebrities or influencers shared their struggles, their failures and their sad moments in life (Abed, 2020). While shining aspects of life are popular and shareable, it is the personal struggles, or challenging times that truly reveal who we are. If a post revealed an introspection by sharing reflection of a difficult experience, personal emotion, or private revelation of sadness or difficulties, the post was considered authentic. The variable was coded at the nominal level with yes or no.

RQ3: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of self-disclosure and intimacy in their Instagram posts?

Self-disclosure is operationally defined as the process of revealing personal, intimate information about oneself to others. It is a variable to examine the private, personal, intimate aspect of the posts. In this study, self-disclosure was defined as the degree of revealing intimate aspects of one's personal life, and researchers adopted a measurement of scale to determine the level of self-disclosure. In other words, each post was evaluated on a scale of one to three as a ratio level variable:

1. Not intimate at all (no personal details are revealed at all, no loved ones and no personal items included. The post is not about the celebrities/influencers' personalities or thoughts but about other objects or vanity. A post that simply features a product or selfie without personal details would fall under this category. If the post includes personal thoughts or feelings that we would not otherwise be aware of, it will not fall into this category.)
2. Somewhat intimate (some personal details are revealed such as anecdotes about the day or family, thoughts, encouraging sentiments, or photos of personal life.)
3. Extremely intimate (very intimate personal thoughts, feelings, or moments the audience would otherwise be incapable of knowing such as an inner feeling or a private moment at home that features "behind the scenes" look)

RQ4: How do celebrities and influencers compare in their use of sponsored content in their Instagram posts?

Sponsored content is operationally defined as material that is paid for by an advertiser and is intended to promote a product or good. In this study, sponsored content is defined as content that is used to promote or link to any commercial brand. Sponsored content includes any

post that is linked to or associated with a commercial product, so posts containing personal elements such as family or photos of self that have advertising intent also qualify as sponsored content. If a post has a brand that is tagged in the post such as @Nike, it is coded as sponsored content.

To address RQ4, sponsored content was measured as a nominal level variable, with each post coded as either having sponsored content or not.

RQ5: How do celebrities and influencers compare in the amount of interactions they get in their Instagram posts?

To address RQ5, interaction of followers was measured. Interaction is operationally defined as a reciprocal action or influence. In this study, interactions referred to the number of comments and likes each post gets. Both were ratio level variables. Specifically, the variable of comments had a count of the number of comments for the post, and the variable of likes had a count of the number of likes for the post. As noted by researchers, the numbers of likes and comments each post has acted as indicators of its success in terms of interaction as these are generally the metrics that signal credibility to potential advertisers (Pirolli, 2017).

Results

Intercoder Reliability

To secure the quality of the codebook, intercoder reliability of simple percentages was used and tested on the three categorical variables: Subject Matter, Authenticity, and Self-Disclosure/Intimacy. A sample size of 69 posts, or 15% of the total research sample of 456 posts, was used in this testing. Two coders did the testing including the researcher. Each coder independently coded the sample set of 69 posts, which were selected from seven dates chosen randomly ranging from February 28, 2020 to December 4, 2020. Then coded numbers were

entered into the Excel spreadsheet to compare and identify agreements. In the first round of testing, the variable of subject matter reached an agreement rate of 78%, and the variable of authenticity reached an agreement rate of 91%, but the variable of self-disclosure/intimacy only got an agreement rate 56% . Therefore, the variable of self-disclosure/intimacy was reworked and modified in the codebook to provide clearer definition. After two rounds of re-modification and re-coding of the variable, the agreement between the two coders reached a 73% agreement rate.

Sample Profile

Out of the total research sample of 456 posts, 282 posts were authored by celebrities, while 174 posts were authored by influencers. The average number of words per post for celebrities is 27, and for influencers is 81. While celebrities have 73 posts with video, influencers only have 39. For the number of photos per post, celebrities had an average of 1.33 photos, while influencers had an average of 1.49 photos.

Statistical Analysis Results

RQ1: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of subject matter?

The variable of subject matter was coded at the nominal level. The chi-square test for independence was used to examine the relationship between the two variables of post authors (celebrity or influencer) and subject matter of posts.

The relationship between these two variables was found to be significant: $\chi^2(8, 456) = 29.87, p < .001$. Celebrities have more posts in most subject matters categories than influencers have. See Table 1 for percent comparison across both post authors and subject matters

Table 1. *Compare Subject Matters Across Post Authors*

| Subject Matter Category | Celebrity, <i>n</i> (%) | Influencer, <i>n</i> (%) | Total | χ^2 | P |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Organic Family Setting | 9.2% | 7.5% | 16.7% | | |
| Organic Routine Setting | 9.2% | 4.4% | 13.6% | | |
| Organic Personal Setting | 9.2% | 6.6% | 15.8% | | |
| Organic Landscape Setting | .7% | 1.3% | 2% | | |
| Organic Textual Setting | 0% | .4% | .4% | | |
| Organic Other | 1.1% | 0% | 1.1% | | |
| Sponsored Professional Setting | 24.1% | 8.8% | 32.9% | | |
| Sponsored Third Party Setting | 7.9% | 9.2% | 17.1% | | |
| Sponsored Social Causes | .4% | 0% | .4% | | |
| Total Organic: | 29.4% | 20.2% | 49.6% | | |
| Total Sponsored: | 32.4% | 18% | 50.4% | | |
| Total: | 61.8% | 38.2% | 100% | 29.87 | <.001* |

*This difference was significant with $P < .001$

The table tells that of all the posts sampled, 49.6% were organic, and 50.4% were sponsored.

For all subject matter categories, 16.7% of posts belonged to the organic family setting, 13.6% belonged to the organic routine setting, 15.8% belonged to the organic personal setting, 2% belonged to the organic landscape setting, .4% belonged to organic textual setting, 1.1% belonged to the organic other setting, 32.9% belonged to the sponsored professional setting,

17.1% belonged to the sponsored third party sponsorship setting, and .4% belonged to the sponsored social cause setting. Sponsored professional setting posts by celebrities take the most percent (24.1%) followed by organic family setting by celebrities (9.2%), organic routine setting by celebrities (9.2%), and organic personal setting by celebrities (9.2%), tied by sponsored third party setting by influencers (9.2%) and followed by sponsored professional setting by influencers (8.8%) and organic family setting by influencers (7.5%) and organic personal setting (6.6%). The least frequently appeared posts are sponsored social cause by influencers (0) versus .4% by celebrities, organic others by influencers (0) versus by celebrities (1.1%), organic textual setting by celebrities (0) versus .4% by influencers.

RQ2: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of authenticity in their Instagram posts?

Authenticity was coded at the nominal level. The chi-square test for independence was used to examine the relationship between the two variables of post author type and authenticity. The relation between these variables was found to be significant or there is a significant relationship between post author and level of authenticity.

$$\chi^2 (1, 456) = 12.84 \quad p < .001$$

It means that influencers tend to be more authentic than celebrities.

See Table 2 for comparison details.

Table 2. *Compare Authenticity Across Post Author Types*

| | Celebrity, n (%) | Influencer, n (%) | Total | χ^2 | P |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Authentic | 1.5% | 3.9% | 5.5% | | |
| Not Authentic | 60.3% | 34.2% | 94.5% | | |
| Total | 61.8% | 38.1% | 100% | 12.84 | <.001* |

*This difference was significant at $p < .001$

The table tells that of the total posts coded, only 5.5% of the posts were authentic, while 94.5% of the posts were not authentic. Among the 5.5% authentic ones, influencers tend to be more authentic (3.9%) than celebrities (1.5%) or celebrities tend to be more unauthentic (60.3%) than influencers (34.2%).

RQ3: How do celebrities and influencers compare in terms of self-disclosure and intimacy in their Instagram posts?

Intimacy was coded as interval level data. Therefore, the independent sample t-test was used to compare the two groups in self-disclosure. Here is the result:

A significant difference was identified: $t(454)=5.07, p < .001$. The celebrity group has a mean score of 1.46 ($n=282$) but the influencer group has a mean score of 1.79 ($n=174$) on a scale of 1-3 with 3 representing a higher value of self-revealing. Influencers tended to reveal more of themselves in comparison to celebrities.

See table 3 for detailed comparisons.

Table 3: *Compare Intimacy/Self-Disclosure Between Two Groups: Celebrities and Influencers*

| Group | N | Mean | SD | SE | t | p |
|------------|-----|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Celebrity | 282 | 1.46 | 0.66 | 0.04 | -5.07 | <.001 |
| Influencer | 174 | 1.79 | 0.70 | 0.05 | | |

RQ4: How do celebrities and influencers compare in their use of sponsored content in their Instagram Posts?

Sponsored content was coded at the nominal level. The chi-square test for independence was used to examine the relationship between the two variables of post author type and sponsored content. The relation between these variables was found not to be significant or there is no significant relationship between post author and sponsored content: $\chi^2(1, 456) = 1.04, p=.308$.

See Table 4 for detailed Comparisons.

Table 4. *Compare Content Nature Across Post Authors*

| | Celebrity, <i>n</i> (%) | Influencer, <i>n</i> (%) | Total | χ^2 | P |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------|----------|------|
| Sponsored | 32.9% | 18.4% | 51.3% | | |
| Not Sponsored | 28.9% | 19.7% | 48.7% | | |
| Total | 61.9% | 38.1% | 100% | 1.04 | n.s. |

Non significant relationship suggests that the distribution of sponsored content and non-sponsored content across the two groups of celebrities and influencers is similar.

RQ5: How do celebrities and influencers compare in the amount of interactions they get in their Instagram posts?

Interaction was coded as interval level data. There, the independent sample t-test was used to compare the two groups in both post likes and post comments. Here is the result:

For Likes: $t(454)=17.16$ $p < 0.001$, and for Comments: $t(454) = 9.71$ $p<0.01$.

This analysis indicates that celebrities garnered significantly more likes and comments than influencers. For likes, celebrities have an average of more than 2 millions in comparison to influencers who are nearing 50,000; For comments, celebrities have an average of 18,000, but influencers only have 622.

See table 5 for detailed comparisons.

Table 5: *Compare Likes and Comments Between Two Groups: Celebrities and Influencers*

| | Celebrity or Influencer | N | Mean | SD | SE | t | p |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----|------------|------------|----------|-------|-------|
| Number of Post Likes | Celebrity | 282 | 2696449.43 | 2034053.11 | 121126.1 | 17.16 | <.001 |
| | Influencer | 174 | 48277.23 | 71007.76 | 5383.01 | | |
| Number of Post Comments | Celebrity | 282 | 18168.86 | 23797.36 | 1417.11 | 9.711 | <.001 |
| | Influencer | 174 | 622.82 | 974.91 | 73.91 | | |

Discussion & Conclusion

Out of the 456 posts (100%) that were analyzed for this study, 282 posts (61.8%) were from celebrities and 174 posts (38.2%) from influencers. However, the average words per post by celebrities are 27 and the average words per post by influencers are three times more: 81. Moreover, influencers have more photos per post than celebrities, but less videos than celebrities. Because the sample was developed from over the course of one year, i.e. from February 28, 2020 to December 4, 2020, the uneven numbers of celebrities and influencers in the sample might be

that celebrities engage in social media partially to promote their existing work in mainstream media and already have existing cultural artifacts; celebrities have more available content to post than influencers do (Jin et al., 2019). Or it may be that celebrities commonly have a communications team that may help them with posting social media content, whereas it is more common for influencers to post things themselves, therefore influencers have less available resources to assist them.

Subject Matter

Celebrities

Celebrities are very self-promotional. The study found that the largest part of their social media strategy was geared towards promoting their other media products and actual goods. Perfumes, makeup brands, clothing lines, magazine covers, movies, music, and interviews of them were all endorsed, and the professional project setting was the most common category represented on Instagram taking almost a quarter percentage of the sample. A celebrities' success is mostly defined by their professional projects, therefore, our findings reinforced other researchers' finding that celebrities use social media as an instrument to boost their movies and projects or other professional related services (Chung & Cho, 2017; Jin et al., 2019).

Despite the commonality of promoting their own work, it was not common for celebrities to engage in third party sponsorships, which were only present in 7.9% of posts in the sample. Instead, family setting, routine setting, and personal setting were used more often, evidenced in 9.2% of family setting, 9.2% of routine setting, and 9.2% of personal setting, which resulted in a total of 27.6% if added up. This suggests that celebrities are trying to use disclosure strategies to strengthen their parasocial bonds with audiences and are trying to communicate personal matters as research suggests (Chung & Cho, 2017; Duffy & Kang, 2020; Lueck, 2015).

Influencers

Although other research findings suggested that influencers would often post photos representing everyday and typical activities (Instagram, 2018), our study did not support this and influencers' posts in the routine setting category only took up 4.4% of posts. However, influencers were living successful shoppable lives, as evidenced by the finding that the largest category of influencers' posts, i.e. 9.2% of the total posts, was their sponsored third party setting content in comparison to celebrities' third party setting content 7.9%. This suggests that a successful shoppable life is one that is able to disclose different parts of ones' lives while taking advantage of commercializing opportunities (Hopkins, 2019; Hund & McGuigan, 2019). The endorsements featured the influencers' families, homes, outfits, vacations, cleaning products, and even stories of personal struggle and loss. Both authenticity and somewhat/very intimate were also present in a few of the influencers' endorsements, which reaffirms the theory that influencers must apply emotional labor to build parasocial bonds that will lead to instafamous success (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Pirolli, 2017; Raun, 2018). It also suggests that "calculated authenticity" and "aspirational ordinariness" are largely part of an influencer's social media strategy when it comes to paid endorsements and content marketing (Hopkins, 2019; Pirolli, 2017).

Like celebrities, influencers also commonly shared professional projects, and promoted digital goods, businesses, and services they offered themselves; such content took up 8.8% of the total posts. It seems to be true that the experienced influencers have capitalized on their success in their respective niches and created either goods or service that built on their "tastemaker" status in their field (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Duffy & Kang, 2020; Instagram, 2018, Maares & Hanush, 2020). For example, Rach Parcell who is established in fashion often promoted her own

clothing line. Kiersten Rich suggested followers join her on exclusive travel packages she had put together, and Jenna Kutcher teased parts of the entrepreneurship tips she offered in her digital courses.

Additionally, influencers presented or revealed their relationships and personal life often via family setting. The study found that 7.5% of the total posts belonged to the family setting (Hopkins, 2019; Hund & McGuigan, 2019; Pirolli, 2017). Children, pets, parents, siblings, and significant others were all proudly displayed as part of the influencers' strategy. Audiences can identify with the influencers, and they can get similar feelings as they would seeing their own friends, coworkers, or family members, making the relationship seem very real. The presence of family in the posts provided or established the intimate environment.

Influencers also posted the personal setting quite often via selfies, and their "selfies" were present in 6.6% posts of the total posts. These selfies were commonly paired with captions that contained introspection, positive sentiments, or anecdotes about their personal life. This influencers' social media strategy adheres to the "visibility mandate" because influencers purposely try to reveal inner thoughts and perform their "authentic self" (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Jerslev, 2016; Pirolli, 2017; Raun, 2018). Although celebrities also posted selfies and represented the personal setting in 7.9% of posts, those selfies were not commonly paired with any kind of introspection or personal thoughts. While both celebrities and influencers use the personal setting as a strategy within Instagram, it appears that they differed from each other greatly: Celebrities tended to display just the selfies, but influencers used the selfies combined with words and placed in a context as a method to reveal more about themselves to the audience.

Authenticity

Our study confirmed that influencers used authenticity as a social media strategy more frequently than celebrities do, with 3.9% of sample posts identified as influencer posts containing authenticity, but only 1.5% posts identified as celebrity posts containing authenticity. As mentioned previously, authenticity was not only included in organic content by influencers, but also within sponsored posts. This supports the research line that influencers are “leveraging authenticity” within their social media strategy in order to advance their connection with followers and strengthen parasocial ties that lead to financial gain (Hopkins, 2019, Pirolli, 2017). However, only 5.5% of the total posts contained authenticity versus 94.5% of the posts that contained none, which suggests that authenticity was not a very common Instagram strategy, though the relationship was significant between the author of the post (celebrity or influencer) and authenticity and lack of authenticity.

Intimacy

For intimacy, it was observed that influencers did offer a higher level of intimacy in their posts than celebrities did, with celebrities’ average score (on a scale of 1 to 3 with 3 being highly intimate) at 1.46 and influencers’ average score at 1.74. Influencers’ careers start on social media; it is critical to interact with their audience to build their reputation and gain trust. To prove that they are who they say they are demands influencers to reveal more of their personal life and share intimate thoughts (Djafarova, & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Duffy & Kang, 2020; Hund & McGuigan, 2019; Jin, et al, 2019; Ledbetter & Redd, 2016; Raun, 2018). Previous research notes that repeated intimate glimpses into a celebrity’s life help to breed parasocial relationships, and engaging in high self-disclosure seems to be one of the more important social media strategies as it helps to create an emotional attachment (Chung & Cho,

2017; Lueck, 2015). Additionally, the finding that influencers would participate in a higher rate of intimacy than celebrities confirms the idea that influencers appear to be more honest and relatable and less guarded than traditional celebrities (Raun, 2018).

Sponsored Posts

Overall, 51.9% of the posts in the study were found to be sponsored, suggesting that just over half of celebrity and influencer Instagram posts are a form of advertisement. This is highly significant when considering Instagram posting strategy. Such a finding doesn't match research that found social media post authors would try to limit the amount of their advertisements and sponsored content (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Pirolli, 2017). Instead, it appears that both influencers and celebrities are attempting to promote commercial goods or products or services.

There was no significant relationship between the author of post (celebrity or influencer) and sponsored posts, which suggests that celebrities and influencers use the strategy of sponsored content approximately in the same manner.

The findings indicate that 32.9% of the sample were sponsored celebrity content, while 28.9% were celebrity non-sponsored posts, 18.4% were sponsored influencer content, and 19.7% were non-sponsored influencer content. This is a similar posting strategy for both groups; they are not statistically different from each other.

Interactions

Celebrities got significantly more likes and comments than influencers. It may be mostly due to the much larger number of followers that celebrities have than influencers. Also, celebrities' professional careers and built-in fan base ensure their large interactions and follower count, which confirms some of the previous research (Maares & Hanusch, 2020). Being

well-known and famous seems to have an advantage. But keep in mind that the interaction here is only one-way. In order to better compare the amount of interactions that celebrities and influencers get, it would be a good idea to factor in the follower number into consideration.

Conclusion

The overall findings of this research project demonstrate that celebrities and influencers do vary in the types of subject matter they post, as well as the way they use the strategies of authenticity and self-disclosure. Influencers tend to be more open, intimate, and authentic with their followers than celebrities do, and they are more frequently engaging in third party sponsorships and promoting their own businesses. This suggests that perhaps intimacy and commercial motives can coexist, and part of a shoppable life is allowing commercial intent to penetrate all aspects of life. However, due to celebrities getting many more likes and comments than influencers, it seems that intimacy and authenticity are not enough to get the equivalent audience reaction, and instead name recognition and being well known is more important to Instagram success.

Considering the popularity of sponsored posts as a strategy among both celebrities and influencers, it is clear that monetary gain and career growth are primary motivations within posting strategy. Despite the direct connection Instagram allows fans to have with celebrities, celebrities still primarily use Instagram to promote their professional projects and interject more personal posts from time to time, perhaps to keep the audience interested. For influencers, because they are not that famous and well-known as celebrities, they have to rely more on intimacy and self-disclosure. The biggest category of influencers post is the sponsored third party content, and influencers tended to inject these sponsored third party posts with personal thoughts and authentic stories of struggle and loss. From the types of subject matter used as well as levels

of intimacy revealed, it is apparent that emotional labor goes hand in hand with Instagram use for both influencers and celebrities. Due to the popularity of use of the family setting, it seems to suggest that succeeding on Instagram without disclosing romantic partners, family members and behind the scenes moments is not possible at all. Without these types of posts, the parasocial relationship can not be built and held as strong.

Limitations

Variable Improvement

For the variable of subject matter, there were a few categories that did not have a significant amount of use, which means future researchers should not include them if this subject matter variable is to be examined. The categories of organic landscape setting, organic textual setting, organic other, sponsored social cause, and sponsored other could be deleted or combined in order to eliminate insignificant subject matter categories.

It is also helpful with coding the variable of subject matter if researchers are more familiar with celebrities and influencers' careers, business associations and family members. Without that knowledge, it is harder to categorize subject matter.

While this study measured the frequency of social media strategies, future studies could examine the efficacy of each strategy in terms of follower interaction. Now that the study identified common strategies that are used, future studies can focus on the desired effects of the strategies by employing sophisticated statistical analysis to see which categories of subject matter performed the best in terms of interaction. Additionally, studies could consider using interviews with influencers to gather qualitative data regarding social media strategies.

Although authenticity was observed and the study demonstrated that influencers use authenticity as a strategy more often than celebrities, the overall percentage demonstrating

authenticity (5.5%) was quite low. This could have to do with the operational definition of authenticity focusing on hardships and struggle, and future studies could benefit by expanding this to also include the concept of “curated imperfection.” “Curated imperfection” refers to parts of life that people would commonly want to cover up, like messy rooms, a no-makeup-selfie, embarrassing moment or social faux pas which would help further define authenticity and potentially represent authenticity as a more thorough variable.

The variable of interactions for celebrities and influencers does not take into account the difference of number of followers or audience size, and future studies should come up with a scheme that would better measure audience interaction and success of the post. Celebrities and influencers have very different followers, to a significant extent, such as celebrities’ millions versus influencers’ thousands, which shall be factored in the interaction. Additionally, it would be interesting to document how often celebrities or influencers ask for direct feedback by either requesting comments and likes, or posing direct questions.

An alternative method to measure the variable of subject matter could be taken by completely removing the two broad categories of organic or sponsored from the subject matter variable (since this is already a standalone variable within the study). In other words, the study didn’t have to identify the two broad categories first and then branch into subcategories. Instead, the study could have coded the posts based on the subcategories directly . For example, in the sample of this study, there were sponsored posts that featured a family member or a routine setting. Based on the codebook instruction, coders would first determine whether the post was organic or sponsored. Then under the “sponsored” category, the coders would continue to code the post into the appropriate sponsored subcategory. Without the broad categories of “sponsored” or “organic,” the polished subcategories of subject matter could be reworked to

have a consistent and focused theme on the who or the what element in the photo (such as family members, routine setting, selfie, a product, etc.) This would have allowed for comparing how subject matters are distributed across sponsored posts versus organic posts, or how subject matters are distributed across influencers versus celebrities.

Additionally, a variable could be added that would determine what the intended purpose of the post was, whether it was to motivate, entertain, educate, promote, complain, or sell to the audience.

Sampling Improvement

The method of constructed week was used in order to make the sample size more manageable, but this could have potentially missed more common posting days from the month. Future researchers may want to look at the entirety of a month to see if the results vary in any way.

Even with these limits, the study did make a significant contribution to our understanding of social media parasocial relationships. While celebrities and influencers differ from each other to some degree, they do adopt similar strategies to keep the momentum of the parasocial relationship on.

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Appendix

Codebook for Content Analysis

Parasocial Relationships in Social Media: A Comparative Study of Instagram Posts by Celebrities and Micro-celebrities

Unit of Analysis: Instagram Post

Assign each post an identification number using three digits starting with 0001, 0002

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|
| <p>V1: ID A Unique number assigned to each post</p> | <p>V2: Dateline Use mm/dd format</p> | <p>V3: Day of Week Please specify which day of the week each date fell on.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sunday 2. Monday 3. Tuesday 4. Wednesday 5. Thursday 6. Friday 7. Saturday | <p>V4: Type of Post Please determine which type of post it is based on the elements within the post</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Photo(s) only 2. Photo(s) and caption 3. Photo(s) and video(s) 4. Photo(s) and video(s) and caption 5. Video(s) only 6. Video(s) and caption | <p>V5: Author Please identify which celebrity or influencer has made the post</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cristiano Ronaldo 2. Ariana Grande 3. The Rock 4. Kylie Jenner 5. Selena Gomez 6. Kim Kardashian 7. Leo Messi 8. Beyonce 9. Justin Beiber 10. Neymar Jr 11. Jenna Kutcher 12. Huda Kattan 13. Kevin Cury 14. Rach Parcell 15. Emily Meyer 16. Jack Morris 17. Katrina Scott 18. Kierston Rich 19. Negin Mirsalehi 20. Brian Kelly | <p>V6: Who Please identify if the author is a celebrity or influencer.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Celebrity 2. Influencer |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|

V7: Number of Words

This is to capture the number of words in the caption of the post. Please count the number of words in each post and record that number. If there is no caption, please put “0.”

V8: Number of Photos

This is to capture the number of photos in each post. Please count the number of pictures in each post. If there are no pictures, please put “0”.

V9: Number of Videos

This is to capture the number of videos in each post. Please count the number of videos in each post. If there are no videos, please put “0.”

V10: Subject Matter

This is to determine what category and sub category each post falls into according to the subject matter of the post. The subject matter refers to the main topic of focus of the post. First, please read the caption of the post in its entirety and look at all of the photos/videos in the post, and determine if it includes any kind of advertisement, endorsement, or tagged brand. If so, it will fall under one of the subcategories under B. If it does not, it will fall under one of the subcategories under A. Please read each subcategory carefully and determine which category and subcategory best describes the subject matter of the post. You will select a category (A or B) and sub category (1-6). Sometimes a post will include multiple photos that may include more than one type of subject matter. First determine its parent category (A or B) and then place in the first subcategory that appropriately fits the post.

A. Organic Content - Content without advertising embedded

1. Family Setting: Posts that feature the celebrity/influencer’s immediate family (including children, parents, spouses, siblings, pets). If any of the photos or videos include a family member or pet (and no advertisement), please code under this subcategory.
2. Routine Setting: Posts that feature regular activities a celebrity/influencer engages in (i.e. errands, mundane daily tasks, hobbies, home, events or outings with friends or acquaintances)
3. Personal Setting: “A Selfie” - Posts with a photo of the celebrities/influencers by themselves
4. Landscape Setting: Posts including a scenery photo that don’t feature the celebrity or their family
5. Quotes or Textual Setting: Posts that are purposed for communicating a message and that message is generally to inspire, encourage and motivate followers. The general use of encouraging phrases, advice, religious sentiments, or motivation speech that does not specifically mention a nonprofit or individual will fall under this category. (Example: Encouraging people to vote without mentioning a specific candidate or nonprofit, or saying “wear a mask” or “social distance” would fall under this category.)
6. Other: Posts that do not fall into any of the five categories above

B. Sponsored Content - Content that is linked to a commercial product, brand, or service

1. Professional Setting: Posts that mention and promote a product or event that the celebrity/influencer helped to produce in some way. Could consist of a movie, television show, magazine cover, music production, sports game/team, a makeup or cosmetic line designed by the celebrity, or a course or digital good created by the celebrity. Posts that encourage users to find more information at “the link in bio” or any owned media (i.e. website, newsletter, etc.) will fall under this subcategory. For athletes, if a post includes them actively playing in a sporting event or participating in their sport in their team jersey, it will fall under this subcategory.
2. Third Party Sponsorship Setting: Posts that promote and advertise a third party brand. They can include advertising photos, mentioning a product they enjoy, or tagging another brand in a post.
3. Charitable or Social Setting: Posts that feature and promote a specific social, political, or religious cause that is intended to educate people. Posts that fall under this subcategory will need to mention a specific nonprofit, church, political candidate, or social movement. (Example: Black Lives Matter, or BLM)
4. Other: Posts that do not fall into the above categories but are still linked or related to a commercial good or brand

V11: Authenticity

This is to determine rather or not the post portrays authenticity by sharing personal struggles and sadness or difficulties or challenges in life. Please read the post carefully and determine if it reveals struggles, difficulties, challenges or sadness (i.e. tough times in life). If the caption does contain authenticity, please select yes (1). If it does not, please select no (2). If the post does not include a caption, please select no (2).

1. Yes
2. No

V12: Intimacy

This is to determine if the post contains intimate content or not. Please assess each post and determine if it is intimate on a scale of one to three, with one being not intimate at all and three being very intimate. Please using the following scale:

1. Not intimate at all (no personal details are revealed at all, no loved ones and no personal items included. The post is not about the celebrities/influencers’ personalities or thoughts but about other objects or vanity. A post that simply features a product or selfie without personal details would fall under this category. If the post includes personal thoughts or feelings that we would not otherwise be aware of, it will not fall into this category.)
2. Somewhat intimate (some personal details are revealed such as anecdotes about the day or family, thoughts, encouraging sentiments, or photos of personal life.)

3. Extremely intimate (very intimate personal thoughts, feelings, or moments the audience would otherwise be incapable of knowing such as an inner feeling or a private moment at home that features “behind the scenes” look)

V13: Sponsored Content

This is to determine whether or not the post contains sponsored content. Sponsored content refers to content that mentions or links to another brand/product and is intended to have advertising effect. Please determine if the post includes sponsored content and select (1) for yes if it does and (2) for no if it does not.

1. Yes
2. No

V14: Number of Likes

This is to determine how many “likes” each post has to determine its success. Please capture the number of likes each post has in the format of 1,000,000.

V15: Number of Comments

This is to determine how many comments each post has to determine its success. Please capture the number of comments each post has in the format of 1,000,000.

V16: Number of Followers

For V16, please put the number of followers the celebrity or influencer has. You can find this by going to their Instagram profile and looking for the number of followers at the top of the page. The number of “followers” they have will be the same for every post made by that celebrity or influencer. This is to determine a percentage of how many interactions their posts get in comparison with the amount of followers