

Rochester Institute of Technology

**RIT Scholar Works**

---

Theses

---

5-15-2021

## **Social Media Influencer Motivation: Exploring What Drives Micro-Celebrities to Produce Content Using Social Exchange Theory**

Jennie Giardino  
jsg3836@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Giardino, Jennie, "Social Media Influencer Motivation: Exploring What Drives Micro-Celebrities to Produce Content Using Social Exchange Theory" (2021). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

**Social Media Influencer Motivation: Exploring What Drives Micro-Celebrities to Produce  
Content Using Social Exchange Theory**

Jennie Giardino

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology

*A Thesis* presented

in partial fulfillment of the

Master of Science Degree in Communication and Media Technologies

Degree Awarded:

May 15, 2021

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of  
Jennie Giardino presented on April 23, 2021.

---

Ammina Kothari, PhD  
Associate Professor and  
Director of Graduate Program  
School of Communication  
Thesis Advisor

---

Sorim Chung, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Saunders College of Business  
Thesis Advisor

---

Ammina Kothari, PhD  
Associate Professor and  
Director of Graduate Program  
School of Communication

---

Kelly Norris Martin, PhD  
Associate Professor and  
Director  
School of Communication

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....4

Abstract.....5

Introduction .....6

Theory.....9

Related studies.....13

Methodology.....17

Data collection.....18

Data analysis.....19

Results.....20

Discussion.....39

Limitations.....42

Future Studies.....42

Conclusion.....44

References.....46

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Ammina Kothari, for her consistent guidance and support, and for inspiring me to pursue a study on social media influencers. I would also like to thank my second advisor, Sorim Chung, for providing her opinion from a marketing perspective throughout this process. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with these two individuals. I could not have been successful without their direction and time. I would also like to thank the 15 influencers who participated in this study for their openness and honesty. Without their time and responsiveness, this project could not be completed.

**Abstract**

Social media influencers are online celebrities who have the power to shape the opinions of audience members due to their relatable qualities. Influencer sponsorships have changed the nature of social media platforms and the strategy by which the content is posted. But besides the potential to be sponsored, why do influencers post content? The purpose of this study was to understand what motivates influencers to post content through the lens of social exchange theory by identifying resources exchanged between the social media influencer and the audience and explain how this affects their motivation to post content. I interviewed 15 lifestyle influencers with more than 10,000 followers or subscribers on Instagram or YouTube or TikTok. The results show that the comments, direct messages, and other forms of engagement received by influencers from their audience give them friendship and support, but also negative mental health consequences. Participants also shared several internal drivers that motivate them to share their lives with others, including wanting to inspire and help others.

*Keywords:* influencer, social media, benefit, cost, motivation

## Introduction

Social media platforms have permanently altered the way people connect with others. About 45% of the world's population uses social media to connect with anyone from family and friends to celebrities and internet personalities (Influencer marketing hub, 2020). These platforms offer a glimpse of everyone's reality that people otherwise would not experience. Repeated snapshots into others' lives can lead to feeling personally connected and attached to them, like a friendship (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Relationships are built online between the everyday user and the content creator who has thousands, sometimes millions of followers, by sharing photos, videos, and comments. These figures are called influencers, defined as a person with a following who has the power to frame opinions, thoughts, and attitudes through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and others (Freberg et al, 2010). Influencers are defined in several tiers based on the number of followers or subscribers acquired. Mega-influencers are those with over one million followers who had their fame established before the rise of social media. Macro-influencers have forty thousand to one million followers, micro-influencers have one thousand to forty thousand followers, and finally nano-influencers have fewer than one thousand followers (Influencer marketing hub, 2020).

Social media influencers have filled the shoes of traditional celebrities who used to be the key people that brands would employ for endorsements. It is evident that people prefer seeing social media influencers promote a product over traditional celebrities due to their ability to be perceived as more similar to the average person, relatable, and trustworthy (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). It is easier for people to identify with social media influencers, therefore easier to picture themselves enjoying the products or services they are promoting. Because consumers

prefer social media influencers (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020), there has been a marketing shift where companies are investing time and money into influencer marketing (Bailis, 2020). Social media influencers have secured platforms on various social networking websites but Instagram and YouTube are two of the most popular sites. Instagram is recognized as the most effective platform with over one billion users and millions of posts including endorsements, providing companies with thousands of influencers to choose from (Bailis, 2020). YouTube is another popular platform with over thirty million daily active users and over one billion videos watched per day (Omnicores, 2020).

Social media influencers create content that their followers' comment and engage with. Through the lens of social exchange theory, this is viewed as an exchange of resources. Social exchange theory breaks down the behavior of social interaction into an exchange of costs and benefits, both physical and conceptual, between two participating individuals (Cook & Rice, 2006). The goal of the interaction is to increase acquired benefits and diminish possible costs (Homans, 1958). This theory has been applied in various studies on human interaction in numerous contexts and industries. For example, social exchange theory has helped researchers define exchanges within interpersonal and online interactions in contexts ranging from tourism to online professional communities (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Tsai & Kang, 2019). Researchers found solutions to issues resulting from tourism development by analyzing what is exchanged between the residents and the government (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Tourism development can be great for a community's economy, however it can also have detrimental effects socially and culturally, so researchers used social exchange theory to analyze costs and benefits associated with it from the residents' perspective (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Another group of researchers examined online professional communities to understand why

some members read the information and do not participate in sharing (the free-rider dilemma) and what will motivate them to contribute or reciprocate knowledge sharing within the group (Tsai & Kang, 2019). They studied how perceived social benefits can have a positive impact on reciprocity, which would solve the issue of people taking the information they need from the online community without reciprocating (Tsai & Kang, 2019). Both studies found issues within their specific contexts, tourism and online communities, and defined either benefits, costs, or both, and used them to better address those issues. Both examples show how social exchange theory can be used as a framework to define costs and benefits exchanged in a given situation.

Using the elements of social exchange theory, I analyzed the costs and benefits exchanged between an influencer and their audience, leading to a better understanding of the factors that motivate online micro-celebrities. Most studies focus purely on followers and interactions between them and the influencer (Schouten et al, 2020; Jin et al, 2019), but there is a gap in research on influencer motivation. It has been discovered that many influencers started their accounts without the intention of gaining a large following or receiving attention from brands for sponsorships (Neal, 2017). But many studies fail to dive into other motivations, which opened a unique research opportunity. In this study, I bring to light those ignored influencer motivations to provide a better understanding of the specific reasons why people start sharing their lives on social media platforms beyond the obvious financial factor. To define a solid set of influencer motivations, I interviewed 15 social media influencers from the lifestyle genre who have established their platform on YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok. Analysis of their responses through the perspective of social exchange theory will help me define what they get out of this relationship, leading to a concrete understanding of this profound career choice and expose other

information about their online experience. This preliminary understanding will contribute to the current literature on social media influencers and create future research opportunities.

### **Theory**

To examine the transaction that occurs between social media influencers and the audience, this study uses social exchange theory. As influencers and the audience interact with each other, they exchange ideas, compliments, and other thoughts that are valuable especially through the perspective of social exchange theory. This theory is useful for understanding why people continue to engage with each other because it includes a cost versus reward analysis based on what is communicated (Homans, 1958).

Social exchange theory stems from 1958 when sociologist George Homans became one of the first to expand upon our most innate social behavior: the exchange of resources (Homans, 1958). Exchanging resources was, and continues to be, key to survival as civilizations developed (Homans, 1958). In other words, this theory goes beyond exchanging physical resources and states that “any interaction between individuals is an exchange of resources” (Lambe, et al, 2001, p. 4). People constantly communicate with each other; these interactions can be broken down into costs and rewards that are sacrificed or acquired from them. Homans (1958) compared behavior to an economy where what one person offers in a conversation might cost them but serve as a reward to the other in the conversation.

Humans are influenced by a subtle pressure to give to and get from others as they seek to maximize the rewards received (Homans, 1958). The researcher stressed that social behavior can present itself in the exchange of tangible materials, like money or items, but also intangible materials like “symbols of approval or prestige” (p 606). Other examples of these positive social symbols include “emotional satisfaction, spiritual values, pursuit of personal advantage, and

sharing humanitarian ideals” (Lambe et al, 2001, p.6). These symbols would be perceived as a benefit from a social exchange. A negative example of a symbol would be embarrassment or shame that is produced from a conversation. Sociologist Peter Blau (1964) argues that the “most important benefits involved in social exchange do not have any material value on which an exact price can be put at all, as exemplified by social approval and respect” (p. 455). He also emphasized the importance of trust as a required component in an exchange relationship. The social rewards from exchanges between two individuals have more value than a dollar amount in some situations. For example, one cannot put a price on the relationships created between friends, family, or significant others, and they hold more value than a physical item.

In discussing social behavior, Homans (1961) says three variables are important in a social exchange: value, costs, and profit. Value is difficult to define because what one finds valuable differs from person to person. Homans (1961) attempts to define value as dependent on how much effort it takes to receive it. The more effort one must put into receiving a reward, the more the value would diminish. Homans (1961) defines costs as the measure of valuable aspects sacrificed because of social exchange. For example, there is a cost associated with helping someone with their homework. One sacrifices their own time and energy to help another, while the other reaps the most benefits of this exchange. It is inevitable that social exchanges cannot always be valuable and beneficial for both parties. Finally, he defines profit as rewards minus cost as people continue to exchange socially, assuming that benefits will result from the conversation (Homans, 1961). Humans engaging in conversation naturally do so with benefits in mind. However, there is no way to guarantee equality in exchanges as one party may profit over the other (Homans, 1961). Blau (1964) expanded the knowledge of this theory by focusing on the relationships that are created from exchanges from a more economic perspective. Blau (1964)

contributed to the theory's definition by referring to social exchanges as "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others" (p. 91). He emphasized how much human action is influenced by the expectation that they will get something in return. Therefore, the actors are dependent on each other to receive something from the exchange. His contribution is important because while he agreed with Homans' (1961) concept of exchanging costs and rewards, he reinforced that the voluntary exchanges are motivated by that possibility of reward, which then can lead to long lasting social relationships within groups or between individuals.

In sum, the main element of social exchange theory is the transaction of tangible and intangible rewards and costs. Since social media offers a unique reciprocal engagement feature of comments and direct messages, which is used for people to have conversations. This feature creates an environment for which social exchange theory can be seamlessly applied. Several researchers have explored social exchange theory on social media. Applied to people interacting with each other on Facebook, Surma (2016) studied how reciprocity can be predicted. They found that if a user likes or comments on a friend's post, that friend is more likely to interact with that user's posts in the future. Reciprocity is predicted here as people like receiving likes and comments, so they are more likely to return them. To predict reciprocal intention in online professional communities, researchers Tsai & Kang (2019) used social exchange theory. They found a "free rider" dilemma where some would come to the knowledge sharing spaces to use that information but would never contribute (Tsai & Kang, 2019). Knowledge contributors are motivated by perceived social benefits that can be exchanged between participants (Tsai & Kang, 2019). According to Tsai & Kang (2019), for knowledge seekers, the perception that the benefits will outweigh the costs determines if they will reciprocate. Using social exchange theory, the

researchers were able to define motivations that may entice the free rider knowledge seekers to start contributing. Another study looked at online group buying platforms like Groupon to see what motivates consumers to continuously purchase from them (Shiau & Luo, 2012). They found that it would benefit online group buying platforms to provide a place for consumers to exchange information with each other as this interaction increases purchase intention.

The fundamental elements of social exchange theory Homans (1961) and Blau (1964) suggest relate to the exchange between an influencer and the audience. There is a known and understood financial exchange where an influencer receives compensation for brand deals and views online. Blau (1964) concluded that intangible social benefits are the most valuable to be exchanged. Besides the occasional giveaway, influencers and their audience mostly exchange words, which would expose these non-material benefits.

For this study, I am using benefits and costs to describe what is exchanged between an influencer and their followers, and uncovering influencer motivations to posting content to serve as an explanation for their choice to post content. For the purpose of this study, the three factors, are defined as following: motivations are defined as the factors that drive the social media influencers to post content. These motivations might include the benefits that will be gained from their platform, but I anticipated that social media influencers will have internalized motivators that are less obvious, which are important to highlight to understand why influencers post content. Benefits are defined as the positive factors gained from posting content that can range from tangible items received from followers or brands to those intangible social rewards mentioned above. Costs are defined as the sacrifices influencers make to post content and the associated negative factors that result from it.

### **Social Media and Parasocial Relationship Between Influencers and their Followers**

Social media have evolved so quickly into as platforms for successful careers that it is a popular topic to study. There are many studies about an influencer's audience, how an influencer can be used as a marketing tool, and the parasocial relationship that is created between a micro-celebrity and their followers (Kim & Kim, 2020; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). So far, there has been less of a focus on the influencers themselves with a few exceptions.

### **Influencer Marketing**

Social media influencers make their money through sponsorships from brands to promote products or services. Research has shown that popular social media figures are successful in promoting products because “they are considered as individuals who are highly informed, respected, and socially connected” (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018, p. 432). Once popular enough on a social media platform, a brand will reach out to them about working together. But they must be careful, because once they post about the endorsement, it can be poorly received by the audience. Audrezet et al (2020) conducted a study on authenticity and social media influencers to see how they manage the possibility of negative perceptions. Every sponsored post is a potential threat to authenticity, so it is in the best interest of the influencer to avoid posting too much sponsored content and to carefully consider the companies they work with as each brand reflects themselves. They must consider the brand's reputation and if the company's values align with their own values. Audrezet et al (2020) concluded that authenticity management demands ““behind-the-scenes' conscious effort” (p 563). This effort includes two main strategies: passionate and transparent authenticity. Passionate authenticity includes posts that display a fundamentally “self-gratifying activity...to ensure an intrinsically satisfying creation process” (Audrezet et al, 2020, p. 563). Posts depicting passionate authenticity will make the influencer appear more genuine as they promote products that they seemingly truly

believe in. Transparent authenticity is a strategy influencers enact by being as honest as possible about the capabilities of the product or service by adding “personal opinions to respect their own sense of integrity” (Audrezet et al, 2020, p. 563). Their job depends on remaining transparent to guarantee the trust of their followers and to continue building an image of honesty and sincerity. This research shows that while it seems that an influencer’s posts look effortless, they put a significant amount of time and thought into each, especially if it includes an endorsement.

Another group of researchers (Seeler et al, 2019) applied the influencer phenomenon to the sphere of tourism and explored how tourism marketing has been changed by people posting pictures and videos of their experience. People do not want to go to a vacation planner or look at advertisements for places to visit anymore. The internet has changed the travel industry permanently with its accessibility and people doing their own research by looking at relatable travel influencers before planning a vacation, creating primary and secondary experiences. Primary experience is when the individual is living through and involved in the endeavor, while passive experience is knowing about the experience (Seeler et al., 2019). Secondary experience is when the information is absorbed through the experience of others. Travel influencers have the unique ability to offer followers passive and secondary experience and to guide the decision-making process. Travel companies can use this research to find influencers who would be interested in trips they offer and sponsor a trip in exchange for social media posts about it.

### **Influencers Branding Themselves**

Neal (2017) conducted a study on fitness influencers on Instagram by interviewing ten people and analyzing comments under sponsored posts and compared them to organic posts. She wanted to see if sponsorships significantly affected the relationship between the influencers and their audience as they can be controversial depending on the brand’s reputation, the product

itself, and how authentic the media figure is. Neal (2017) found more positive comments under organic posts and slightly more negative comments on posts featuring endorsements. Her interviews with fitness influencers showed that some of them never intended on gaining a large following as they created their accounts initially for themselves. Neal (2017) also discovered the ways influencers foster a relationship with their followers including: arranging meet and greets, coincidentally running into them, commenting back to them, going live on Instagram to answer their questions, and using the poll feature to learn about them. Overall, Neal's (2017) research has positively contributed to research on influencers themselves by revealing how sponsorships affect their image and how they build their relationships with followers.

While Neal (2017) interviewed micro-influencers with the largest following being 506,000, Leban et al (2020) conducted a study on high-net-worth (HNW) social media influencers with millions of followers who live an expensive, luxurious celebrity-like lifestyle. This type of influencer is subject to more negativity and judgement naturally due to the large number of people who are watching and analyzing their every move. With the attraction of this negative attention, HNW influencers must be especially careful about how they portray themselves online. The researchers (2020) found that HNW put extra work and energy into appearing as genuinely good people including occasionally enacting personas that illustrate them positively. Researchers (2020) used the altruist and the 'good' role model personas to frame the HNW influencers' posts. They execute the altruist persona to balance out their page through posts about philanthropic events that show how they use their money for good causes. They portray the 'good' role model persona by depicting acts that make them seem more relatable. This research shows that some influencers must have to post in an extremely calculated manner to balance their feed and remain in the good graces of their followers.

### **Parasocial Relationship**

In response to the growth of radio, television, and movies Horton and Wohl (1956) formulated the parasocial relationship concept from the “illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer” (p.215). They call the media figure that can compel audience members into feeling this face-to-face relationship a “persona” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216). Repeated exposure to the persona results in audience members starting to rely on them. Horton and Wohl (1956) state that “his appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life” (p. 216). The persona starts to become a part of the audience members’ lives without either party knowing each other exists. To understand why fans connect so personally to celebrities, researchers named this phenomenon the parasocial relationship (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). An important feature of parasocial relationships is that they are generally one sided, which was especially evident with traditional media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Researchers have related the parasocial relationship to social media influencers and their audience to explore how the reciprocal commenting and messaging features strengthen the relationship (Bond, 2016). When social media influencers respond to their followers, it was discovered that media users feel a closer parasocial bond with them (Bond, 2016). This study will be focusing on the influencer’s perspective, but it is still important to understand that this connection can take place on social media platforms.

In sum, the current research is on influencer sponsorships, how these individuals portray themselves as a brand in front of an audience, and the parasocial relationship. Influencer sponsorships are newly popular partnerships between brands and influencers that gives the brand exposure and the influencer money. To participate in this partnership, influencers must carefully balance their authenticity by consciously choosing products and companies that fit into their

personal brand. Branding themselves online includes opening themselves up to their audience for people to get to know them, which leads to the possibility of parasocial relationship formation. This literature reveals that most of the research is on influencer sponsorships for marketing purposes and the parasocial relationship, leaving a gap in research relating to influencer motivations. This study contributes to scholarship by showing that social media influencers are not only compelling for marketing purposes, but also for relationship creation. To begin exploring the relationship created between social media influencers and their audience, I will define what motivates them to post content. This preliminary project will start the process of filling this gap in research.

Guided by social exchange theory and existing research, I pose the following questions:

RQ1: What motivates lifestyle influencers to post content?

RQ2: What benefits do influencers receive from posting content?

RQ3: What costs are associated with being an influencer?

RQ4: From the influencer's perspective, what do they give to their audience by posting content?

RQ5: Do costs and benefits exchanged between influencers and followers effect their motivation to post content?

### **Methodology**

To find what motivates influencers to post content, I chose a qualitative methodological approach and decided to conduct individual interviews. Individual interviews are appropriate when the goal is to document individual experiences from a specific demographic (Babbie, 2020). The less structured quality of an interview gives ample space and time for the participant to guide the conversation and provide detailed responses. Another benefit to interviewing participants is that the conversation between the interviewer and the participant can uncover

concepts, stories, and other specifics that researchers might not initially anticipate (Babbie, 2020). These discoveries lead to a better understanding of the participant and unveil future research opportunities. I am looking for answers that explain why influencers do what they do. Because content creators post about their unique interests and daily life, these answers are expected to vary. Participants are from different parts of the world, the number of followers they have varies, they use social media for different reasons, and have different backgrounds and general life experiences. These are just a handful of factors that show how each social media influencer will have a diverse journey to share, ultimately possibly leading to distinct motivations for content creation. An interview is the only method that allows the participants enough time and flexibility to adapt to each of their situations.

Though individual interviewing is the best method for this research, there are a few limitations to consider. During an interview, there is potential for the researcher to ask biased questions and for the interview to get side-tracked (Babbie, 2020). The interviewer must remain intentional about the questions asked while also trying to foster a natural conversation, so it can be difficult to balance. Another limitation is that each interview takes a decent amount of time away from the participants' day. For my research, it took about thirty minutes per participant. Because of this, there can be fewer participants in a qualitative research study compared to a quantitative one where a survey can be sent to hundreds of people at a time. Therefore, the sample will not be representative of a large population (Babbie, 2020).

### **Data Collection**

I interviewed 15 social media influencers from the lifestyle genre during the months of mid-February to mid-March. Each interview lasted on average about 30 minutes. Lifestyle influencers are those who create content based around their everyday activities and interests.

Lifestyle influencers are relatable since their content consists of how they manage these daily activities, often offering advice or simply showing their personal process. Though these influencers are categorized in the same genre, their motivations, followers, and content creation process will vary. Lifestyle influencers tend to frame their content around a main passion that drives their daily life, like music, fashion, or family life, which makes them especially versatile. Each social media influencer invited to participate in the study has at least 10,000 followers, which ensures a microcelebrity status and engagement with the audience. Influencers were contacted through social media and email to ask if they would be willing to participate. Thirteen of the interviews took place on Zoom where the session was recorded to the cloud with the participants' permission, while the other two interview responses were collected through email. The Zoom interviews were automatically transcribed verbatim, so the next step was to listen to each interview while reading the responses to ensure they were accurate.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I framed the process around the steps suggested by researchers who studied the feasibility of using cloud-based applications to analyze interview responses (Hinkel et al, 2021). The first two steps involve collecting the data and checking the transcripts for accuracy. After cleaning the data, the responses were organized in an Excel spreadsheet by interview question for further analysis. Analysis of qualitative data involves several coding steps (Babbie, 2020; Hinkel et al, 2021). The reasonable first step was to process the responses through open-ended coding used to do a close reading of the individual responses, which includes pulling key concepts that would be labeled and then broken down with two more coding processes: topical coding and thematic coding respectively (Babbie, 2020). The process consisted of reading each transcript individually to observe the key topics brought up by the

participants. From open-ended coding of the responses, I discovered three main topics: motivations, benefits, and costs. In Excel, I created a new spreadsheet for each topic that was pulled from the open-ended coding. The next step was to highlight the quotes that best represented each topic in a process of topical coding. This process allowed me to pull specific themes from the highlighted responses in a more systematic final coding process. A theme is defined as a response that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.11). This process of thematic coding is the last step of analysis suggested by Hinkel et al (2021) which involves rereading of the highlighted quotations that represented influencer motivations, benefits, and costs and generated meaning. After familiarizing myself with the highlighted portions, I pulled the most relevant and repeated themes from each topic. The themes pulled from each topic were often repeated factors and experiences from multiple influencer responses that answer my research questions. Thematic coding was the best choice to analyze the responses set because it is a flexible process and used for illustrating patterns across data including those that reflect participants’ reality and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Results**

My analysis of 15 interviews identified multiple reasons for why lifestyle influencers post content and engage with their followers. I present my findings by research question.

### **RQ1: What motivates lifestyle influencers to post content?**

Research question 1 has to do with uncovering internal drives that motivate social media influencers to post content. The goal was to find out why they post content and why they have chosen this career or hobby. The responses showed that most of the participants started posting

content as an outlet for themselves with no intention of becoming famous or gaining a following. Once they started gaining a following, I found several themes in responses that illustrate the internal drivers that explain why they continue to post content. The three main internal motivations for posting content include the desire to inspire, uplift, and help people, their mood, and the desire to be authentic.

### ***The Desire to Inspire, Uplift, or Help People***

Several of the participants mentioned a wish to inspire and uplift their audience and a desire to help others by sharing their experiences. For instance, Influencer B, a fashion focused lifestyle figure with 16.4K followers on Instagram, said her motivation comes from the opportunity to inspire others:

Though Instagram won't be around forever and I doubt I'll ever have this type of audience or influence again, I feel grateful that my photos and style have inspired even just one person.

Similarly, influencer N, an actor who films daily vlogs (video logs) on YouTube who has 16.5K subscribers, and posts lifestyle content on Instagram (20.1K followers) describes their motivations as:

You know I guess you could call it a gift... sharing with people and having them resonate with you, or that you're open to sharing your life like it's not something that everyone's good at or everyone, it comes to them, naturally. So I guess I feel like if it's something that I can help other people with it like, I really like that, like when people say like hey this video of yours really helped me get through this, like it really was inspiring that you shared this with me. Or even like my audition stuff they're like, oh wow I was so nervous about my audition and watching your audition video like made me have a little bit of a

glimpse of what it was like thank you so much...those kind of things just kind of remind me that it's not just about me it's like I feel like I'm helping people...I feel like I'm able to provide relatable insight by sharing my life.

Like influencer N, influencer O, a content creator with a focus on beauty, mental health, and other aspects of her life films vlogs on YouTube (66.3K subscribers), and posts on Instagram (23.9K followers), described appreciating that they are able to help their followers:

That's probably one of the most special experiences I've had with social media, is being able to see how my videos and content can legitimately help others.

Influencer I, a lifestyle Instagrammer with 12.7K followers who posts fashion, product recommendations, and information about her past career as an animal trainer, has a slightly different motivation. They described being motivated by wanting to educate their audience by sharing:

I love educating people. And like just something that so intrinsic to me is like helping and being a part of something bigger. And so, because of the whole trainer Tuesday thing I actually launched a side business where I supply resources for future animal trainers to hopefully get into the field, and so I think a coaching business or a resume builder course or an interview course and so yeah just like, I just want help people.

These examples show that influencers are motivated by helping others with the information they share, whether it is a random activity they are working on at home or a product recommendation, or reviews on clothes they buy. They like to feel as though they are helping their followers and making a difference in their lives. Many of these participants may not have ever expected to have a platform with the number of followers they have, but now that they do, they feel motivated to help and inspire them by simply sharing their life online.

*Motivation From Being in a Proper Affective State*

Several of the participants expressed that they only post content when they are in a creative mood or in the mood to post in general, which is a theme that was unexpected. From an audience perspective, it seems like every influencer has a specific content posting schedule, but many of these influencers explained that it is the opposite for them. Influencer D, a lifestyle Instagrammer with 10.3K followers, who posts content consisting of fashion and thrifting, positivity and artistic photos explained that they do not follow a schedule and instead lets their mental health status dictate their content creation:

That's very variable for me, I'm probably the worst influencer ever which hopefully gives you an interesting perspective because you know they have those rules where you should be posting multiple times a week. Whatever, I've honestly kind of put that mindset on the back burner for right now, because I think mental health is more important... I post if I feel like it, and I think that's been the healthiest approach, right now.

This quote suggests that the pressure of content posting schedule might have had a negative effect on Influencer D. Not only does the quote show that they post when they feel like doing it, but more than that, it uncovers another unexpected cost that I will explore further when showing the results for research question 3. Influencer G, an actor who documents their life through daily vlogs and fashion content on YouTube (11.1K subscribers), Instagram (6,855 followers), and TikTok (27.9K followers) also does not follow a schedule and instead lets their mood guide their engagement on social media:

I just try to like post whenever I feel like it, I feel like a lot of influencers try to be very, like posting every single day or on a schedule and I feel like that kind of sets them up for burnout or feeling like they need to post all the time, even if they don't feel like doing it.

So, if I don't feel like posting or I feel sad or something I'm not just gonna like, fake it and post a video anyways.

Influencer J, a lifestyle influencer who documents fashion, beauty, and other product favorites on Instagram (11.5K followers) also does not follow a content posting schedule because they want it to be an enjoyable experience:

So I've been posting whenever I want now, I'm just trying to switch it more towards like what I want to post, and when I want to post it instead of an "every day, you have to do it" because that's not enjoyable if it's not like feeling good for you.

These quotes show that being in the mood to post content is an important factor influencing when the participants will create and share. All three of these quotes indicate that posting when they do not feel like it would result in negative feelings like "burnout," faking it, or content posting being "not enjoyable." Being in a good mood when sharing their lives is integral to feeling motivated. Being in the mood to post content aligns with the next theme, authenticity, because they want to be truly interested in and enthusiastic about the content they post.

### ***The Desire to be Viewed as Authentic***

Being as authentic and real to followers was a concern that many participants mentioned. The desire to be authentic motivates them to share content, including products, tips and tricks, and daily activities that truly represents themselves as a person or brand. Posting content that does not align with their personalities would be detrimental to their success, proving that authenticity is a significant motivator to them. When asked about how many sponsorships they take, influencer I said:

So I make it a really big point right now with where I am and my follower count where I'm only accepting paid sponsorships that I like 100% believe in, because I want my

audience to know that it's authentic or I will accept unpaid content if its a company that I really like, believe in, so it depends on the company right now.

Influencer H, a lifestyle influencer focused on promoting a health and wellness through daily vlogs on YouTube (14.5K subscribers), and posts on Instagram (4,688 followers), is similarly cautious about brand endorsement:

I'm very cautious of like who I work with and I just make sure that it aligns with what I believe in and then usually kind of the stuff that people that follow me also kind of align with what I believe in.

When asked about audience reactions to sponsored content, influencer B stated:

I try to keep my sponsored content pretty subtle and so it still feels true to my style. I also would never work with a brand or do a sponsored post about something that doesn't align with my values (i.e.: working with a fast fashion brand).

When asked about their relationship with their audience, influencer E, a TV news reporter who posts daily vlogs about her life on YouTube (458K subscribers), and shares her life on Instagram (44.4K followers), explained that:

Yeah, I mean, I would say it's just it's very straightforward and honest. I've never, you know promoted a product I don't believe in. My YouTube channels very much so not like that, and I think it's just very honest real. I feel like if you watch my YouTube channel you really do know me.

These quotes show how important it is for social media influencers to post content they truly believe in. They want their audience to see the real, true version of them, so that motivates them to post content that reflects their personality, values, and beliefs. Showing their audience their

true selves seems to be a key factor in building their relationships and growing their following. Authenticity is in the back of their minds when creating content and posting it.

**RQ2: What benefits do influencers receive from posting content?**

Research question 2 has to do with the positive factors social media influencers gain from posting content online. Many of the participants briefly mentioned the physical items gained from their platform like money and free products. However, out of all fifteen participants, it was not a core topic of discussion for any of them. Many acknowledged that the money is nice and appreciated the free products, but it was evident that social capital was more important to them. What is more important to these participants is gaining social connection, a creative outlet, and support from their followers.

*Social Connection*

All the participants mentioned social connection as being one of the significant outcomes from posting content on social media. They mentioned connecting with fellow influencers, followers, networking, and even likened their followers to be a second set of online family and friends.

When asked to talk about what their followers give to them, Influencer E said:

I mean just so much happiness and like a way to connect with so many people, you know just naturally living your life you're only exposed to so many people, especially with the pandemic, right? That taught us that, man you can feel so isolated, but they just provide me with a million new friends... it seriously is like family and my friends in my real life so...They mean everything like I can't even imagine if you took it away like if you took away my YouTube you would take away a majority of my life.

Influencer C, a lifestyle Instagrammer (14.4K followers), who posts artistic depictions of her life using her photography skills, echoed similar sentiments:

Oh, I feel like they're my second family. I feel like, if anything is wrong that I know one of them is going to either have a solution have the answer and be able to talk it out with me.

When asked about their relationship with their followers, influencer G said:

I feel like every social media influencer is like "they're like my friends" but I genuinely respond to...all my comments on TikTok. If there's 1000 comments, I literally respond to every single one because I feel like they're my friends and I don't know, if maybe, if I had a million followers maybe it wouldn't feel the same way, but since I'm like not as big, it feels like a small group of like friends to me.

Influencer A, a lifestyle Instagrammer (18.4K followers), who posts travel, fashion, and aspects of her daily life, also appreciated the ability to connect with their followers online:

It just like makes me happy knowing that I can connect to so many people and, like, I feel like I have like friends like at my fingertips all the time which is really cute...I like post something and like say something, and I get so many responses about it and it's just like so exciting like to then go on Instagram and see like a bunch of messages from people like and we're all talking about the same thing. So I just think like that that's why like, I love it so much.

Several participants also mentioned how much it means to them that total strangers take an interest in their life. Influencer D shared their appreciation for her audience by explaining that they make her feel less lonely:

I think the number one thing is like keeping me company and I, there's a lot of times where people really show up and I don't expect them to. They'll just comment and be like "hey how are you doing." They'll ask how my cats are, because I share my cats a lot on my on my stories...I'm just like, floored that people care...people are just so kind and that they take the time to think about you...it just makes me happy that people take the time to think about you, even if they've never met you. Yeah, so like, I don't have any siblings I only have my boyfriend so I don't get to see anyone. And I'm just like you know it's really nice to stay connected with people when we can't really talk face to face, so I love that about them, I have really nice followers.

Influencer I, also compared their audience to being family and friends:

They just feel like extended family and friends and eventually would love to meet, like every single one of them, and I have met some of them, which is so cool. But yeah, they just feel like my friends.

These quotes serve as evidence that influencers truly value their audience; they are more than just numbers to the participants. Calling strangers family and friends is a powerful comparison. With so many social media influencers mentioning this benefit, it is clear that social connection is a prevalent outcome of sharing their lives on the internet.

### *Creative Outlet*

Another theme identified from my analysis is how social media platforms serve as creative outlets for the influencers. Influencer B, who focuses on living sustainably, likened her Instagram feed to a photo diary:

I've always loved taking photos, so I treat it as my photo diary, it's really allowed me to remember small moments I may have forgotten if not for the photos. Also, I enjoy

looking at it as a puzzle, seeing how all these different images can fit seamlessly together on my feed for an overarching look, it's definitely a visual hobby to me first and foremost.

Influencer D also values capturing moments and sharing them in a visually pleasing way on her Instagram feed:

Other than the materialistic things, I think it's a great creative outlet for me. I've always since I was really little loved photography and while I may not always be the one taking the photos now, I like having a vision for something, whether that be makeup, clothes, photo angles, locations, something like that. And that's really fun to me when I can explain that to my boyfriend and we go out and do it, and I can capture exactly what I want. I love doing that.

Influencer E has a different perspective as a TV news reporter because she is told what to report on every day, but her platform allows her to make creative decisions the way she wants to present them. She describes that posting content is a hobby she truly enjoys:

I just find it so much pure enjoyment and I think the proof of that is that I have a full time job and also just the fact that I've done it so long, you know we all have hobbies and I've had so many you know little hobbies that I have kind of just you know, ended throughout the years...but this is one that has been with me for over a decade and it just makes me so happy...it allows me to kind of you know, put my creativity out in a very unique way, and also in a way that I can control myself.

These quotes show that each participant uses their platform as a creative outlet that is shaped by their individual interests. Influencer B prioritizes her platform as a "visual hobby" instead of looking at it as a job or something she is forced to do. Several participants mentioned having a

vision for their page and enjoying putting photos on their Instagram feed in an artistic way.

Influencer D acknowledged the “materialistic things” they receive from posting content but spent more time sharing how their platforms allow them to explore their creativity. Because many participants mentioned creativity being important to them, this shows that the ability to explore their creative side while posting content is a significant benefit gained from having a platform.

### *Support*

Several participants mentioned being grateful for the support their audience gives them, which is another important piece of social capital. Influencer O explained that they notice their followers who frequently comment and explained how much that means to them:

It’s always so fun to me to see the same names pop up in my comments section! It means a lot that total strangers would be interested in my life and so incredibly supportive of me! There are no words to describe how amazing it feels to be vulnerable and share about mental health or trichotillomania and see people comment and relate to the same experience. It definitely helps me feel like I’m not alone!

In addition to mentioning their audience being supportive, this quote serves as evidence for content posting creating social connection. Influencer H shared similar sentiments about her audience serving as a support system:

They are definitely like, a good support system and its definitely nice to feel supported in what you do and what you share. And like, when people respond positively to that, that's definitely a huge motivator for me yeah...I'd say I support like probably the biggest thing.

Influencer A shared a more personal perspective as she described the ability to be open with her audience, knowing that they will be there to support her no matter what:

I feel like I can talk to my followers about anything like say whatever is on my mind and they're gonna like be there for me, and I know that not a lot of people feel like that and I don't know I just feel like, very like happy, and like, excited to talk to my followers about stuff... I love my followers like, they're so nice like, they're so supportive.

These quotes show that the participants pay attention to the engagement they receive and feel genuinely supported by it. Support can have powerful effects on people, including building confidence, improving mental health, and a greater ability to handle stress (Cherry, 2020).

Several participants also mentioned their audience's support in the form of comments and direct messages gave them confidence. This sense of support is something participants mentioned appreciating, making it a valuable benefit resulting from posting content.

### **RQ3: What costs are associated with being an influencer?**

While the participants dedicated a lot of their responses to explaining how grateful they are for their platforms, they all mentioned at least one negative aspect of posting content. I found three major themes that describe the costs social media influencers sacrifice: time, mental health, and pressure. I also included commentary on the affect negative comments had on only 3 participants. While negative comments did not affect most participants, the 3 influencers that suffer from them had significant experience to share.

#### ***Time***

Several participants shared how time consuming it is to create content. While it looks like social media influencers seamlessly post content each day, the truth is that it takes a lot of time, energy, and effort to think of content to share and edit it to be ready for their feed. Influencer M explained this time-consuming process:

It is very, very time-consuming, you don't even realize it at first. In order to like build a community and build a following, it takes a lot of time and effort of like putting yourself out there and like, you have to like engage with like new accounts for an hour a day and like, engage with people like you follow for another hour of the day, and...coming up with the idea for a post, getting the picture, editing the picture, posting the picture, creating the caption. It's just, it's a lot. And then like stories are kind of... more important right now than posts, so like creating a storyline each and every day and like creating content for stories it's, it's a lot...I question all the time, like is it worth it...I have a family, I have a husband, I like don't want to take away from time with them either.

This quote illustrates the struggle to balance work life and family life. For influencer M, content posting is a full-time job. They describe the underestimated time it takes to build a community and to keep up with a content posting schedule as “overwhelming.”

Influencer J stated:

The algorithm has been kind of wacky lately I'm not sure if you're familiar with all of all of that, behind the scenes kind of thing um so it's, it's been a little discouraging because you know, a couple years ago, you know 80% of people that were following me saw my post and now it's maybe 10% of those people are seeing my posts, so I don't know what's going on on the back end but, but you know it's pretty frustrating because we put in a ton of work, and we don't see the results that we should be seeing even when we think that our content is really good you know we spend a lot of time.

This quote shows that not only do content creators spend a lot of time on photos, videos, and story posts, but the Instagram algorithm makes it so that less of their followers actually see their hard work. Influencer J explains that this is especially discouraging to them. A few other

participants described a similar situation where they spend a lot of time on creating content, they post it, and it does not come out the way they thought it would or it does not receive the attention they expected it to, which is discouraging to them. Influencer J continues by describing an example of this:

Mental health wise is the only thing, probably just because you know if you work so hard and a post and you're happy and proud of it, you go to post it and it's for a brand you know, a brand deal or a campaign and doesn't do that well.

This quote indicates that spending a lot of time on a post that does not receive a lot of attention even affects this participants' mental health. In contrast with influencer J and M, influencer H posts content on YouTube and Instagram while keeping a full-time job as a translator. They stated:

People just send me like kind messages or like just like respond to my stories and it just like makes me so happy and it makes me like think it's worth it's just like. Putting all that extra effort to like make those videos all the time because, like that's a lot of work for me and like sometimes I just really like would rather take a week off.

This quote shows that the kindness this participants' followers show them motivates them to post content even when it consumes a lot of their time. They also mentioned that they are motivated to create when they have more free time because their job takes up most of their day, Monday through Friday. These examples show that time is a significant sacrifice the influencers make. Content posting takes time away from family, free time, and other activities they might want to participate in.

### ***Mental Health***

Several participants mentioned content posting causing negative effects to their mental health in various ways. Influencer M described the struggle of comparing herself to others when she logically understands that it is unhealthy habit:

You're definitely like putting yourself out there for criticism... it can be like hard like comparing yourself to other people like if you have like the same followers and the same like, amount of followers and like you see somebody else doing better than you and then it's just like, hard. I think we all do it like, wondering like why you're not doing as well as them or you know it's kind of it's like negative...and like you can tell yourself all the time, like I know that's dumb I know that I shouldn't be doing that and it's still like something that we do...I know that that seems true across the board for like all of my friends in the industry.

Multiple influencers mentioned that they compare themselves to other people online as a main negative consequence of being a content creator. For example, influencer D stated:

It's hard to get past the mindset of like "oh it's me" or "oh like I'm not good enough I'm not doing enough, look at all these other people." I just try to not compare because at the end of the day, it's an app you know. Trends die, TikToks taking off and Instagram is dying so, you know, I just, I take everything with a grain of salt, but there are days definitely when I compare myself and I'm like well other people can post like a picture of their coffee and it takes off and if I did that it wouldn't.

Like the previous example, this quote shows that this participant is aware that comparing yourself to others is unhealthy and they should not do it. But in both quotes, it is evident that not falling into the trap of comparing themselves to others is a challenge that they constantly grapple with. Participants also described experiencing imposter syndrome, another psychological

detriment that comes from posting content. When asked if negative engagement affects their motivation to post content, influencer C explained:

Negative comments in my head do like imposter syndrome... I am one that like really compares myself to a lot of people, like if I post something really great and they post something somewhere and it does better, and then they get opportunities because of it, I always think of like what did I do wrong? Or, what could I have done differently? Like, was it the hashtags, was it the, something... so yeah it's not more negative comments from other people, but just negative comments in my head and dealing with imposter syndrome that's really the negative aspects of social media is just trying not to look at it like a numbers game, but just a way for you to let out your creativity.

Imposter syndrome is a situation where a person feels like they are not worthy of the success they are experiencing and they do not belong in the role they have found themselves in (Abrams, 2018). Influencer F, a musician who uses their platform to post lifestyle content while showing off their musical talent to network and connect with others, also mentioned feeling impacted by imposter syndrome. The above quote from influencer C shows how easy it is for creators to start picking apart their content and comparing it to someone else's when it does not perform the way they expected.

### ***Pressure***

Another common theme throughout responses with a negative tone was the mentioning of the immense pressure influencers feel to produce content or to be a certain way. For influencer N:

It's definitely like feeling like I need to upkeep a schedule, like if I want to be posting you know, every Sunday, for example, but I don't have something really special to share I

often feel like, pressure to come up with something. Or if I'm like not having a great day and I'm in kind of a bad mood that I have to be like, okay like psych yourself up, put on the face and be like "hey guys what's up" you know... like it's, yeah, the pressure to put something out, the pressure to always be positive when I'm not.

This quote shows that there is potential for influencers to feel pressured in multiple ways, including filming content that must be exceptionally interesting and filming when they genuinely do not feel in the mood to create. When wrapping up their thoughts about their platform, influencer N continued:

I have a love-hate relationship with it because I think it's one of the things that causes me the most anxiety in my life, but also the most joy.

This quote ties back to the previous theme, mental health, with its mentioning of the anxiety content posting creates. The "love-hate" battle seems to be common among influencers because they love the connections they make with others and appreciate the opportunities they are given but also struggle with these negative effects from it. Several participants also admitted that this pressure they feel is self-inflicted. Influencer D briefly described being affected by this internalized pressure:

The negatives are definitely the pressure that's involved with it, I would say it's mostly internal pressure.

This quote suggests that this intense pressure does not even come from the audience but from the participant creating it within themselves. This pressure might stem off of the tendency to compare themselves to others, as it seems to create internal pressure that causes them to experience imposter syndrome and other mental health effects. All of the examples of costs sacrificed by social media influencers seem to overlap with each other. They must sacrifice a lot

of their time to create content with an understanding that the time might be wasted if the post does not do well. When their post is not successful, they tend to compare themselves to others, which causes negative mental health consequences and internalized pressure.

### *Negative Comments*

When asked if negative comments affect their motivation to post content, most participants said they just brush it off and try not to let it bother them. However, three participants said it does affect their motivation. Influencer E explained that negative comments caused her to take a break from social media:

Yeah there was one time this fall, where I was just like. It never affected it too much that much to actually make me stop, but I was just like man I just need to close my laptop for like two days and not engage in YouTube and in any sense but yeah no nothing that would ever make me stop, and I think it's just because of all the positivity.

Influencer O felt similarly, and shared that negative comments make her question why she posts content:

Absolutely. Even if I remind myself that “their opinion doesn’t matter”, it doesn’t negate me questioning my self-worth. I do create and post content because ultimately, I enjoy the process or think the content will help others. But if I feel like it’s not helping others, or if someone leaves a negative comment, it does make me question why I’m doing it.

Influencer F shared a comparable situation to these two examples by explaining that sometimes negative comments give him pause and make him question why he is posting content. Negative comments are just one example of a cost exchanged from followers, but these examples show that they can have an impact on motivation. These three participants have significantly more followers than most of the rest on at least one platform (influencer E has 458K subscribers,

influencer F has 29.8K on TikTok, and influencer O has 66.3K subscribers), indicating that the larger the audience, the greater the effect negative comments have on the content creator.

**RQ4: From the influencer's perspective, what do they give to their audience by posting content?**

Inspiration was the most common social capital that participants mentioned being something they hope to give to their audience. Besides wanting to help and inspire others with their content, participants explained various benefits they hope their audience gets from following them. This includes friendship, advice, an escape, tips and tricks for various lifestyle related uses, a new perspective, relatability, and other bits of useful information. The most important of those benefits is friendship. Influencer J described her hope that her followers think of her as a friend:

I think I give them, and I think that most of mine are coming to me for like fashion advice, but they always will comment and say like I just love hanging out with you, watching your stories every day so just I you know you kind of feel like you give them a friend too.

Influencer C described similar sentiments by explaining that her content might help others combat loneliness:

I never want to give up on a chance of having a friendship that could be thousands of miles away, but if they're in quarantine sitting alone, not being able to talk to anyone, it's like an easy outlet for people to have communication with someone. So I love that.

These examples show that being there for their audience in a casual, friend-like way is important to them. The participants hope that the friendship they receive from their audience is reciprocated back to them. While not every participant specifically mentioned that they hope to

be a friend with their audience, the benefits they want to give to them are commonly exchanged between friends, like advice, relatability, and a new perspective.

**RQ5: Do costs and benefits exchanged between influencers and followers effect their motivation to post content?**

The short answer to research question 5 is yes, the costs and benefits exchanged between influencers does affect their motivation to post content. Social media influencers are motivated by having the platform itself as it provides a place for them to inspire and help their audience by being their authentic selves. The social connection and support received from participants' audience are two of the major factors that keep them motivated to post content. For example, Influencer O stated "that kind of support is so incredible and so motivating" when explaining how supportive comments make her feel. Participants spent most of the interview describing how much their audience means to them. However, while a majority of the responses were positive, the participants also explained the negative side that sometimes takes their motivation away. The time-consuming nature of the job, effects on mental health, and pressure to post content certainly weigh on the participants as each one of them had an experience stemming from at least one of those themes to share. It is clear that whether the exchange is of benefits or of costs, influencer motivations are affected by them.

### **Discussion**

The results indicate that the ability to have connections with strangers through content posting, comments, and direct messages created numerous benefits of social capital for influencers, but also several negative consequences to their mental health. It is evident that there are specific factors that motivate influencers to post content, including internal drives and factors received because of posting. Social media influencers want to inspire and help others, want to

post online when they are in the mood, and want to portray their authentic selves in front of their audience. They gain many benefits from posting content, including social connection, a place to showcase their creativity, and support. In addition to these positives, they also bear some costs for their engagement on social media, including sacrifice of time, emotional distress from negative comments and added pressure to keep up with their competitors. Each lifestyle influencer was given the chance to share their unique online experience, but these internal motivators, benefits, and costs dominated the interview responses as multiple participants reported similar factors.

The findings in this study are consistent with and expand upon the current research. The current studies that are related to this topic emphasize the importance of self-branding and relationship building online for social media influencers, which relates to the internal motivator participants mentioned with being authentic online, and the main benefit of social connection. They mentioned only showing products they truly enjoy using and only working with brands who share their values. The results are consistent with the work influencers put into being authentic online and only choosing to work with brands that align with their values. The findings from Audrezet et al (2020) that influencers enact passionate and transparent authenticity is reflected in multiple participants' responses, as most of them explained how important it is to them to only accept brand sponsorships from companies they honestly enjoy. The drive to be authentic is one of the main internal motivations found from responses in this study, so it is interesting that it directly reflects Audrezet et al's (2020) authenticity management findings.

The results also broaden the scope of Neal's (2017) study on fitness influencers. She only focused on Instagram and the fitness genre, so this study expands upon that by looking at lifestyle influencers, a broadened genre, on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. I found that many

participants did not start posting on their platforms to become famous or make a lot of money; the platforms started as passion projects, which Neal (2020) found with fitness influencers, too. Neal's participants also noticed less engagement on sponsored posts, which the interviewees in my study also mentioned. Though participants choose brands they truly like, when they post sponsored content, the post is not as popular as an organic post (Neal, 2017). This ties back to what a few participants in this study mentioned about working hard on content, posting it, and it not receiving a lot of engagement. This discourages them and leaves them feeling less motivated to post content, tying back to the costs associated with posting content online, but it seems to come with the territory of being an individual with an online platform.

The most important contribution of this research relates to the parasocial relationship, which ties to the social connection benefit that social media influencers receive from posting content. Again, Horton & Wohl (1956) named this phenomenon as an explanation for the one-sided, close bond fans feel to celebrities through traditional media, like television. It has been applied to the one-sided connection followers feel toward online celebrities recently (Bond, 2016). Participants in this study shared that they receive support and frequent engagement from their followers which is consistent with the current definition of a parasocial relationship. But most of the participants also explained that their followers feel like their friends or extended family members. This study expands upon the parasocial relationship by providing insights from influencer's perspective. The parasocial relationship can be viewed from the influencer's perspective because their followers are technically strangers, but they still feel that close connection with them. This is important to acknowledge because the social connection influencers create online is arguably the main motivator for them to create content.

In terms of contributions to social exchange theory, this research shows that the intangible benefits received from posting content, like social connection, friendship, and support, are more important than physical items exchanged. Social media influencers have opportunities to exchange physical items with their audience with product giveaways to followers and gifts sent to a PO box from followers. Some participants mentioned offering giveaways to their audience, but it was brief. They spent most of the interview focusing on how much they appreciate building their community and the privilege of having a platform to connect with others. The non-physical benefits received from being a content creator mean more to the participants in this study.

### **Limitations**

This study fills a gap in research by answering why social media influencers post content, but it does suffer from some limitations. First, this study only had 15 participants. This is a number high enough to find trends in responses and gather preliminary conclusions, but too low to apply findings to the experience of all social media influencers. Second, there was 1 participant who identified as male and the rest identified as female, so unfortunately, this study lacks gender representation. This study also lacks racial diversity as all participants are white. Next, this study focuses on the perspective of micro-influencers, so the results can only be used to reflect this influencer tier's experience. Though, there are a handful of limitations within this study, they provide direction for numerous future studies that can stem from this preliminary research.

### **Future Studies**

This study on influencer motivations represents just the beginning of what can be done with future research on the subject. One opportunity would be switching from in depth

interviews to surveys. Surveys can reach a larger number of participants, providing a more generalizable sample of results that will reflect the realities of social media influencers. Surveys might be more attractive to participate in than interviews, especially when targeting macro-influencers, because they take less time, effort, and are less invasive. It would be beneficial to explore mega-influencers with millions of followers on platforms because I predict that their online experience is vastly different from micro-influencers' experience. With three participants in this study who have slightly more followers than the others struggling with negative comments from their followers, it would be interesting to see how an influencer with millions of followers copes with the potential influx of negativity. Studies should be conducted on every tier of influencer (mega, macro, micro, and nano) so comparisons regarding what motivates them to post content can be made between them. It would also be interesting to study male social media influencers specifically to see if their motivations differ. Likewise, studies should be conducted on specific races to investigate differences in motivations.

Another opportunity is to continue studying social exchange theory on social media to see if exchanges of social benefits are more important than physical items to other groups of influencers. This would make this finding from this study more generalizable. Also, since self-branding is so important to an influencer's success, there is an opportunity to study this concept more specifically. Influencers consciously choose certain products and brands to work with because they align with their interests and values. A study can be conducted to show how influencers become experts on certain products or lifestyles that people will go to for advice or recommendations. My study shows that influencers indeed spend time consciously choosing brands to work with, and a study on self-branding and expertise will expand upon this idea by showing how audiences consciously choose influencers to follow for their expertise. Because

there are many types of influencers on numerous platforms, future research can build on my findings to analyze a variety of situations to continue to fill this gap in research.

### **Conclusion**

The benefits received by social media influencers from their audience motivate them to continue to post content even when it gets overwhelming. This study shows that as this trend of becoming a social media influencer grows, the human exchanges between them and their audience reveal that there are significant costs involved. Social media influencers choose to post positive content, making it look like the career or hobby is mostly positive. This is deceiving, and it is important to recognize these costs. It is crucial to understand that the exchange between social media influencers and their followers is not beneficial to both sides all the time.

While the results of this study show how much influencers appreciate the social capital provided by their platform, it is important to recognize that it is still a commercial space. Being a social media influencer comes with a constant tension and management of parasocial relationships, connections, and commercial interests. Influencers receive hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars per post, which certainly is a significant motivator. But they cannot fill their social media pages with only sponsored posts because that would threaten their authenticity and show that they are only posting for money, which would likely cause people to unfollow. Many influencer platforms may have started as passion projects without intention to receive monetary compensation, but it is important to acknowledge that as content creators grow their audience, their motivations may change, and their relationship with them may also change. The tension managed between fostering parasocial relationships and the commercial aspect is subjective to every influencer has their own individualized process and online experience.

By spending just a few minutes scrolling through an influencer's comments on a photo or video, you will see anything from comments complimenting them on their outfit to comments thanking the content creator for getting them through a rough time in their life. Social media influencers are online figures seen scrolling through platforms every single day, so they have a powerful voice and effect on consumers of their content. Clearly, influencer audiences feel a close bond with these strangers that open their lives to the world by posting about real life, hobbies, interests, and more. Influencers are integral figures in our society now as social media has become engrained into many facets of our lives. Defining what motivates them to post content is an important first step to further explore this choice to share one's life so personally online. Social media platforms are changing every single day. Some platforms are dying, some are just being created to take over as the next biggest platform. It will be interesting to examine future studies on influencers on different platforms within different genres to see how their motivations shift.

### References

- Abrams, A., (2018). Yes imposter syndrome is real. Here's how to deal with it. *Time*.  
<https://time.com/5312483/how-to-deal-with-impostor-syndrome/>
- Audrezet, A., Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J.G., (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*, Volume 117, pp. 557-569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>.
- Ballantine, P., & Martin, B., (2005). Forming parasocial relationships in online communities. *Advances in consumer research*. Association for Consumer Research (U.S.) 32(1). Retrieved from: [\(PDF\) Forming Parasocial Relationships in Online Communities \(researchgate.net\)](#)
- Babbie, E., (2020). The practice of social research. Cengage.
- Bailis, R. (2020). The State of Influencer Marketing: 10 Influencer marketing statistics to inform where you invest. *Big Commerce*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/influencer-marketing-statistics/#10-most-important-influencer-marketing-statistics-for-2020>
- Blau, P. (1964). Exchange and power in social life. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Branding: A Case Study of Lucie Fink. *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 8(2), 77-87.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bond, B.J. (2016), "Following Your 'Friend': Social Media and the Strength of Adolescents' Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(11), 656-60.
- Cherry, K., (2018). How social support contributes to psychological health. *Verywell Mind*.  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/social-support-for-psychological-health-41199700>
- Cook, K.S., & Rice, E. (2006). Chapter 3: Social exchange theory. Retrieved from: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/09d5/86df6b2fb0ee7ce5de0fefc27293c25e9988.pdf?ga=2.177197665.573616439.1574821424-1121229628.1574821424>
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L.A., (2010). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001

- Heming, L. (2020). Can I trust you @influencer? Reasons why followers build a trusted relationship with influencers (*Master's thesis*). Retrieved from: [http://essay.utwente.nl/81287/1/Heming\\_MA\\_BMS.pdf](http://essay.utwente.nl/81287/1/Heming_MA_BMS.pdf)
- Homans, G. (1958). Social Behavior as Exchange. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(6), 597-606. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2772990>
- Homans, G. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace and Company.
- Hopper, T., Fu, H., Sanford, K., & Hinkel, T. (2021). YouTube for transcribing and Google drive for collaborative coding: Cost-effective tools for collecting and analyzing interview data. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(3), 861-873. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4639>
- Horton, D. & Wohl, R. (1956) Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction, *Psychiatry*, 19:3, 215-229, DOI: 10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049
- Glucksman, M. (2017). The Rise of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Lifestyle Branding: A Case Study of Lucie Fink. *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 8(2), 77-87.
- Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers. *Computers in Human behavior*. 87, 155-173.
- Jin, S.V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*. 37(5), pp. 567-579. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2018-0375>
- Kim D.Y. & Kim, H.Y. (2020). Influencer advertising on social media: The multiple inference model on influencer-product congruence and sponsorship disclosure, *Journal of Business Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.02.020>.
- Leban, M., Thomsen, T.U., von Wallpach, S., & Voyer, B.G., (2020). Constructing Personas: How High-Net-Worth Social Media Influencers Reconcile Ethicality and Living a Luxury Lifestyle. *J Bus Ethics* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04485-6>
- McKnight, D., Choudhury, V., & Kacmar, C. (2002). The impact of initial consumer trust on intentions to transact with a web site: a trust building model. *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 11(3-4), 297-323. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0963-8687\(02\)00020-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0963-8687(02)00020-3)
- Neal, M. (2017). Instagram influencers: The effects of sponsorship on follower engagement with fitness instagram celebrities (Order No. 10689330). *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*. (2014469958). Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/2014469958?accountid=108>

- Nguyen, M., Bin, Y., & Campbell, A. (2012). Comparing online and offline self-disclosure: A systematic review. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 103-111. doi:10.1089/cyber.2011.0277
- Nunkoo, R., & Ramkissoon, H., (2012). Power, trust, social exchange and community support, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Volume 39, Issue 2, pp. 997-1023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.11.017>
- Oppenheim, M. (2016). New data reveals people trust social media influencers almost as much as their own friends. *Independent*. Retrieved from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/new-data-reveals-people-trust-social-media-influencers-almost-much-their-own-friends-a7026941.html>
- Schouten, A.P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020) Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: the role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39:2, 258-281, DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898
- Seeler, S., Lück, M., & Schänzel, H.A., (2019). Exploring the drivers behind experience accumulation – The role of secondary experiences consumed through the eyes of social media influencers, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Volume 41, pp. 80-89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.09.009>.
- Shiau, W.L. & Luo, M.M., (2012). Factors affecting online group buying intention and satisfaction: A social exchange theory perspective, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 28, Issue 6, pp.2431-2444. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.030>
- Surma, J., (2016). Social exchange in online social networks: the reciprocity phenomenon on Facebook, *Computer Communications*, Volume 73, Part B, pp. 342-346. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comcom.2015.06.017>.
- Tsai, J.C., & Kang, T.C., (2019). Reciprocal intention in knowledge seeking: Examining social exchange theory in an online professional community, *International Journal of Information Management*, Volume 48, pp. 161-174, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.02.008>
- Wang, Y., Min, Q., & Shengnan, H. (2016). Understanding the effects of trust and risk on individual behavior toward social media platforms: A meta-analysis of the empirical evidence. *Computers in Human Behavior*. Volume 56, pp.34-44.
- What is an influencer? (2020). In *Influencer Marketing Hub*. Retrieved from: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>
- YouTube by the numbers: Stats, demographics & fun facts (2020). *Omnicores*. Retrieved from: <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/youtube-statistics/>