

**Inside the Influence:
A tri-entry point encounter with
social media influencing**

**by
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Abstract

This thesis engages with the practice of social media influencing. Conscious of social media's perpetual progression, this thesis serves as a snapshot of the field laden with dialectical tension arising from the value of social media influencing and the societal implications. Through survey and synthesis of various streams of Communication theory literature and mainstream texts, an argument for the paradoxical nature of social media influencing is made. By closely attending to cases of social media influencing where scandal and failure are present, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which social media influencing is both an inescapable part of contemporary market society and a fundamentally paradoxical communicational practice.

Keywords: Social media; Social media influencer; Social media influencing; Public relations; PR; Marketing

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Introduction

“Instagram is the Coca-Cola of influencer marketing, and it isn’t going anywhere.”

- Hennessy, 2018, p. 26

With Instagram analogous to Coca-Cola, and social media as ubiquitous as soft drinks, this thesis acknowledges the depth and complexity of social media and social media influencing and its embeddedness and integration in society by engaging with the dynamic, perpetually progressing, and proliferating industry through a multi-dimensional and multi-modal tri-entry point approach. Endeavouring to unpack the often dismissed and discredited profession of social media influencing, this study offers a vertical and horizontal examination of the modern phenomenon—developing a deeper understanding and awareness of the dominant field.

To begin, a survey and synthesis of the framing of social media influencing in mainstream literature is conducted, followed by a detailed review of key social media influencing elements, both of which are informed by a tripartite of popular texts. This preliminary encounter provides the framework for Chapter 1: “Influencer Instruments”.

Chapter 2, “Warm Doesn’t Conform,” offers a return to classic communications theory and literature by applying a historical, theoretical lens to the practice and profession. Social media is examined within the context of Marshall McLuhan’s influential 1964 hot and cool media percept, relying on social media influencing elements to demonstrate the hybridity of hot *and* cool media that social media presents. The chapter suggests that the multimedia can be most accurately categorized as ‘warm’ when considered within the parameters of McLuhan’s thinking, building a case for the modernization and expansion of the basic binary to encompass the leading media communication technology. Also reviewed is how the hybrid of hot and cool media, and available media elements, affect and inform influencer tactics.

To complete this multi-entry point study of social media and social media influencing, Chapter 3, “Social Media is an Ampli(fyre),” critically engages with the profession via case study analyses. This chapter further reveals the embeddedness and integration of social media in society and the overlap between the online and the offline

by investigating the implications and ramifications of social media-based scandal and failure.

Rephrasing the above, in keeping with the multidimensionality of social media influencing, this thesis presents three main arguments. First, through survey and synthesis of popular texts, Chapter 1 argues that social media influencing is more nuanced than the common labels “fluffy”, “easy”, and “fake” suggest. Second, by considering social media influencing within a historical theoretical context, although vague and challenging to identify at times, I suggest that historical theory is still relevant and applicable when examining modern practices and developments. Finally, through case study analyses of social media influencing scandals and failures, an argument is made for the embeddedness of social media influencing in modern society, and its impacts and implications. It is through these three, separate encounters with social media influencing, and distinct arguments related to the growing practice, that this piece offers insight into its influence.

While this is an academic piece, it is purposefully peppered with anecdotes, literary techniques, and verbiage from the field under study; as one cannot write about popular culture without drawing, from time to time, on the very discourse one seeks to analyze.

Chapter I.

Influencer Instruments

How does an influencer develop authentic and genuine relationships through a media that is fundamentally perceived as inauthentic?

Introduction

Fluffy. Fake. Easy. Mindless. These popular perceptions of social media influencing cause the leading form of modern-day marketing to be frequently dismissed and discredited. “Tragically misunderstood” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 11), this paradox of discrediting a dominant practice is the underlying theme for this introductory chapter. Via survey and synthesis of a tripartite of bestselling social media influencer texts, this chapter endeavours to get the fluffy stuff out of the way, and present social media influencing as more than the “dirty word” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 11) it has become.

To accomplish this, a two-fold approach is adopted. First, the common framing and presentation of social media influencing in mainstream literature is gathered, with consideration for impacts and implications. Second, key elements of social media influencing are explored and unpacked to reveal dominant themes and tropes, recommended practices, successful strategies, and suggested tools and tactics.

This approach aims to offer a comprehensive picture of the complex, perpetually progressing, content-driven, and oversaturated ubiquitous modern phenomenon turned multibillion dollar industry; one which thrives as an elusive, yet seemingly attainable, and highly sought-after practice and profession. Such persistent interest and intrigue drive the ongoing production of literature on the topic.

The survey and subsequent synthesis are based on three mainstream social media influencing texts: (1) *Influencer: Building Your Personal Brand in the Age of Social Media* (2018) by Brittany Hennessy; (2) *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (2013) by Jonah Berger; and (3) the 2020 updated version of *One Million Followers: How I Built a Massive Social Following in 30 Days*, by Brendan Kane.

Engaging with these three popular texts is not designed as a critical analysis. Rather, I approach each work at face value—for what they are—i.e., as an account of how to become a (successful) social media influencer. These texts, and the survey- and synthesis-style approach used supports greater understanding and awareness of where popular perceptions of social media influencing originate via consideration of common framing, techniques, and key elements; an opportunity to further engage with the very literature perpetuating social media influencing as a simple “how to”.

Prior to extracting and examining (1) the dominant framing/presentation of social media influencing in mainstream literature, and (2) the key elements of social media influencing, I want to explain why I settled on these particular texts, and how they collectively provide a representative sample of the broader media landscape.

Text Selection and Author Clout

Why were these texts selected and what gives these authors clout? In addition to their texts, each author is also an industry professional with primary experience, and together, they offer a diverse range of expertise.

As “senior director of influencer strategy + talent partnerships at Hearst Magazines Digital Media” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 7), Brittany Hennessy “cast[s] influencers to star in co-branded campaigns for the digital versions of *Seventeen*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Redbook*, *Esquire*, and more” (Hennessy, 2017, p. 7). She elaborates on her knowledge of the industry and digital literacy:

That means it’s my job to know the universe of influencers: understand their followings and engagement; recognize their aesthetic and tone of voice; be aware of who their agents are; and—and this is really important—know how easy (or not) they are to work with on a deadline. (2018, p. 7)

Approaching the topic from an influencer-first perspective, Hennessy’s 2018 book, *Influencer: Building Your Personal Brand in the Age of Social Media*, details self-branding for social media and the steps involved in successful social media influencing. Replete with both first-hand and popular examples, Hennessy’s book outlines core stages involved in a typical, successful social media influencer life cycle, starting from less than 2,500 Instagram followers to securing long-term, multi-annual partnerships.

Complete with tips, insights, stories, profile segments, and email/messaging templates, Hennessy promises: “By the end of this book you’ll have all the tools you need to create a brand for yourself, your child, your dog, or even your badass grandma” (2018, p. 10). Motivated by the mantra “Why not me?”, Hennessy’s book, in her words, “explains how this whole influencer marketing thing works because people are out here acting like they have no idea what’s going on” (2018, p. 155).

As the title of his 2013 New York Times best seller suggests, Jonah Berger’s book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* “explains what makes content contagious” (p. 22). An academic with a PhD in Marketing and more than a decade of work experience as a marketing professor at The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, Berger writes from an advertising perspective, presenting six principles of contagiousness: social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value, and stories, which he represents with the acronym STEPPS. Like Hennessy’s book, Berger’s text is

designed for people who want their products, ideas, and behaviors to spread . . . this book will help you understand how to make your products and ideas more contagious. It provides a framework and a set of specific, actionable techniques for helping information spread—for engineering stories, messages, advertisements, and information so that people will share them. (2013, p. 25)

His work is propelled by the elusive question: “Why do some products, ideas, and behaviors succeed when others fail?” (Berger, 2013, p. 9)

The title of Brendan Kane’s book, *One Million Followers: How I Built a Massive Social Following in 30 Days*, is indicative of its premise. The 2020 updated edition outlines the systems, strategies, tools, and tactics he leveraged to garner one million followers in 30 days. Acknowledging the “fluff” that clouds the social media influencer industry, he writes:

Unfortunately, many . . . are filled with fluff advice like ‘Be genuine’ or ‘Be interesting.’ While those clichés may be true, they don’t tell you how to do so. You’re left needing a system that gives you the tools to discover how to be and do that yourself. That is precisely what I will share with you in this book. (Kane, 2020, p. 33)

Kane brings “more than 15 years’ experience as a digital and business strategist for celebrities, brands, and Fortune 500 corporations” (2020, p. 24), working with such

celebrity clients as Taylor Swift, Rihanna, supermodel Adriana Lima, pro skateboarder Ryan Sheckler, and popular brands including: Disney, Fox, NBC, Netflix, Xbox, and LinkedIn among others (Kane, 2020, p. 239). Unlike Hennessy and Berger, however, Kane writes with a primary focus on paid advertising, as he believes:

regardless of how good your content is, it's essential to amplify it with paid media . . . No matter how shareable a piece of content is, you have to use paid push. There's just too much noise and clutter out there. You have to boost your posts and pay to ignite them. (Kane, 2020, p. 94)

Further distinguishing his work from the other two popular texts discussed here, Kane stresses the value of A/B testing, and the learning, adaptation, and retargeting and remarketing processes that follow. His emphasis on the necessity of paid advertising efforts underscores the overabundance of online content. However, in parallel with the design of Hennessy's book, with a focus on building a following, Kane shares his "strategies, mindsets, and processes" (2020, p. 85), peppering each chapter with checklists, case studies, sample messages/templates, and associated analyses, concluding each chapter with a "Quick Tips and Recap" section.

Framing and Presenting the Practice

"How-to"

Together, these three texts represent the broader field of literature on social media influencing. With a consistent discourse, these works reveal a common stylistic approach to writing about social media influencing by framing the practice and profession as an attainable "how-to." Positing social media influencing as a "how-to" is indicative of society's perception of the profession as simplistic, an accessible and learnable step-by-step process, which in turn, feeds the easy and effortless, fluffy and fake labels the professional practice often endures. Such "how-to" framing suggests social media influencing can be reduced to a basic linear process by disregarding the intricacies and complexities of the dynamic field and viable long-term career. This simplification and rudimentary framing of social media influencing does not account for the hard work, dedication, discipline, trial and error, and persistence required to merely have a chance of succeeding within the competitive, complex, oversaturated, and ever-evolving market.

Recognizing the salience of this “how-to” approach, T. Bettina Cornwell and Helen Katz actively adopted an alternative angle when writing their 2021 book *Influencer: The Science Behind Swaying Others*. The coauthors

[dive] deeper than the many ‘how-to’ books on the influencer phenomenon . . . bring[ing] in frameworks from marketing, sociology, psychology, and communication studies to redefine the influencer as a persona . . . that possesses greater than average sway over others . . . serv[ing] both those who want to understand the science behind influencer marketing and those who want to most effectively employ influencers in brand strategy. (Cornwell & Katz, 2021, p. 3)

Their analysis and introspection of the industry, profession, and practice is noteworthy. The example-based design of each text, including Cornwell’s and Katz’s, surfaces as an additional sub-trend. Given the relatively new and dynamic nature of the discipline where prior cases are often precedent-setting, such heavy reliance on examples is understandable.

Summary of Approaches

Beyond exposing the dominant “how-to” style and example-based design of social media influencing texts, these seminal bodies of work also illustrate the cyclicity of the industry as well as the embeddedness of social media influencing in modern society. With this, a myriad of recurring elements emerges. A review of these popular elements forms the framework for the remainder of this chapter’s unpacking of the industry and practice.

This survey and synthesis also serves as a primer on social media influencing—providing baseline knowledge, while also informing subsequent chapters. To begin, the practice and profession of social media influencing must first be defined and expanded upon.

What are Social Media Influencers?

As Hennessy concisely states: “In general, an influencer is someone who has influence” (2018, p. 11). She goes on to explain:

But in today's digital world, the word 'influencer' is most commonly ascribed to someone who has clout through her digital channels, or as some like to call it, 'social currency.' Whether she has a lot of followers or really high engagement, when she speaks, her audience listens, they act, and—most importantly to brands—they buy. (2018, p. 11)

This explanation of social media influencing offered by Hennessy reveals essential elements of the practice including social currency, follower count, engagement rate, and audience.

Further, Hennessy notes: “When an influencer posts content, her audience listens to what she has to say, and they trust her, even if that content is sponsored. This is the main reason advertisers hire influencers: They want access to their audience” (2018, p. 42). Her observation is worthy of unpacking insofar as it highlights three critical factors. Firstly, Hennessy's statement acknowledges essential virtues of trust and reliability—increasingly challenging to establish in today's oversaturated mediascape, and therefore all the more important. Secondly, solidifying the value of these virtues, as she touches on advertisers' strategic leveraging of influencers' existing relationships; and thirdly, recognizing the significant societal power and influence influencers wield. It is worth noting that the trust and reliability (ethos) that audiences perceive the influencer to have do not stem from such traditional sources of credibility as education, family background, moral status, etc. For influencers, ethos as a mark of credibility is derived primarily from metrics (i.e., follower count/audience size).

Underscoring the power of influencers, Kane, in the updated edition of his book, *One Million Followers*, deems social media influencers “bigger than mainstream celebrities” (2020, p. 23), while Hennessy continues: “There are many full-time influencers with 100,000 followers who are making good money doing something they love, making us all jealous in the process” (2018, p. 8). Hennessy's statement also indirectly references the fluffy and fake labels social media influencers regularly encounter, describing some influencers as “portray[ing] a lifestyle and a dream that others may never experience” (Kane, 2020, p. 81), and promoting “unrealistic expectations” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 40).

Social Media Influencing is Hard Work!

Despite the criticism aimed at social media influencing, these fabricated and finessed, timed and tested “realities” shared to social media are no easy task; establishing and maintaining one’s brand is constant hard work. This theme of dedication and persistence is raised in all three popular texts examined herein. Seemingly easy, fun, and carefree at the outset, Hennessy warns: “Be prepared to work your *** off at any time” (2018, p. 85), while Kane explains:

the greatest influencers work hard. As easy as it is for people to diminish what influencers do, the reality is that they’re good at what they do—there’s something about them that people want to watch. They consistently post content and put themselves out there, adapting with the times . . . this is valuable, and worthy of respect. (2020, p. 190)

With this, Hennessy cautions against universal claims of “fluffy”, easy, and the belief that “anyone can do it.” Leaning on her primary experience, she explains that “people don’t realize the amount of brainstorming and effort that goes on behind each post” (2018, p. 43).

The “hard work” of social media influencing stems from the always-on nature of the industry. There is a constant demand for content creation; the field is volatile, unpredictable, and precarious, while the perpetual progression of social media platforms and technological developments requires ongoing flexibility and adaptability. This, coupled with the inexplicability of elements such as virality and algorithms; factors of authenticity, relatability, relationship development, and community building; and challenges associated with mediated trust and connection makes social media influencing anything but “easy”, prompting us to reconsider and re-evaluate social media influencing as fluffy, fake, easy, and mindless. Moreover, to counter these undesirable tropes, clearly and consistently demonstrating qualities of authenticity, relatability, reliability, trust, and genuine connection must remain at the forefront of all content production and mediated communication social media influencers produce and engage in. Now, this does not mean that social media influencing can easily shed the label of “fluffy” or “fake” simply because of the hard work the profession requires—a social practice that requires work can still be relatively mindless. In other words, just because one puts in effort does not enable that work to transcend objections. Social media

influencing is hard work, and making it look easy is part of the allure, however, one must recognize that hard work does not guarantee universal acceptance.

As jealousy-inducing as influencer content may be, social media users routinely return for more—as mentioned, “there’s something about them that people want to watch” (Kane, 2020, p. 190). This unwavering interest, intrigue, and attention fuels the flourishing industry and its cyclicity, with average citizens living vicariously through Instagram influencers’ embellished and picture-perfect daily lives.

Adjacent to this is the precarity of social media influencing itself. Social media influencers are constantly confronted with the challenge of creating alluring, desirable content, while ensuring it is engaging and relatable, and evinces a sense of attainability. Maintaining this delicate balance between achievable and unachievable is paramount for successful social media influencing. Themes of relatability, connection, and audience understanding surface here, as well as the omnipresence of content creation and the vitality of valuable content.

Elements of Social Media Influencing

With the dominant framing and presentation of social media influencing in mainstream literature established, and an understanding of the means by which it is commonly communicated, I want to shift my focus to the second part of this chapter’s survey and synthesis: key elements of the proliferating practice. With each element discussed, there is a presupposition; the authors are relying on their audience(s) to have a baseline understanding. Among the three texts, there are numerous terms that assume prior knowledge. Such lexicons of everyday life, jargon, and social media/marketing-specific terms will be referenced throughout this chapter, however, each will not be thoroughly defined; like the authors, this examination assumes engagement from readers with a presupposition.

The three authors present consistent elements, strategies, and advice that can be broadly categorized into five general areas: key qualities and characteristics; growing an audience, following, and community; content; emotion and emotional response; and other independent factors for consideration, each of which, and their supporting sub-elements, will be synthesized below. Taken together, the paramount role of content; the

aspiration to grow one's audience base, following, and community; actively demonstrating characteristics of authenticity, genuineness, and relatability; and the associated underlying dialectical tension are revealed as core trends, guiding themes, and recurrent patterns. Dialectical tension refers to the need (i.e., societal pressure) to be "this" *and* "that" simultaneously—acknowledging the contradictions in everyday life and the in flux nature of society. For the purposes of this thesis, I am treating "paradox" and "dialectical tension" as equivalent expressions.

As in many professional practices, authenticity, trust, and relationship building are non-negotiables. Emphasizing the value of these qualities, Hennessy, Berger, and Kane each speak to these interrelated elements.

Authenticity

Classifying authenticity as the backbone of successful content creation and social media influencing, Hennessy equates the essential quality with "ammunition—without it, you might as well give up" (2018, p. 33). She further suggests that "a good influencer . . . would never promote something she wouldn't organically share even if she's being paid by a brand" (2018, p. 12). Authenticity fosters trust and brand loyalty (Kane, 2020, p. 26); it is key to cultivating, expanding, and maintaining a dedicated audience but more importantly, an engaged audience, insofar as one is "more likely to take action when they feel an authentic connection" (Kane, 2020, p. 53). And seeing that action (i.e., engagement) is a key performance indicator (KPI) within social media influencing, such authenticity is absolutely critical.

KPIs

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are a quantitative method for measuring social media influencer performance. Examples of social media influencing KPIs include following/follower count and engagement/engagement rate, both of which are raised by all three authors. Hennessy recognizes:

In today's version of show business, the business part is happening online. You may not love the idea that your follower count may be seen as more important than your actual skills, but you need to adapt, because those who don't adapt won't make it very far. (2018, p. 14)

Kane shares a similar sentiment, explaining: “Social media numbers are becoming increasingly important and can have a huge effect on your ability to get in the door and build crucial partnerships” (2020, p. 31). Furthermore, Kane notes: “social media numbers aren’t just desirable for individuals—they apply to brands as well” (2020, p. 31). There is an element of irony here, however: as career-defining as KPIs are for both influencers and brands, they are equally arbitrary in that they are (a) relatively easy to fake and inflate, and (b) in constant flux.

Like the industry and its technology, KPI metrics, calculations, and tracking techniques are ever-evolving—continually recalibrated and reconfigured due to the progressive ethos of social media. All the while, influencers’ livelihoods are acutely dependent on these arbitrary metrics and calculations—highlighting the dynamism, unpredictability, volatility, and precarity of the industry and associated challenge it presents—further distancing the practice from the lighthearted labels, while also alluding to the underlying theme of perpetual progression.

This review of KPIs in conjunction with the host of elements to consider when creating content (discussed below) illustrate a consistent presumption on the part of each author: the more followers the better—that “a lot” of followers is “good”, and that “a lot” of followers is the goal—the underlying motivator. But what is “a lot” of followers? For a micro-influencer, 100,000 followers are “a lot”, but for Donald Trump who boasts over 87.3 million followers on Twitter (“X”) at the time of this writing, 100,000 followers are negligible. So, what does “a lot” of followers mean? What does it represent? Trump has what many would consider “a lot” of followers—so what? Is this arbitrary, quantifiable metric enough (on its own) to demonstrate one’s worth and define one’s status? Is this KPI all that modern society cares about? Is follower count alone representative of one’s true self? Does the single numeric value offer a comprehensive representation of one’s brand and one’s persona? Regardless of the answers, amassing a sizable following is a common goal; and sustaining, nurturing, and growing one’s following is at the core of social media and social media influencing—a key recurrent theme shared by all three texts synthesized herein.

Two-Way Communication

Expanding on the relationality among authenticity, engagement, and connection, Kane introduces the element of two-way communication. This unique, multidirectional interplay between producer and consumer is a defining feature of the new media communication technology, and a vital tool for expressing authenticity. Given the dependent relationship between two-way communication and authenticity, engagement, and connection, influencers must actively and strategically leverage the multidirectionality of social media.

Acknowledging this interrelationality, Kane explains: “Follow your gut and be authentic. Social media is a two-way conversation. When you’re genuine and connected to yourself, it’s easier for others to connect with you” (2020, p. 67). Actively and consciously providing opportunities for others to connect—presenting as approachable and relatable, and reciprocating engagement, while maintaining the discernible characteristic allure of the influencer further illustrates the complexity of the profession. In addition to the interrelatedness of social media influencing elements, Kane’s explanation again underscores the necessity of authenticity, engagement, and connection for success, as well as the multifactorial nature of the industry. Authenticity, for example, (which can be demonstrated through two-way communication) supports the development of genuine relationships, fosters trust, and facilitates community development.

Relationships and Connection

Kane claims: “Social media is all about building relationships” (2020, p. 56), and thus suggests keeping what a “good relationship” looks like top-of-mind when creating content (2020, p. 56). His recommendation reinforces the interrelationality between social media influencing elements—in this case, the dependent relationship between content and connection.

Underlining the value of relationships within social media influencing, Kane concludes: “Building a million followers doesn’t mean anything if you don’t establish a relationship and a connection with them” (2020, p. 211). So how does an influencer develop authentic and genuine relationships through a media that is fundamentally

perceived as inauthentic? In response, Kane returns to the KPI of engagement and the two-way communication affordances of social media, suggesting strategic use of these elements to demonstrate one's authenticity and forge relationships. The interwovenness and cyclical relationships between social media influencing elements are again evident—as authentic relationships (which can be developed through two-way communication as previously established) should ideally inspire future two-way communication—thereby strengthening relationships while also indicating one's authenticity.

Beyond supporting (the development of) an engaged and active audience, and advancing the hard work of social media influencing, building genuine, authentic connections and developing long-term, sustainable relationships supports the establishment and maintenance of one's online community. This focus on longevity can be used to introduce the marathon mindset.

Marathon Mindset

In each of the three texts I am examining, the authors point to the fact that social media influencing is a marathon, not a sprint, and requires a critical shift in mindset. The focus on longevity also cements the “hard work” of social media influencing. The marathon mindset acknowledges that “[b]uilding your following takes time, effort, and money” (Kane, 2020, p. 104)—a critical reminder when speaking lightly about the practice. The marathon mindset also coincides with the in-flux nature of the industry; focusing on the long-term enables one to work with, rather than against, the precarity and unpredictability of the field.

Kane discusses the marathon of social media influencing chiefly in terms of staying power as this is “achieved through maintaining a strong relationship with your audience” (2020, p. 211). This leads him to return to aforementioned themes of authenticity, trust, two-way communication, and connection, again exhibiting the interrelationality of social media influencing elements.

Presenting social media influencing as a marathon, not a sprint, demonstrates the development and evolution of the practice into a legitimate and sustainable modern-day profession.

Brand

In a consumer-driven, consumption-oriented virtual environment, where new content and the “next best” is in constant demand, establishing and maintaining a brand is pivotal. Personalized and distinguishable, a brand is “who you are” (Kane, 2020, p. 208), it presents a tangible and comprehensible expression of the self, and ideally resonates with both viewers and companies. A strong brand fosters trust—it is “a story of who [you] are” (Kane, 2020, p. 208). Inherently authentic, one’s brand embodies and portrays their values and motivations (Kane, 2020). Brand intrinsically denotes permanence and longevity—a sense of staying power—aligning with the concept of the marathon mindset and displaying further interrelation among social media influencing elements. A successful brand is trustworthy, genuine, and authentic—critical qualities in today’s oversaturated mediascape where content is cyclically consumed and disposed, within an increasingly compressed timeline. As evidenced here, Kane has an ontological conceptualization of brand, whereas Hennessy brings a topographical perspective to the concept; she believes brand success relies on back-end work—your “digital house”. An indication of preparedness, ensuring “your digital house is in order” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 74), involves self-branding, building and establishing your brand, and setting yourself up for success (described below). Profile maintenance and capacity building is central to this, i.e., you want to “dominate your search results” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 18) insofar as when your name is Googled, “[a]ll the content on the first page should either be created by you, or provided by you” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 18).

Like his “Chapter 0: The Million Followers Mindset” suggests, Kane recommends one “start at zero . . . working on yourself before you build your following” (2020, p. 36). He believes the right mindset is critical to social media success. Following mindset are three key steps by which Kane claims he achieved one million followers: “hypothesize, test, and pivot” (2020, p. 38). The basis of his methodology, Kane explains that the success of this series of steps is directly based on mindset. Mindset complements Hennessy’s recommendation “to make sure your digital house is in order” (2018, p. 74). The extent to which one is able to set themselves up for success (both mentally and physically) ultimately dictates the future of their brand, content, and endeavour as a social media influencer. If one’s digital house forms the physical infrastructure, mindset composes the psychological infrastructure.

Brand, however, is a fairly conservative concept—it places one in a restricted box, metaphorically speaking—suggesting they must behave within the parameters of this self-defined box (i.e., brand). This surfaces the deep dialectical tension within the concept of brand. Firstly, branding has two meanings: (1) branding the product, and (2) branding the self. How, and in what ways are people encouraged to brand the self? Through their content? Their partnerships and collaborations? Through their recommendations, social alliances, and digital house? Secondly, further dialectical tension within the concept of brand stems from the idea that brand should be both consistent and recognizable, yet dynamic, active, and relevant—adapting and changing with the times. This demand to be both at the same time, i.e., consistent while avoiding stasis, is controversial and not easily achieved; yet, social media and social media influencing, as challenging as it is, appears simple and easy—a further layer of dialectical tension—i.e., to be “this” *and* “that” simultaneously.

Digital House

A digital representation of oneself and one’s brand, “digital house” involves a comprehensive, easy to navigate, and accessible personal website; consistent and recognizable social media account handles; a media/press kit and one-sheet; search result curation; hyperlink maintenance; and more. This may seem rudimentary within the context of social media influencing, however, ensuring such personal digital marketing assets are “in order” forms the foundation of one’s social presence and demonstrates one’s preparedness. Based on her experience as a “senior director of influencer strategy + talent partnerships”, Hennessy offers the following guidance:

it’s really important that your site is top-notch. When someone is casting for a campaign, the pages of your site are where they are going to find all the information that makes them want to hire you. Three simple pages can be the difference between getting hired and getting passed over. (2018, p. 74)

Somewhat in line with the nature of the industry itself, much of the language these authors use is vague and ambiguous. A “top-notch” site sounds good, desirable, and impactful, but how does one define “top-notch”? And, furthermore, what is considered “top-notch” to one may not align with another’s understanding of “top-notch”. Is a “top-notch” site elaborate, or minimal?

As Hennessy notes, establishing and maintaining one's digital house directly impacts the success of other core influencer elements including brand/branding, authenticity, connection, relationship building, networking, and collaborations and partnerships. Upkeep of one's digital house (brand) also supports relevancy. Remaining relevant in a dynamic and oversaturated virtual environment is increasingly challenging, and therefore all the more imperative for success, punctuating the hard work of the practice.

In keeping with the marathon mindset, ideally, a brand remains relevant long-term—growing, developing, pivoting, and adapting with both the influencer and industry advancements. Conversely however, social media content is short-lived and increasingly temporary—consumed en masse—in a passive, cyclical style due to overload. It is thus “important to build a brand around you—that way you mean more than simply the content you create right now” (Kane, 2020, p. 210). With content consumption patterns continuing to evolve in contrast to social media influencer goals of longevity, establishing an organized digital house, and ensuring its maintenance is essential in the ongoing quest to remain relevant and top-of-mind.

Returning to Brand

Revisiting the larger theme of brand, underlining its importance and role as a conduit for communicating one's “why”, a brand name must be “easy to promote” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 19) and ideally consistent across all accounts. Such uniformity is pivotal in an oversaturated environment and helps establish brand credibility and recognizability. Here however, Hennessy advances two somewhat contradictory recommendations: she encourages only creating accounts on the social platforms you plan to actively use and update regularly—referencing her first-hand experience by explaining: “nothing is worse than finding a great influencer on a platform only to find out she hasn't posted anything new in three months” (2018, p. 20). However, Hennessy also suggests “everyone should have an account on the big four: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube” (2018, p. 20). Kane similarly encourages a multi-channel approach insofar as it generates multiple engagement streams for the content creator. As an aside to Hennessy's discrepant advice, it is worth noting the absence of TikTok on her list. The non-existence of TikTok at the time of publication (2018) exemplifies the perpetual progression of the industry and the sheer pace of its ongoing development.

This underscores the cruciality of relevancy, adaptability, and active consideration for the dynamism of the industry, while again affirming the “hard work” necessary for social media success. Brand is a foundational element of this “hard work”—building connections, cultivating community, establishing long-term relationships, and advancing authenticity. Without a cohesive brand, one is merely creating superfluous, disconnected pieces of content.

Cultivating Community

Community is cultivated through a myriad of factors. Establishing a trusting, engaged, and loyal community is based on a series of connections and relationships. Community “is different, and more important, than a following” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 24); it is a safe space heavily reliant on elements of trust and authenticity, foregrounding the interrelationality of elements. In keeping with the example-first approach commonly employed when writing about social media influencing, while further demonstrating the codependencies among core concepts, Kane refers to his work with Taylor Swift, recounting how she used Myspace to “[foster] a one-to-one connection with fans because she intuitively understood that this would accelerate her brand reach” (Kane, 2020, p. 25). To achieve this, Swift leveraged the two-way communication capabilities of social media, genuinely and authentically, to connect with her audience and, as a byproduct, cultivate her community. This resurfaces the multi-directional design of social media and illustrates its power when used purposefully.

Kane also highlights the importance of A/B testing and user data. Such metrics are a direct reflection of audience response to content. A key tactic in his own success, user analytics are, to a great extent, readily accessible in-app to the content creator; overlooking this available data is a disservice. Expanding on the value of data and user metrics, Kane emphasizes the importance of “actually learn[ing] from the results” (2020, p. 141); such comprehension and understanding supports growth and adaptation. Although not often shared publicly, “[t]esting is a huge part of the culture” (Kane, 2020, p. 141), and for Kane it proved pivotal in achieving success. Testing provides real-time data, results which can (and should) be used to inform future actions. Striving for success in an industry in constant flux requires agility and flexibility. As Kane says, “you have to constantly shift . . . You have to be willing to change with the times and go with the trends . . . if you don’t keep up, you’ll get left behind” (Kane, 2020 p. 191). This need

for relevancy and adaptability resurfaces themes of longevity and sustainability (i.e., the marathon mindset) and their interrelationality with the core concept of authenticity. As Hennessy describes: “If you are in this business for the right reasons, creating great content, and engaging with your audience, the followers will come. This isn’t a sprint; it’s a marathon” (2018, p. 54).

What are the “right reasons” Hennessy refers to? Goals will dictate this.

Goals and Goal Setting

Goal setting is a direct determinant of success. In his book *One Million Followers*, Kane underlines the importance of clarity around one’s goals, and the adaptability and flexibility of these goals based on (1) personal progress/brand and business evolution, and (2) external advancements, trend developments, and best practices. This foregrounds the importance of developing both short- and long-term goals. Such tiered goal setting aligns with the marathon mindset—proactively supporting permanence, longevity, and staying power, while concurrently sustaining one’s “why”.

Like actively pivoting with the dynamic climate of social media, one’s goals must be equally agile. “[T]rends change over time” (Kane, 2020, p. 146), and thus one’s short- and long-term goals must be consciously designed to account for such fluidity and the associated reassessment and recalibration that will naturally be required; goals and visions do not exist on a linear trajectory. This introspection on goal setting again illustrates the overlap and integrated nature of social media influencing elements. Interrelationalties presented thus far include:

- Goals and goal setting should support the marathon mindset insofar as comprehensive goal setting involves both short- and long-term goals;
- The marathon mindset and long-term forecasting is critical to the development and sustainment of brand and brand identity;
- Strong (i.e., cohesive and recognizable) brand and brand identity stems from a digital house “in order”, and is equally essential for communicating one’s “why”, values, vision, and mission;
- Clear and accessible brand and brand identity attracts like-minded individuals— cultivating community;
- Community is rooted in connection and relationships;

- Connection and relationships develop in the presence of trust and authenticity.

Each layer of this extensive vertical is unavoidably informed and motivated by the necessity for continuous content creation and dissemination in a chronically oversaturated and overstimulated, perpetually progressing virtual global microcosm. These deeply interwoven social media influencing elements can be grouped together; each individual element, however, is dependent on content—“[c]ontent is still king queen” (Hennessy, 2018, p. 24).

Content

Content is the essence of social media; the oxygen of social media influencing. In the absence of content, there is no substance and no material; social media platforms would be an empty, inactive, obsolete virtual space. Such vitality of content inherently increases its worth and corresponding effects. The value of a given piece of content determines its shareability, and ultimately, its success.

Content is the core from which social media influencing elements are based insofar as the practice of social media influencing is based on the creation, distribution, and consumption of content, and the resulting return on investment (ROI). Content, then, is an influencer’s conduit for connecting with their audience—sharing and communicating their brand, and demonstrating their authenticity, relatability, and reliability, all key factors in cultivating community and establishing meaningful, long-term relationships. Similar to branding which is comprised of two inherent meanings, there is dialectical tension with the concept of content: (1) content that simply fills the page, or (2) content that is meaningful, i.e., something that has substance and value.

Valuable, quality content is a loaded concept that becomes increasingly complex when considered in conjunction with the dynamism of social media and new media communication technologies. Added to this is the growing focus on creating valuable content, as perceived value has a direct impact on engagement. And, having established engagement and engagement rate as a KPI within social media influencing, given this direct correlation, creating content that is of value is needed to boost these metrics.

Similar to valuable content, producing content that is of service to one's audience exhibits relevancy, and indicates an understanding and cognizance of their needs, wants, interests, desires, etc. Displaying a high degree of awareness strengthens influencer-influencee connection and relationships, a foundational feature of community.

Addressing the importance of creating content that is of value to one's audience, Kane introduces the Process Communication Model (PCM) which has an impressive public profile within society at present. The PCM identifies "six personality types: Thinkers, Persisters, Harmonizers, Imaginers, Rebels, and Promoters. Each personality type experiences the world in different ways" (2020, p. 128). This variance in perception of reality emphasizes the complexity of social media influencing and, more specifically, content creation. At the same time however, awareness and understanding of the dominant personality types comprising one's niche enables the influencer to tailor their content and communications—to employ a purposeful, targeted, and direct approach—addressing their audience with appropriate, relevant, and resonant content. Given the interrelationality of elements, the increased intimacy (ascertained from the PCM) should positively impact one's KPIs insofar as "[w]hatever content speaks to them most will be the content they choose to share" (Kane, 2020, p. 129).

Hennessy also references content-motivated engagement, writing: "when she speaks, her audience listens" (2018, p. 11). Within the context of social media influencing, one "speaks" through the content they create. To achieve active "listening" from one's audience, the influencer must remain in tune with their audience's personalities and consciously use this advanced understanding (per the PCM) to optimize the impact of their content; "[i]f you understand how your audience perceives the world, and you incorporate it into your communication style, it can be very effective in helping you develop content" (Kane, 2020, p. 129). Kane's emphasis on testing and learning is also apparent here. Such an informed approach to content creation increases its resonance and value, and thus success.

The value of a given piece of content varies based on the individual, their PCM personality type, and associated perception of reality. Nevertheless, regardless of personality type, there are consistent attributes of valuable content. Valuable content evokes an emotional response, and thus, an emotional connection; valuable content possesses practical value and social currency. These core attributes of valuable content

in turn prompt sharing (shareability), thereby increasing the potential for virality, contagion, and buzz, insofar as “[p]eople like to pass along practical, useful information. News others can use” (Berger, 2013, p. 123). This thoughtful sharing “strengthens social bonds” (Berger, 2013, p. 124).

Observability

Observability directly impacts the efficacy of content—the more observable a piece of content is, the more effective (Berger, 2013). Social media, social media influencing, and sharing via social media increases visibility, i.e., if social media users can easily observe an influencer using a particular product, engaging with a specific service, or participating in a certain activity, the extent of social influence is stronger.

Observability has a huge impact on whether products and ideas catch on. Say a clothing company introduces a new shirt style. If you see someone wearing it and decide you like it, you can go buy the same shirt, or something similar. (Berger, 2013, p. 106)

Not only does observability “[spur] purchase and action . . . [it] also remind[s] people about things they already wanted to buy or do” (Berger, 2013, p. 107), thus serving as a trigger.

The pivotal role of social media influencing in making the private public can be observed here. Traditionally considered personal and private, products and services related to digestive health and oral hygiene, for example, are now regularly shared with the public. Social media and social media influencing are both the catalyst for and culprit of this spike in sharing and fundamental shift in sharing culture—publicizing traditionally private activities and services. Such public promotion provides social proof. A concept developed by psychology professor Robert Cialdini, social proof is an “implicit endorsement . . . passive approval because usage is observable” (Berger, 2013, p. 111). Furthermore, Berger reminds: “If people can’t see what others are choosing and doing, they can’t imitate them” (2013, p. 109). An innate human desire, imitation is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. Beyond a basic human behaviour, viewers imitating influencers is proof of an influencer’s ability to influence, which in turn impacts their KPIs and suitability for brand partnerships and collaborations (elaborated on below), insofar as imitation results in the purchasing of promoted products/services.

The vulnerability and transparency associated with publicly sharing one's usage of traditionally private, personal products and/or services also implies authenticity and establishes relatability—a virtue which promotes connection, relationship building, and community cultivation. In other words, observability of such traditionally private, or perhaps taboo practices advances the belief that the usage must be honest and authentic. At the same time, however, it is no secret that society collectively opts to share content that provides social currency—i.e., “content we share because we believe it reflects well upon us to share it. That is, we think sharing it makes us look smarter and that we're being helpful to others” (Kane, 2020, p. 133). Sponsored content, brand partnerships, and collaborations (discussed below) are an additional factor to consider. At times, sponsored content creates skepticism regarding one's authenticity and the authenticity of their content. This is important because “[w]e look to others for information about what is right or good to do in a given situation, and this social proof shapes everything, from the products we buy to the candidates we vote for” (Berger, 2013, p.120). It is thus important to consider the role of #sponsored social proof and how this affects the reliability of the social proof. The interconnectedness of social media influencing elements is prevalent again here.

Value and Practical Value

Berger says that “Offering practical value helps make things contagious” (2013, p, 123). In essence, “[p]ractical value is about helping” (Berger, 2013, p. 137)—“[h]elping people do things they want to do, or encouraging them to do things they should do. Faster, better, and easier” (Berger, 2013, p. 135). Validating Berger's claim, Kane, through his social experiment of amassing one million followers, recognizes the same: “When you focus on creating value for people instead of gaining customers, it drives sales and direct actions” (2020, p. 51). He concentrates on the “service” aspect of content that offers practical value, explaining that “the best way to get content to go viral is by providing service and value to others” (2020, p. 53).

In essence, content providing practical value and/or employing a “service-oriented approach” (Kane, 2020, p. 53) increases shareability, thereby improving its chance of going viral. Content with practical value also provides social currency and, as previously established, given the appeal of social currency, this is another reason

content with practical value is more likely to be shared. It is also worth noting that Kane cites Berger when introducing and discussing social currency.

Storytelling

A storytelling approach to content creation adds depth and dimension, and displays authenticity—providing an additional opportunity for connection and relatability (elements which strengthen relationships and support community cultivation). Stories are inherently trustworthy for they provide “proof by analogy . . . People are also less likely to argue against stories than against advertising claims” (Berger, 2013, p. 145).

True to the case-based format often employed when writing about social media influencing, Adenike Fapohunda shares a classic example depicting the effectiveness of storytelling in their February 2021 *Current Affairs* article “The Problem with Influencers”. In their article, Fapohunda describes a social media influencer sharing sponsored content through a story-style narrative, and the resonance it has with her audience. In other words, after engaging with an influencer’s personal story, one is more likely to strive for the same; a genuine and authentic story providing opportunities for connection and relatability is significantly more impactful than an obviously curated sponsored post.

As Fapohunda’s example demonstrates, content shared in the form of a story is naturally trusted and more relatable, and thus has strong influence. This is alluded to in their labeling of the influencer as the consumer’s “friend”. Stories provide contextuality and serve as a point of reference, “a quick and easy way for people to acquire lots of knowledge in a vivid and engaging fashion . . . Stories save time and hassle and give people the information they need in a way that’s easy to remember” (Berger, 2013, pp. 144-145). This efficiency of narratives supports staying power which “is achieved through maintaining a strong relationship with your audience” (Kane, 2020, p. 211). The additional layer of personality that stories offer make the friendly stylistic approach a compelling tactic for social media influencers.

Like Hennessy’s emphasis on the importance of (1) maintaining authenticity when sharing sponsored content, and (2) balancing sponsored content with original content (outlined below), storytelling must be equally thoughtful and strategic, otherwise one risks jeopardizing authenticity.

Solidifying content as a cornerstone of social media and social media influencing, this overview of the core element and associated impacts and implications further reveals the interrelationality among social media influencing elements.

Emotion and Emotional Response

Integral to stories and the high success rate of story-based content is the emotional response they evoke. Emotional response inspires sharing and word of mouth and can contribute to social currency; it plays a role in determining the value of the content for the consumer. “Sharing emotions also helps us connect” (Berger, 2013, p. 84), a claim that indicates the role of emotion in relationship development—reintroducing previously examined elements and demonstrating further interrelation among concepts.

Jealousy is a common emotional response prompted by social media influencer content (Hennessy, 2018, p. 8). The ease with which social media content can elicit jealousy must be cautiously navigated, and such reactions must be carefully nurtured. Jealousy and the resulting desire to equally experience (imitate), is a response sought after by many content creators insofar as it drives engagement, which ideally converts into action on the part of the viewer/consumer (purchasing the given product or service being promoted, in the pursuit of a similar experience). And, when this jealousy and imitation is in response to sponsored content, it generates ROI for the brand.

Elaborating on the importance of considering the type of emotional response a piece of content evokes, Berger notes that emotional response does not always lead to sharing, and suggests that one should aim to create content that elicits “high-arousal emotions [which] drive people to action” (Berger, 2013, p. 93). This could entail making people mad (high-arousal) versus sad (low-arousal). Making people angry (high-arousal) prompts sharing—a strategy for content dissemination, while making people sad (low-arousal) does not encourage sharing—rather, it often elicits the opposite response—causing people to shut down and close off. With this, Berger explains: “activating emotion is the key to transmission. Physiological arousal or activation drives people to talk and share” (2013, p. 98). Kane similarly discusses the causal relationship between emotional response and sharing. Regarding elements of relevance and resonance, for best results, he encourages creating “content and messages that move people emotionally” (Kane, 2020, p. 138). Still aligned, both Berger and Kane emphasize that

emotional response strengthens connection which is fundamental to successful social media influencing. While speaking to this interrelationality, Kane writes: “content needs to go a step further than good or great and connect with the audience emotionally for them to take the big step of sharing it” (2020, p. 65). The action of sharing is critical; sharing content indicates it is valued by the sharer, and implies they believe it will provide value to those they share it with. Sharing content also suggests the sharer may believe they will gain social currency by sharing it.

As an influencer, creating and sharing content that evokes a strong emotional response should be an ongoing objective. However, as powerful as emotional connection is, if the link between the intent of the content and the emotional response it elicits is strained, the emotional response is ineffective. Such awareness and consciousness when creating content is crucial for successfully leveraging the affordances of emotional response. Context, correlation, and connection ensures a successful emotional response.

Context, Correlation, and Connection

Connection between content and intent is paramount; there must be context and correlation.

If the intent of the content is clearly communicated, it is more likely to be engaged with and shared, thereby increasing its potential for success. Clear and comprehensible content is valuable content. On this, Kane urges: “Be context specific with your calls to action. Make sure they correlate to the actual content and are interwoven in a creative way” (2020, p. 64).

Stressing the importance of context, correlation, and connection, and in accordance with the example-based style often employed when writing about social media influencing, Berger recounts a notable guerilla marketing activation to demonstrate the utter disconnect of the stunt from the company and its intent. The example introduces elements of remarkability and buzz, and re-introduces elements of staying power, shareability, and storytelling.

Coined the “the fool in the pool” by media outlets reporting on the event, during an otherwise illustrious event—the August 2004 Athens Olympics—Montreal-based

“serial prankster” (Ha, 2004, para. 1), Ron Bensimhon, performed a stunt dive in an attempt to generate buzz and garner attention for the Internet casino GoldenPalace.com. Clearly designed for maximum impact, and fixated on the remarkability, shareability, and buzz that would presumably ensue, wearing a blue tutu and white polka dot tights with “GoldenPalace.com” embossed across his chest, Bensimhon performed a “10” belly flop into the Olympic pool. This remarkable marketing ploy is an archetype of shareable content; as expected, Bensimhon’s stunt generated buzz. The buzz, however, was not centred on the Internet casino; instead, the stunt drew attention to Olympic safety and security protocols, while media outlets picked up on the story angle that Bensimhon’s “interruption threw off the Chinese divers, who flubbed their final dive right after the trick and lost the gold medal” (Berger, 2013, p. 150).

Bensimhon and GoldenPalace.com did receive attention and significant buzz, which understandably led to sharing due to the pure remarkability of the activation; however, as stated, media coverage and buzz were primarily focused on the stunt performed—there was little if any mention of the Internet casino the stunt was intended to advertise. This example illustrates the necessity for clear and direct connection, correlation, and context between content and intent. In this case, the promotional objective (intent) was unsuccessful due to the disconnect from the content (the stunt performed). If the connection and correlation between content and intent is too strained, regardless of the buzz generated and/or the high rate of sharing, the purpose of the content will be lost; in other words, clear connection and context must be present for successful messaging. Berger reminds the reader: “When trying to generate word of mouth, many people forget one important detail. They focus so much on getting people to talk that they ignore the part that really matters: what people are talking about” (2013, p. 151).

Word of Mouth

When it is a form of recommendation, word of mouth is a vital tool and tactic for virtual success. Word of mouth is inherently reliable, credible, trustworthy, and authentic. And, considering “[t]he most powerful marketing is personal recommendation” (Berger, 2013, p. 29), in today’s mediascape, where content is often overlooked amidst oversaturation and algorithmically informed updates, word of mouth is increasingly valued.

Returning to the concept of social currency and the notion that people share content “to achieve desired positive impressions among their families, friends, and colleagues” (Berger, 2013, p. 32), word of mouth can be used as a conduit for social currency. Generating word of mouth is equally valuable for brands, as “existing customers can act as advertisements . . . It’s like advertising without an advertising budget” (Berger, 2013, p. 113).

Exclusivity, Scarcity/Limitation, and Qualification

Content pertaining to exclusivity and/or scarcity is inherently more likely to be shared. Why? Exclusivity and scarcity are often equated with value and superiority—generating social currency and creating a have/have not divide. Exclusivity, scarcity/limitation, and/or the need for qualification generates buzz, interest, and intrigue. Such content, topics, and experiences are therefore highly attractive in an oversaturated, content-driven virtual environment.

Consumption

Positive word of mouth inevitably promotes consumption insofar as it recommends engagement with the given product, service, or experience being shared. Consumption (a recurring theme and persistent motivator within social media influencing) is therefore a byproduct of positive word of mouth.

Platform Specificity

Like ensuring context, correlation, and connection, one must exercise similar care and consideration for platform specificity—a determining factor in the success (i.e., shareability) of content. Adhering to platform-specific best practices and tailoring content accordingly demonstrates knowledge, familiarity, and awareness of a platform’s purpose, its users and user habits, preferences, and consumption patterns; and thus, also increases the shareability of the content. To illustrate this concept, Kane explains: “The same video may have a different length, title, or starting point when posted on Facebook as opposed to when it’s posted on YouTube or Instagram. Each platform will have a slightly different version of the content” (2020, p. 150). Understanding and

strategically leveraging platform variances is determinative of the content's resonance with the platform-specific audience, and thus its success.

Producing platform-specific content directly impacts its value and shareability, while also demonstrating one's digital literacy. Here, again, the interrelationality of social media influencing elements is evident.

Triggers

Awareness of triggers is equally pertinent to the content creation process. Creating an environment in which triggers are present is necessary in an increasingly oversaturated mediascape; with the constant overturning of content, triggers ensure one's brand remains top-of-mind. A now ubiquitous, arguably overused term, triggers support the longevity of content: "acting as reminders, triggers not only get people talking, they keep them talking" (Berger, 2013, p. 64). Such ongoing conversation is critical in an overloaded and overstimulated virtual environment.

Frequency and strength of triggers directly dictate their efficacy (Berger, 2013, p. 70) by revisiting aforementioned elements of correlation and connection. Although "not as sexy a concept as Social Currency" (Berger, 2013, p. 74), Berger admits: "Triggers are the foundation of word of mouth and contagiousness . . . it's an important workhorse that gets the job done . . . The more something is triggered, the more it will be top of mind, and the more successful it will become" (2013, p. 74). His explanation of triggers and their imperative role also emphasizes their interconnectedness with other social media influencing elements.

Collectively, Hennessy, Berger, and Kane conclude that successful content must "take advantage of existing triggers" (Berger, 2013, p. 74). Or, as Kane argues, "take what you have to offer and make it accessible by linking it to what is already working" (Kane, 2020, p. 130). Awareness and understanding of existing triggers and cues, and their respective salience aids in the creation of new associations and trigger-inducing environments. To illustrate the importance of frequency of trigger stimuli, while also remaining consistent with the example-based approach commonly used when writing about social media influencing, Berger juxtaposes weekends with holidays, and coffee with hot chocolate to demonstrate variance in frequency.

Cadence of Content

Akin to frequency of triggers is cadence of content. Providing one's audience with a consistent cadence of content establishes reliability and offers a rare sense of stability and predictability in an increasingly dynamic virtual environment. A key characteristic of trust, and integral to relationship building, demonstrating reliability via cadence of content contributes to the creation and cultivation of long-term relationships and community, presenting reliability as a recurring theme, while further illustrating interconnection among elements. Cadence of content and the resulting proof of reliability is an effective social media influencing tactic when used well.

Regular and reliable content creation and distribution is necessary, but in today's oversaturated and perpetually progressing mediascape, it is basic at best. To elevate one's status and become truly competitive in the exponentially advancing virtual marketplace of social media and social media influencing, one must also focus on consistent engagement (a key element of social media influencing). Routinely engaging with one's audience, i.e., regularly responding to comments, messages, etc., leverages elements of frequency, cadence, reliability, and the two-way communication structure of social media to nurture an active and engaged community (in other words, a reciprocal relationship supporting the KPI of engagement). Cementing the interdependence of these elements, Kane writes: "You must create content that keeps your followers wanting more, that resonates with their interests, and that gets them to share your brand at the highest possible velocity" (2020, p. 122). Further, he notes the importance of frequency "for building an audience, especially when you're starting out" (2020, p. 186). Connecting cadence with the earlier section regarding quality of content, and the essentiality of this pairing, Kane explains: "if the content is good enough, people will follow . . . for the opportunity to see it. This forces him to keep creating quality content" (2020, p. 77). Beyond exhibiting the interconnection and interrelationality among social media influencing elements and tactics, this also highlights the steadfast cyclicity of the practice and profession.

The advice and extensive collection of elements to consider are contrary to the authors' prompting to be genuine and authentic. This underscores the fundamental paradox of the practice of social media influencing and ongoing dialectical tension within the industry—encouraging one to be "this" *and* "that" simultaneously.

Pitching (Yourself)

When pitching yourself (1) to companies with the intention of partnering, (2) to other social media influencers for collaborations, and/or (3) to agencies for representation, a clear, intentional, and well-established brand is imperative. The foundational role of brand and branding resurfaces here, in addition to previously explored concepts of digital house and relationship building, further illustrating the codependency among social media influencing elements.

A form of self-promotion, pitching oneself and one's brand shares commonalities with content creation insofar as it must become regular practice. With the bulk of current social media influencing involving partnerships, collaborations, campaigns, giveaways, and/or contests, obtaining a brand partnership and/or collaboration can be the catalyst for one's career— providing credibility and recognizability, while establishing a brand-based trigger and association (a concept elaborated on in Chapter 3). Increasingly important, yet evermore challenging to secure, brand partnerships and associations are paramount in an oversaturated and perpetually progressing virtual environment.

Partnerships, Campaigns, Collaborations, Giveaways, and Contests

Partnerships, campaigns, and collaborations are directly related to pitching oneself. To successfully secure and enter into (potentially long-term) partnerships, campaigns, and collaborations, Hennessy, Berger, and Kane each recommend starting small by “look[ing] for partners who are attainable” (Kane, 2020, p. 165), and leveraging existing relationships (resurfacing themes of relationship building, networking, and community). Collaborations facilitate the sharing of audiences: “it really does work,” assures Kane (2020, p. 184), who speaks from experience having garnered one million followers in just 30 days—a testament to the tactic's potential. On this topic, Kane cites Chris Williams, Founder and CEO of pocket.watch, explaining:

strategic partnerships and collaborations are vital for scale and growth . . . Essentially, they allow the audience to find and like you because you're associated with something they already gravitate toward. Collaborations drive a direct audience in a fairly efficient way. (2020, p. 185)

While an efficient and effective tactic for expanding one's audience and growing as a social media influencer, one must be cognizant and strategic regarding the partnerships with which one chooses to engage, considering that:

with each campaign, you're aligning yourself with a brand and promising you won't work with any of their competitors no matter what they're offering. You're essentially cutting off future revenue streams. So, you need to choose each campaign wisely, and it needs to be worth it. (Hennessy, 2018, p. 104)

Furthermore, Hennessy warns of being money-motivated, and advises adhering to a 70/30 rule: "this means for every ten posts/photos/videos, seven of them should be organic and three can be sponsored [paid]" (2018, p. 34). Berger substantiates this proportional approach, noting: "People don't like to seem like walking advertisements" (2013, p. 145). Expanding on the need to maintain a balance between organic and sponsored content, Hennessy explains: "Sponsored posts should always make your audience say, 'Hey! XYZ influencer partnered with XYZ brand. How cool!' Not, 'Oh goodness, here goes XYZ influencer with another sponsored post'" (2018, p. 34). Such proactive consideration and continued consciousness and assessment of one's content indicates authenticity, an influencer's lifeblood in a virtual world dominated by curated highlight reels. This solidifies one's genuineness amidst the "fluffy" and "fake" labels, while once more demonstrating the interrelatedness among social media influencing elements, as well as the aforementioned omnipresence of content.

Engagement Groups and Instagram Pods

A form of networking, engagement groups, commonly referred to as "Instagram pods" due to their popularity on the platform, are "essentially groups of people who promise to follow each other and comment on/like each other's posts" (Hennessy, 2018, p. 43). This "follow-for-follow" and "like-for-like" tactic is effective and efficient, in theory accumulating followers, likes, comments, and increasing engagement.

However, engagement groups are often comprised of other social media influencers (likely of a similar status to oneself), and therefore not one's target audience. Participation in engagement groups/Instagram pods will certainly increase metrics and strengthen KPIs, but only superficially (returning to the arbitrary nature of the

performance measurement) seeing that it will presumably be other influencers engaging with one's content, i.e., not ideal candidates. Nevertheless, participation in engagement groups is a great source for networking when approached strategically in that leveraging the connection and audience growth opportunities can help build one's following and cultivate community with identified target audience candidates. Considerations aside, Kane, like Hennessy, recommends participating in engagement groups, highlighting the sharing aspects and increased visibility they can provide. Despite the potential drawbacks just mentioned, it can be a worthwhile tactic for building momentum, especially at the outset of one's influencer career.

Networking

Engagement groups, Instagram pods, partnerships, collaborations, and campaigns are forms of networking, and “[y]our network is everything” (Kane, 2020, p. 71). According to Hennessy, network is one of the two components of influence: “P × N: Persuasiveness times Network” (2018, p. 148). And, given the inundation and oversaturation of content on social media, having influence is highly coveted.

Network thrives on “good content and good distribution” (Kane, 2020, p. 71), underscoring (a) the omnipresence of content within social media and social media influencing, while (b) spotlighting the interrelationality among social media influencing elements. Sharing others' content is another popular networking and content creation tactic. It can involve reposting others' content and/or creating/sharing listicles or roundups (a collection of top/recommended sources on the given topic).

Lists and Roundups

In an always-on, oversaturated virtual environment, aggregate-style content is increasingly attractive. As Berger notes:

People often use these lists as shortcuts. There is way too much content available to sift through it all—hundreds of millions of websites and blogs, billions of videos . . . Few people have time to seek out the best content in this ocean of information. So they start by checking out what others have shared. (2013, p. 78)

Albeit highly curated, referencing others' lists and roundups allows one to bypass the initial (time consuming) groundwork phase—engaging with consolidated content presented in a bite-size, easily digestible format.

Again however, due to the overloaded nature of social media, securing placement on lists and inclusion in roundups is not easy. To circumvent this challenge, Hennessy suggests creating and sharing one's own lists and roundups. Producing and sharing listicle or roundup-style content is multipurpose: lists and roundups in which one includes themselves is a simple and effective technique for personal promotion and amplification, while sharing others' content provides additional opportunities for networking and audience growth.

Your Worth

Realistic awareness of one's worth serves a dual purpose: firstly, when negotiating partnerships, campaigns, collaborations, etc., and secondly, when engaging an agent, whether pitching oneself to an agent/agency, or when being approached by one.

As a modern form of freelance work, determining and advocating for one's worth as a social media influencer is critical to success. But how does one determine their worth? What dictates one's value? According to Hennessy, "[t]his is actually one of the most difficult parts of being an influencer" (2018, p. 97). To assist, she outlines the formula for calculating one's fee: "Distribution Fee + Talent Fee" (2018, p. 98), promising "[n]egotiating is less frightening once you've figured out the numbers" (Hennessy, 2018, p. 97). Distribution fee refers to "how much it costs to be featured on your channel/blog" (Hennessy, 2018, p. 98). This cost is based on five factors: follower count, engagement, quality of content, name/facial recognition/skills, and demographics (Hennessy, 2018, p. 98). Talent fee—the other half of the equation—"is how much it actually costs you to create the content" (Hennessy, 2018, p. 99). To further aid in gauging these values and in keeping with the marathon mindset, Hennessy advises regularly asking: "What's in it for me?" (2018, p. 101). Such regular, conscious reflection supports the maintenance and ongoing assessment of one's worth—essential factors when working as a freelance content creator in a dynamic field.

Dynamic Field

Social media and social media influencing thrive as a field in constant flux. This perpetual progression persists as a fundamental element and characteristic to constantly consider. In the pursuit of success, this dynamism must be thoughtfully and strategically navigated via ongoing evaluation and re-evaluation of tools, tactics, approaches, and mindset. The industry's volatility and unpredictability justify Kane's emphasis on regular testing and re-marketing of content (explored below).

Agility, adaptability, awareness, and cognizance of current trends and best practices are crucial; while one's ability to remain well-informed and up-to-date with ever-evolving patterns, practices, and behaviours is indicative of success. Resurfacing core attributes of flexibility and relevancy allude to the marathon mindset insofar as social media influencing tactics and approaches must continuously evolve and develop in tandem with the new media communication technology itself. This comment on the dynamism of social media and associated best practices reaffirms the interrelationality among social media influencing elements.

Testing, Iterations, and Learning

Championing regular A/B testing, retargeting, remarketing, and analysis, as introduced earlier in this chapter, Kane wrote *One Million Followers* with a focus on the necessity of adaptability—the ability to successfully pivot one's approach and strategy based on results and learnings from data and analysis. A prominent theme throughout the updated edition of his book, Kane repeatedly returns to the vitality of A/B testing, reconfiguring, and redistributing, i.e., creating and circulating various iterations of the same core content, and retargeting and remarketing based on results—ideally increasing engagement and effectiveness with each iteration. An advocate for data-based strategy, Kane points to the myriad of tools readily available to the average social media user, stressing the need to look beyond the data aggregated and actually learn from one's analytics, and then actively using those learnings to inform content adaptations, future A/B testing, and retargeting and remarketing strategies. According to Kane, data analytics operate as a ready-made feedback loop.

Like Kane's emphasis on learning, Berger underscores the importance of "understanding why people talk and why some things get talked about and shared more than others" (2013, p. 15); such awareness enables one to effectively "[harness] the power of word of mouth" (Berger, 2013, p. 15). The ability to (a) learn, and (b) take appropriate results-based action is a key determinant of success and foothold in the dynamic marketplace of social media and social media influencing because, as Kane notes: "if you don't keep up, you'll get left behind" (2020, p. 191).

"[T]rends change over time" (Kane, 2020, p. 146), and within the context of social media and social media influencing, this change is accelerated. It is thus necessary for one to attempt to keep pace with the perpetually progressing industry, growing and developing with the fluidity of the field. For Kane, "[te]sting is a huge part" (2020, p. 141) of this upkeep process. He leads with the principle "hypothesis, test, pivot" (2020, p. 140) in order to underline adaptability and agility as a recurring theme. Pivoting, however, is most effective when it is data-based and learning-informed.

As promoted by Kane, such elements as A/B testing, data analysis, learning, adapting, pivoting, retargeting, and remarketing support effective and efficient navigation of the dynamism, fluidity, and unpredictability of social media, social media influencing, and related trends. Emphasizing the relationality of these evaluative tactics and their role in maintaining relevancy, Hennessy offers a realistic reminder: "In an industry where you're only as good as your last six posts, you must always be on the lookout for ways to stand out to advertisers and increase the value of your personal brand" (2018, p. 144). Perpetual progression and content are omnipresent elements of social media influencing—factors which can be proactively managed through data analysis and learning.

Regarding the interrelationality of these elements, Kane again stresses the key role testing plays in creating resonant content:

To discover what will work for your audience, you must allow yourself space to test, play, and discover. If your content doesn't resonate, keep testing and tweaking until you find the content that does . . . If something doesn't work, it's fine; you just need to learn from it and pivot. (2020, p. 139)

His advice emphasizes again how data-informed and results-based adaptations enable one to create content that is of greater relevance to their audience.

Algorithms and Algorithmic Awareness

Parallel to the perpetual progression of social media, platform algorithms are continuously transforming; algorithmic awareness is thus critical. Like working with the dynamism of social media, Kane suggests striving to create and share content “that pleases the algorithms” (2020, p. 69), explaining: “The algorithms are what control whom and how many people see each specific piece of content . . . if the content isn’t good and the algorithms don’t see its value, it won’t get very far” (2020, p. 69). Given the determining power of algorithms and the ambiguity surrounding the enigma, algorithmic awareness persists as an additional element within social media influencing to consciously and constantly consider, thus adding to the already extensive vertical of considerations.

In-App Features and Best Practices

Reintroducing Kane’s focus on the use of in-app analytics, data, and user metrics to their full potential, Hennessy also highlights a handful of in-app features, reviewing best practices and how to leverage their capabilities from her perspective as “senior director of influencer strategy + talent partnerships at Hearst Magazines Digital Media”. These features include brand integrations, archiving appropriately, thoughtful presentation of images, and tagging. She says that tagging is “the best way to help people spread content . . . Tagging is like a personal invitation to get someone to see something” (2018, p. 77), along with well-written biographies (“bios”). For Hennessy, a well-written bio is the modern-day hook:

I can’t stress enough that what you display here is so important! . . . a brief description of your feed’s focus and any other facts that makes [sic] you unique. What’s your story? What sets you apart? Try to condense it and put it here. (2018, p. 30)

Kane similarly acknowledges the importance of such concise and accessible summative content, thereby unintentionally strengthening the case for the value of roundup and listicle style content (discussed above). On this, Kane explains: “creating a messaging strategy that helps the information stand out and gives it a unique Hook Point that grabs people’s attention is key. The message becomes more relevant to more people” (2020, p. 134). As Hennessy demonstrates via her question prompts, Kane accentuates the

need to “[know] what makes you unique” (2020, p. 137), and suggests using this to define your hook point.

Navigating Overload and Oversaturation

A strong “hook point” and effectively communicating one’s uniqueness are crucial in an oversaturated environment sustained by constant content turnover. Today’s mediascape is in a state of content surplus; users, consumers, and producers are inundated with a continuous stream of new content. Kane recognizes the challenge of this overload: “I can’t stress enough that with 60 billion messages sent out on digital platforms each day, you have to stand out . . . make your information relevant. Create messaging that your audience is interested in” (2020, p. 132). This necessity for uniqueness also speaks to the importance of authenticity (established at the outset of the chapter), i.e., “[m]ake sure to highlight your distinctive personality, and show people who you truly are. There’s no one like you, so if you bring your entire self to the camera, it will help you shine and gain more fans” (Kane, 2020, p. 189). Uniqueness, like remarkability, also stimulates sharing and word of mouth insofar as both elements can contribute to social currency—illuminating, yet again, the interrelatedness of social media influencing elements.

Conclusion

Via survey and synthesis, the close reading of this tripartite of popular social media influencing texts provides a representative sample of (a) the dominant framing of social media influencing in mainstream literature, and (b) key social media influencing elements. Synthesizing this literature through this dual approach paints a comprehensive picture of the current social media influencer landscape by looking beyond the fluffy, fake, easy, and mindless labels and revealing the “hard work”, interrelationality, multidimensionality, complexity, and legitimacy of the practice and profession.

The dismissing and discrediting of social media influencing stems from the common framing and presentation of the practice as a simple “how-to”, suggesting the profession can be reduced to a sequential step-by-step process and positioning social media influencing as easy and accessible, often communicated through an example-based writing style.

In the process of delineating social media influencing from its unfavourable and misleading labels through a review of key elements, overarching narratives, persistent themes, and regular considerations are revealed. These include the deep interrelationality among social media influencing elements; the determining role of authenticity and engagement; content; and the characteristic dynamism of the industry.

This extensive collection of social media influencing elements is only a cursory examination of the practice and its viability and legitimacy as a profession. Nevertheless, this chapter presents a solid case for the complexity of social media influencing and the hard work involved by demystifying dismissive labels and providing a foundational survey and synthesis of the industry.

Chapter II.

Warm Doesn't Conform

*Participation with hot media signifies a merger
of traditionally opposing and independent concepts.*

Introduction

High definition and participatory, social media thrives as a paradox of Marshall McLuhan's hot and cool media percept, advancing a hybrid of fundamentally contradictory characteristics. This chapter shows that social media can be understood in the context of McLuhan's famous distinction between hot and cool media, however, social media platforms possess a hybrid character insofar as they are neither hot nor cool, but 'warm'. Moreover, this hybrid state makes them somewhat paradoxical—resurfacing the overarching theme of dialectical tension—the this *and* the that. McLuhan was not averse to the idea of media hybridity, as evidenced in Chapter 5: “Hybrid Energy” of his influential text *Understanding Media*. If McLuhan acknowledges the hybrid tendencies of media, why then does his hot and cool media percept neglect such “fusion” (1964/1994, p. 48), mixing (1964/1994, p. 53), and space for “the interpenetration of one medium by another” (1964/1994, p. 51)?

Providing historical, theoretical context, while building on the survey and synthesis conducted in the previous chapter, this chapter examines social media and social media influencing within the context of Marshall McLuhan's hot and cool media percept. The work of other communication scholars, such as Henry Jenkins, would have been equally well suited for an examination of social media and social media influencing, however, considering such modern phenomena within the context of McLuhan's hot and cool media binary provided an opportunity to revive and revitalize both McLuhan and one of his lesser-known works for a modern audience, while also attending to his underappreciation as a communication scholar (even within Canada).

Considering social media within the context of McLuhan's hot and cool media also presented an opportunity for contribution to the field—with the proposition of

'warm'/hybrid media, while remaining in line with the work of others—examining new forms of media (e.g., HDTV) within the parameters of McLuhan's percept.

Although 60 years old, McLuhan's hot and cool media continues to carry cachet. The validity of his work is also reflected in Kati Sudnick's 2023 book, *A Philosophy of Communication of Social Media Influencer Marketing: The Banality of the Social*, in which she utilizes McLuhan's global village (among other theoretical touchstones), explaining:

As social media becomes even more prevalent in the 2020s with a myriad of apps including Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram, an understanding of their influence on how we communicate is of import: the scholarly area of media ecology allows for such inquiry. Thus, a brief entry into a media ecological understanding of social media for integrated marketing communication, primarily utilizing the work of Marshall McLuhan as an undergirding foundation, is necessary. (p. 10)

Positing social media within McLuhan's 1964 hot and cool media binary demonstrates the ways in which social media departs from traditional media, while equally displaying where fundamental characteristics of media persist. Such progression *and* persistence further aligns with the theme of dialectical tension underscoring this thesis.

Through an application of theory to (modern) practice, a case for the 'warmness' of social media is presented, suggesting social media is situated *between* McLuhan's hot and cool binaries insofar as the new media communication technology houses both hot *and* cool media simultaneously. This convergence and coexistence (of hot and cool media) demonstrates considerable progression within the field since the development of McLuhan's percept.

To claim that media and related practices have shifted 180 degrees since the development of McLuhan's hot and cool media percept, published "in his seminal 1964 publication, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*" (Logan, 2016, p. 2), downplays the drastic-advancements that have been made in communication technologies. Social media is dynamic, featuring highly complex interplays McLuhan could have never imagined; "we are wrapped in a cocoon of text that would have boggled McLuhan's mind" (Carr, 2007, para. 9). This multidimensionality, multimodality, and

multifunctionality is critical when investigating the modern media within the context of McLuhan's binary.

The dynamism and fluidity of social media highlight the need for reconsideration and reconfiguration of the classic media concept to account for new media, and better emulate the unconstrained ethos of the modern media.

To build a case for the 'warmness' of social media, popular social media and social media influencing elements (some of which were introduced in Chapter 1) will be reviewed, and I will assess the hot *and* cool media characteristics they currently present. In fact, many of these modern media features exist only as a result of the hybridity of hot *and* cool media elements available. In other words, social media can only exist in a media ecology where the binary categories established by McLuhan are taken to be dynamic rather than static; when the idea of hybridization is given greater emphasis than it was accorded in McLuhan's percept.

This coexistence of hot and cool media demonstrates the increased depth, dimension, and complexity of mediascapes, while also showcasing the endurance of fundamental hot and cool media, media elements, and media characteristics. These defining features have shifted and evolved, taken on new forms, and been shaped and reshaped by technological and industry advancements. This validates McLuhan's mid-1900s predictions while illustrating the sustained applicability and efficacy of his percept as a pedagogical tool for understanding and analyzing new media.

Hot and Cool Media *is* Still an Effective Pedagogical Tool

Although media have evolved exponentially since the development of McLuhan's hot and cool media percept, the framework *is* still an effective pedagogical tool for studying media, including this case of social media and social media influencing. The concept can be applied to facilitate an examination of the phenomena—provoking deeper understanding—infrastructural for organizing society's perception of, and engagement with the new media.

Examining social media within the context of McLuhan's hot and cool media binary reveals considerable growth and advancement within media, mediated communications, and media technologies, and thereby justifies the proposal for

modernization (i.e., expansion) of the traditional percept to encompass the current and complex media landscape. The addition of a ‘warm’ median category would reflect the hybrid of hot and cool media that social media exhibits. The development, rise, and proliferation of social media influencers and the practice/profession of social media influencing exemplifies the exponential advancements the industry has experienced.

Social media and social media influencing are fascinating, complex phenomena that have infiltrated the lives of everyday citizens. On one hand, the modern media embodies the hotness of traditional forms of media—high definition, rich in sensory data, and complete, requiring little participation from the consumer, like movies and photographs. Alternatively, however, social media are equally cool—rife with incomplete content—requiring participation from the user to “complete” the message; this coolness and fundamental element of engagement are alluded to in the media’s name: “*social media*.”

Gary Miolo’s 2004 *Institute of General Semantics* article, “Why McLuhan’s Still Hot and Cool,” substantiates the sustained efficacy of McLuhan’s hot and cool media percept. Miolo’s recollection of his post-secondary teachings of the concept emphasizes its persistent applicability as a strategy for examining and analyzing media. Reflecting on his teachings, Miolo recalls:

Most students readily understood the concept of hot and cool media when deciphering McLuhan’s [sic] statement that ‘Any hot medium allows of [sic] less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than a dialogue’. (2004, p. 216)

Proving continued relevance, Miolo’s students applied McLuhan’s hot and cool media binary to home theatre systems (paralleling this chapter’s application of the percept to social media). His students

pointed out how the very name of the new medium, High Definition TV, had a striking similarity to McLuhan’s observation that ‘A hot medium is one that extends a single sense in ‘high definition’ . . . With HDTV, they postulated, there is a conversion from what once was a cool medium to what is now an ‘all inclusive’ or hot medium. (Miolo, 2004, p. 216)

The “conversion” his students observe is all the more evident in the case of social media where hot and cool media thrive as a true *convergence*. This convergence is similarly

recognized by Nick Carr in his 2007 *Guardian* article “McLuhan would blow hot and cool about today's internet”, in which he recognizes: “Television, which McLuhan saw as cool medium, is rapidly turning into a hot one, with mammoth screens, high-definition images and surround sound” (para. 9).

Mielo's article exemplifies the ongoing value of McLuhan's thesis of hot and cool media as a pedagogical tool for understanding and examining new media. Analyzing social media within the context of McLuhan's percept expands on elements of social media and social media influencing, demonstrating how Insta-famous individuals leverage both the hot *and* cool features available. Such an examination provides evidence for the hybridity of social media and strengthens the case for the ‘warmness’ of the new media.

Defining Parameters and Scope

Prior to continuing this examination of social media within the context of Marshall McLuhan's hot and cool media percept, it is necessary to establish the parameters of this analysis.

Although less salient, McLuhan's hot and cool media categories are also based on physical mechanics: “light on” (hot) versus “light through” (cool). Movies—a form of hot media—are “light on”, for example: “[p]eople go to the movies because of the magic of the silver screen, which operates on the basis of reflected light or light on” (Logan, 2016, p. 442). This element of physicality, however, becomes challenging to decipher with the introduction and onslaught of social media and new media communication technologies due to their complexity and the hybridity of hot and cool media they present. Recognizing this new challenge, Robert K. Logan, in the second edition of his book *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan*, determines “the use of computers is both hot and cool” (2016, p. 442).

For the purpose of this chapter's analysis of social media and social media influencing in relation to McLuhan's hot and cool media percept, the physical mechanics of the duality (i.e., “light on” and “light through”) will not be addressed. This omission will allow for a purely psychological examination of social media.

Focusing on the cognitive aspects of McLuhan's percept also aligns with the psychology of the practice of social media influencing, providing a suitable framework for this analysis. Applying only the cognitive elements demonstrates awareness of social media's increased emphasis on the psychological, presenting a unique and targeted, historically, and theoretically informed perspective on social media and social media influencing.

Addressing elements of social media and social media influencing in isolation will formulate a collection of miniature case study examples while showcasing the coexistence of hot *and* cool media within social media, and the myriad ways in which the media operates as a true hybrid of both hot *and* cool media.

McLuhan's Hot and Cool Media

Hot and cool media is one of the many percepts Marshall McLuhan introduced in his oft-cited 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*. The magnitude of his work and this percept is punctuated by the fact that "although not one critic in five hundred was entirely sure what he meant by the distinction, the phrases served to justify a \$40 million advertising campaign" (McLuhan, 1964/1994, introduction by Lapham, p. xi). Breaking down this multimillion dollar distinction that eluded many: McLuhan categorizes all media as either 'hot' or 'cool'; viewing "all media as environmental . . . he develop[ed] a taxonomy of 'hot' and 'cool' media to describe their meteorological effects on our bodies" (Marchessault, 2005, p. 176).

'Hot' media are in high definition and thus require low participation "on the part of the audience in terms of filling in the missing information" (Marchessault, 2005, p. 176). Rich in sensory data, McLuhan categorizes photographs, lectures, and movies as 'hot,' claiming that a "hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data" (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 22). Because a hot medium provides completeness for the viewer, it is low in the participation required of its audience.

In contrast, 'cool' media are low definition and therefore demand a high degree of participation, "requiring the audience to complete the message" (Marchessault, 2005, p. 176). McLuhan considers cartoons, seminars, and television to be 'cool' forms of media.

A cartoon, for example, “is ‘low definition,’ simply because very little visual information is provided” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 22); a high degree of participation is thus required from the viewer to complete the message.

The Duality of the Percept and Application

With this fundamental distinction established, given its prominence, dominance, and embeddedness in today’s society, it is natural to consider where social media is situated within McLuhan’s hot and cool media binary.

McLuhan’s percept is effectively designed as a duality—a collection of binaries—poised to posit forms of media in opposition to one another based on contrasting characteristics. As mentioned above, classic comparisons include: movies (hot) versus television (cool), photographs (hot) versus cartoons (cool), and lectures (hot) versus seminars (cool). These binaries are based on such key categorical distinctions as high definition/low definition, complete/incomplete, and low participation/high participation, among others. The comparisons cited above demonstrate that the hot-cool duality is always relative; that is, television is cool in relation to film, just as cartoons are cool in relation to photographs. It is as if there is a spectrum running from cool to hot with different media arranged along the scale, where their position is defined by the comparison between the different media.

However, as purposefully designed as McLuhan’s percept is, and as relevant as it may still be, social media does not conform to the simplistic duality. Rather, the complex, multifaceted, multifunctional, and multimodal, now ubiquitous form of modern media thrives as a hybrid of hot and cool media. In today’s dynamic mediascape, hot *and* cool media elements coexist, forming a gradient between the hot and cool binaries of McLuhan’s percept. That is, there is a depth and dimension to the new media that did not exist in McLuhan’s time. This coexistence of hot and cool media within social media advances the proposition of ‘warm’ as the most accurate label for social media when examined within the parameters of McLuhan’s percept.

The proposal for an additional median category that encompasses the multimodality and multifunctionality of social media, and accounts for the hybridity and fluidity of the new media, further underlines the growth and expansion within the industry

since the development of McLuhan's hot and cool media binaries, suggesting the 1964 percept is no longer representative of modern media. Unlike traditional forms of media on which McLuhan's percept is based, when using and consuming social media, the degree of participation required varies with each piece of content. Such a mosaic of hot and cool elements acting in unison on the user/consumer emphasizes the 'warmness' of the modern media and the hybridity of the always-on virtual ecosystem.

Thus, by applying McLuhan's hot and cool media percept to social media, this chapter advances the premise that those who engage with social media no longer experience hot and cool media individually, but rather a hybrid of hot and cool media, i.e., 'warm' media; thereby progressing the need for a median category representative of this dominant form of new media—a central category to encompass the “interact[ion] and spawn[ing of] new progeny” (1964/1994, p. 49) that McLuhan discusses in Chapter 5: “Hybrid Energy” of *Understanding Media*.

Mimicry

As established, social media has grown exponentially with undeniable success; this growth and expansion is largely attributable to imitation and the innate human desire to mimic. Mimesis, the act of imitating (introduced in Chapter 1), has become increasingly prominent with the rise in popularity of social media and social media influencing, and its embeddedness in the everyday, thus making imitation increasingly accessible and acceptable. The hybrid of hot and cool media that is present within social media enhances this natural human trait—heightening visibility and feeding the inspiration to imitate. The power of the influencer is prevalent here; they adopt the role of public icon—an idealized version of the self. Acting as surrogates for everyday citizens, today, social media influencers are “important means of sorting information . . . in a world where people are continually overwhelmed by information, turning to seemingly like-minded people to make decisions became a utilitarian choice” (Hund, 2023, p. 29).

Leveraging the hot *and* cool media affordances of social media, social media influencers exude a unique allure, a delicate balance between aspirational and attainable:

relatable, they're just like us, but they're still—it's this desire to, like, learn from them. They're not *just* like you and me, there's still some sort of

distinction between the two, but they're so much closer to who [we] are, and that I think is why people relate to them so much. (Hund, 2023, p. 75)

This positionality of social media influencers is made possible due to the coexistence of hot *and* cool media and media elements, coupled with the innate desire to imitate. This combination fosters connection, encourages engagement, and supports relationship building and community cultivation between the influencer and their audience by creating an optimal environment for the promotion of products and services. As previously identified, in the absence of such hybridity, many of these fundamental social media influencing elements and best practices would not be possible; they are enabled and sustained by the coexistence of hot and cool media.

Beyond inspiring mimicry, strategically utilizing the hybrid of hot *and* cool media and media elements available within social media can aid one in portraying authenticity, a vital attribute for successful social media influencing introduced in the first chapter. As Emily Hund outlines in her 2023 book, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*, authenticity

is the quality that makes one person more influential than another, even if they have similar metrics. A sense of authenticity sells products. . . . Carefully constructing authenticity is what has allowed some people to make real money and gain genuine satisfaction from their work making content for social media. (p. 13)

Such careful construction of authenticity is fundamentally paradoxical, indicating that one's authenticity is curated, which also reintroduces the "fluffy" and "fake" associations unpacked in the opening chapter. Undesirable labels aside, the irony of constructing authenticity is arguably enabled by the hybrid of hot and cool media and media elements available.

In addition, authenticity is typically understood as more substantial than a trait or characteristic marketable as a form of influence (which Hund suggests with this definition). Charles Lindholm's 2008 text *Culture and Authenticity* and its investigation into the nuances of the concept of authenticity can be examined here. In Chapter 4: "The Commodification of Authenticity", Lindholm explains some of the problems that arise when authenticity is viewed as just another product for sale, recognizing that "advertisers attempted to capitalize on popular disillusionment with the mechanical world of factory

production by making excessive claims for product authenticity” (p. 56). He discusses “Americans continu[ing] to believe in personal authenticity” (p. 57) and the associated challenges due to “the onslaught of advertisements and promotions of ‘the genuine’ that were becoming characteristic of modern life” (p. 57). This is evermore relevant in the case of modern-day social media and social media influencing, where advice to “be genuine” and “be authentic” is counterintuitive to the very essence of the concept.

Lindholm elaborates:

An authentic action . . . must be the direct and immediate response to spontaneous feelings expressed in preferences. In this utilitarian faith there is no ultimate meaning to be found beyond knowing and pursuing what feels good *to you*, and knowing and avoiding what feels bad *to you*. Of course, the pursuit of authenticity through realizing one’s felt preferences can be most directly expressed through consumption. In other words, commodified and media-saturated consumption has expanded to fill the void created by deep suspicions about the authenticity of commodified, media-saturated consumption, creating ‘a culture forever wedded to a dialectic between authenticity and imitation.’ (2008, p. 58)

This dialectical tension “between authenticity and imitation” is further applicable to social media and social media influencing, since authenticity and mimicry, as this section suggests, exist in contrast to one another.

A form of engagement, mimicry denotes categorically cool media due to the element of participation involved. However, such imitation is often based on high definition and rich in sensory data (i.e., hot) social media content which illustrates the convergence of hot and cool media that social media incubates. As naturally imitative creatures, it is also critical to bring awareness to how this instinctive tendency is strategically leveraged by social media influencers vis-à-vis the combination of hot and cool media and media elements that social media offers.

Choice, Agency, and Autonomy

Social media promotes ideals of newfound user/consumer choice, agency, and autonomy which persist in contrast to the highly curated, carefully crafted, purposefully prescribed, and delicately dictative ethos of the media’s content. User/consumer choice and agency (or the perception of such autonomy) is an affordance social media has

introduced to the traditional media environment. The fundamental shift in agency (from producer to consumer) signals advancement and progression within media ecology since the development of McLuhan's percept. In essence, this fundamental shift enables the user/consumer to dictate the extent to which they wish to engage with a given piece of content, regardless of its hot or cool denomination. In other words, the "temperature" of social media content is self-determined, on a case-by-case basis, by the consumer at the time of consumption. A piece of social media content may be fundamentally cool in requiring participation from the viewer to complete the message, however, the consumer may choose to view the cool content as though it were a form of hot media, deciding not to participate and/or "complete" the message. It is also plausible that the consumer may actively choose to not engage precisely because the content is too cool (i.e., too demanding, and too participatory). This demanding nature and the resulting tendency to turn away and/or shut down is revisited below, in the "Social Media/Digital Detox" section.

Furthermore, this participatory choice is not static—one may choose to passively engage with one piece of social media content but decide to actively engage with the next; again, independent from the hot or cool media characteristics the given piece of content exhibits. This highlights the depth and complexity of social media and foregrounds the hybridity of hot and cool media and media elements it presents.

The ability to choose and self-regulate the "temperature" of the social media content one is consuming, regardless of the hot or cool characteristics the content presents, exposes a fundamental departure from McLuhan's simplistic percept. It indicates advancement within the field and strengthens the case calling for modernization and expansion of the mid-1900s percept.

A Combined Experience

Further foregrounding the hybridity of social media is the fact that the average quick, simple, and mindless scroll through one's virtual newsfeed is, in reality, highly complex. As a hybrid medium, social media also hosts hybrid media: hot and cool media, as well as more complex forms of hybrid media (such as Instagram Stories, examined below). Today, the typical social media newsfeed displays both hot and cool media. Moreover, not only does a social media newsfeed present a combination of hot

and cool media in one continuous long-form format, but a single piece of social media content may contain both hot and cool elements.

A medium can be hot or cool, but it also works best when its content aligns with its temperature/categorization. Although contradictory to his popular principle that “the medium is the message”, McLuhan illustrated this notion via reference to “the match between the medium of radio and Adolf Hitler’s political persona (a persona that would have failed utterly on television)” (1964/1994, p. 14). Why would Hitler have “failed utterly” on TV? Because “TV is a medium that rejects the sharp personality” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 309). This is also precisely why, “[i]n the Kennedy-Nixon debates, those who heard them on radio received an overwhelming idea of Nixon’s superiority . . . [while] the cool TV medium . . . translated that sharp image into the impression of a phony” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 299). Television was thus “a boon for the blurry, shaggy texture of Kennedy . . . TV would prove so entirely in Kennedy’s favor that he would win the election. Without TV, Nixon had it made.” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, pp. 329-330). Although beyond the scope of this paper, this notion of aligning content (i.e., the message) with the medium it is being communicated via exists as an additional area for further study and analysis.

Instagram Stories

Instagram Stories are a prime example of this merger and overlap of hot and cool media within one single piece of social media content. The feature demonstrates the convergence and coexistence of hot and cool media and media elements. As “seconds-long glimpses of people’s lives, shared on Instagram for only 24 hours” (Bernazzani, 2022, para. 1), Instagram Stories are categorically cool—incomplete—requiring participation from the viewer to complete the message. However, the impermanent and incomplete, characteristically cool form of media content can be composed of high definition and sensory-rich hot media content—such as a photo or a video—classic forms of hot media according to McLuhan. So then, is the high definition and sensory-rich, incomplete “glimpse” into one’s life that an Instagram Story offers most appropriately categorized as ‘hot’ or ‘cool’ media? Such a rhetorical question illustrates the convergence of hot and cool media within social media, emphasizing that the new media communication technology does not conform to McLuhan’s binary. This provides additional evidence for social media as a form of ‘warm’ media—encouraging

reconsideration and reconfiguration of McLuhan's duality—to make space for the dynamism, complexity, and multimodality social media has introduced to the traditional media landscape.

Let me consider further how Instagram Stories develop the case for the warmness of social media. When creating an Instagram Story, the creator has the option to add “stickers” to their temporary content. Many of these stickers encourage participation and engagement from viewers. According to *Later*, which is the “#1 visual marketing platform for Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest . . . with over 7 million users globally” (About Later, 2023), “Instagram Poll stickers are one of the easiest ways to engage your Instagram community” (Gagliardi, 2022, para. 1). Applying a participation-prompting sticker adds further depth and dimension to the pre-existing hybrid of hot and cool media that Instagram Stories present.

The average Instagram Story can thus be most accurately categorized as ‘warm,’ a label representative of the feature’s multidimensionality and multimodality, that is, a characteristically cool, incomplete form of media composed of hot, high definition, and rich in sensory data content, which often has cool call to action (CTA) stickers layered on top. This compounding of elements showcases the coexistence of hot and cool media within social media and advances the claim that social media does not accurately fit within McLuhan’s hot and cool media binary, but rather thrives as a hybrid of the opposing forms of media.

Complicating this marriage of hot and cool media that social media presents, while also displaying the growth and development within the field, given that social media users have the agency and autonomy to choose the extent to which they engage with a given piece of content (regardless of the hot or cool media characteristics it presents) means that cool, incomplete, and participatory social media content often goes unanswered and remains incomplete. This is yet another reason why engagement persists as a recurring theme and key performance indicator (KPI) within social media influencing; participation with cool media content is no longer a guarantee. With the industry shift from producer- to consumer-led, consumers now wield the ultimate power, independently determining the extent to which they wish to engage (i.e., participate), and thus in a sense regulating the temperature of the media content for themselves, making engagement with content increasingly valuable. The intersection of hot and cool that

Instagram Stories exemplify cements the rationale for the ‘warmness’ of social media, and the proposition of a new, less rigid median category, representative of such hybridity and complexity.

Predetermined Message Completion

Expanding on the uniqueness and complexity of social media and its overlap of hot and cool media characteristics, although social media appears ‘cool’ at the outset—as an incomplete and participatory medium—when examined more thoroughly, with reference to the highly controlled and curated content it hosts, it can be ascertained that the “incomplete”, cool media content the virtual interface perpetually circulates is, in fact, relatively hot (i.e., complete). In other words, it is challenging to categorize incomplete social media content with a predetermined narrative of completion as ‘cool’ insofar as the audience participation required is minimal.

Such prescribed message completion foregrounds the paradoxical nature of user/consumer choice, agency, and autonomy social media promotes. The controlled and curated prescriptiveness of social media content exposes how choice, agency, and autonomy are illusory. Creating and sharing cool, incomplete media content with a strongly suggested narrative of completion further reflects the merger of hot and cool media that social media presents.

When (1) the perception of user/consumer choice, agency, and autonomy, and (2) the controllable nature of social media message completion is combined with the innate human desire to mimic, a quintessential habitat for the promotion of products and services (i.e., consumption) is created. Again, such a unique and indirect consumption-oriented environment is enabled by the hybrid of hot and cool media that social media possesses.

Consumption

Seeing that social media “influencer marketing has grown into a \$21.1 billion industry” (Santora, 2023, para. 4), social media influencers have undeniably replaced traditional forms of advertising and promotion, serving as “marketing juggernauts and vital components of the retail system” (Hund, 2023, p. 29). As examined in Chapter 1

and revisited in Chapter 3, brand partnerships, campaigns, and collaborations are critical forms of media content for social media influencers and brands alike; this dominant form of collaborative content is again reliant on the hybrid of hot and cool media and media elements that social media supports.

Origins of prescribed cool media messaging encouraging consumption can be observed in classic television commercials. New York University communications theory professor, Neil Postman, for example, describes a script-free McDonald's commercial in the 1990 Bill Moyers documentary *Consuming Images*. Here, Postman chronicles: "a young father taking his six-year-old daughter into McDonald's, and they're eating a cheeseburger, and they're ecstatic" (sterlingsubs, 2019). He then poses the follow-up questions: "Is that true or false? Is the picture, is the image true or false?" (sterlingsubs, 2019). Postman's description of the cool television commercial is understandably assumptive—firstly, due to its script-free design, and secondly, insofar as television is a form of cool media. Despite being categorically cool and incomplete, the commercial's narrative of completion is predetermined.

Acknowledging this prescriptiveness, Postman explains: "words don't seem to apply to that sort of thing, that just is" (sterlingsubs, 2019), suggesting there is little opportunity for interpretation. Albeit technically "incomplete", the commercial's message is relatively obvious to the viewer. In other words, it would be highly unlikely for one to watch this McDonald's commercial and conclude that they would have a negative experience at the fast-food restaurant. It is carefully designed to encourage a specific (positive) narrative of completion, one that also promotes consumption.

Although not explicitly verbalized, through prescribed message completion, the commercial urges the viewer to deduce that the young father and daughter eating their McDonald's cheeseburgers are "ecstatic". Thus, due to the innate human desire to mimic, this leads one to infer that they will have an equally positive experience with their child(ren) if they bring them to McDonald's for a cheeseburger. And thus, many will look to do just that, demonstrating how the hybrid of hot and cool media stimulates consumptive behaviours.

While 20th century television commercials occupy an entirely different realm than social media and social media influencer content, the principle of controlled message

completion and the subsequent influence on consumption remains consistent; exacerbated, condensed, and amplified on social media due to its multidimensionality and multimodality, and the complex hybrid of hot and cool media utilized to portray such suggested narratives of completion.

Here, it is also imperative to understand that both the McDonald's commercial and social media influencer-brand partnership content are promoting more than just the advertised product or service, for they leverage affective associations in a quest to sell positive results, experiences, relationships, and feelings. The impactfulness and high success rate are again due to the hot and cool media and media elements available and the ease and accessibility of creating such complex, hybrid content.

A Dynamic Spectrum

Dynamism and perpetual progression are defining features of social media and social media influencing. These are topics I discussed in the opening chapter, and they can be referenced here to further demonstrate the 'warmness' of the new media. As a communication technology in flux, in addition to presenting hot and cool media simultaneously, the ratio of hot and cool media that social media presents is also dynamic (a fundamental departure from McLuhan's static hot and cool media binaries). This adds another layer of complexity and underscores the modern media's fluidity, thereby strengthening the case for social media as a spectrum of 'warm' media, and its position between McLuhan's hot and cool media binaries.

With infinite ratios of hot and cool media possible, it is nearly impossible to accurately situate social media within McLuhan's hot and cool media binary. The complex, dynamic, perpetually progressing, and multimodal cycle of content production, distribution, and consumption the new media communication technology facilitates is not represented in McLuhan's static and simplistic binary. The harsh duality of the mid-1900s percept is outdated, providing further justification for modernization and expansion of the percept in an attempt to more accurately emulate and encapsulate the affordances, complexities, fluidity, depth, and dimension of social media.

Along with the dynamism of the media and Silicon Valley ideals of perpetual progression and reinvention, the industry sustains production, distribution, and

consumption of social media content as a cyclical constant. As such, users are constantly bombarded with media content of varying “temperatures”. This fluctuation in content temperature, coupled with the continuous stream of content that social media hosts, strengthens the case for the ‘warmness’ of the new media and stresses the need and urgency for a framework more representative of and compatible with the modern media, its complexities, and affordances.

Social Media/Digital Detox

This coexistence of hot and cool media content is demanding. High definition in form and rich in sensory data, social media content is also participatory insofar as it requires ongoing engagement. The always-on nature of these contradictory demands can be overwhelming, and at times, exhausting. Such overload prompts many to embark on a social media/digital detox—a temporary break from the media’s constant demands.

Social media/digital detoxes allude to the hybridity of social media insofar as they signal a need and desire to disconnect and decompress from the intensity of the converged new media. The desire to detox and to temporarily remove oneself from the multimedia implies the need for a pause in pressure; it denotes a sense of overload and discomfort. This unsettledness is a byproduct of the hybrid of hot and cool media simultaneously acting on the user.

This self-imposed time offline ideally provides one with the space necessary to “detox” and return online refreshed, reinvigorated, and recomposed. American celebrity, singer, and actress, Selena Gomez, recently engaged in a social media detox, sharing with her 411 million Instagram followers that she was going to be “taking a break from social” (Gomez, 2023). A common modern-day practice for consumers and producers alike, such detoxes demonstrate the demands and pressures of modern social media on its users, which stems from the hybridity of the media. This also advances the proposition for ‘warm’ as the most appropriate categorization of social media within the parameters of McLuhan’s hot and cool media percept.

As illustrated above, the compounding of hot and cool media that social media houses exacerbates user demands. This intensity, coupled with the dynamism and perpetually progressing nature of the multimedia is challenging to navigate. The

normalization of social media/digital detoxes emphasizes the persistent pressure to participate and consistently perform at one's best. This often leads to feeling overwhelmed and insufficient—indicative of the hybridity of the media—complex and demanding.

Further Examining the Interplay of Hot and Cool Media within Social Media

In Areen F. Aldardasawi's 2017 article "McLuhanian Perspective of Facebook", they argue that Facebook is categorically 'cool', explaining: "Facebook can never be a hot media for it contains many various contents and media mates which prevent [it] from perceiving information in high-definition quality" (p. 65). This claim (which can be extended to all of social media) highlights the multidimensionality, multimodality, and complexity of the new media with a myriad of content of varying temperatures presented (and consumed) en masse, in a constant stream-like format. To Aldardasawi, engaging with content in this manifold manner inhibits one from engaging "with complete concentration and . . . [no] distraction" (2017, p. 65). However, it is important to recognize that the "various contents and media mates" Aldardasawi references could, individually, be forms of hot media content; but due to the packaging of the content and aggregate style of delivery, it cannot be perceived in hot, "high-definition quality" (2017, p. 65). The merging of media content and combined delivery style Aldardasawi describes further establishes the hybrid of hot and cool media that social media houses, while indirectly supporting the rationale for the 'warmness' of the new media insofar as it provides a continuous flow of a variety of media content and media temperatures.

Continuing their argument for the coolness of Facebook (social media), Aldardasawi's article calls attention to the sharing-obsessive behaviour the new media has cultivated—iterative of the participatory, cool media characteristics of the communication technology. They explain: "Facebook is very cold because it is converged, involves high participation" (2017, p. 65). This convergence Aldardasawi speaks of parallels Mielo's student findings when they applied McLuhan's hot and cool media percept to HDTV, observing "a conversion from what once was a cool medium to what is now an 'all inclusive' or hot medium" (Mielo, 2004, p. 216).

Leading with fundamentally cool characteristics, Facebook/social media was designed as a participatory virtual public sphere, a host for a multidirectional flow of information, sharing, and communication. However, when examined more thoroughly, the multimodal and multipurpose, complex, and perpetually progressing digital interface initially perceived as 'cool', is equally hot in that it houses fundamentally hot media such as photos and videos. This convergence of hot and cool media is again illustrative of the hybridity of the multimedia—thereby advancing the proposition for social media as 'warm'—and suggesting a need for review and reconsideration of McLuhan's claims. Nevertheless, as outlined at the outset of this chapter, McLuhan's hot and cool media binary remains an effective pedagogical tool for examining new media. A simple and well-established framework, it can consistently be applied to media to extrapolate advancements, changes, growth, and adaptations, while equally revealing the persistence of traditional hot and cool media elements.

As Aldardasawi recognizes, social media structurally involves engagement with a variety of content of varying formats and temperatures. Social media features and engagement tools present a similar hybrid; a participatory, passive "like" is a quintessential example. The overlap of hot and cool media characteristics that the virtual "like" entails also surfaces the concept of slacktivism, another social media-based practice that has emerged as a result of the hybridity of the media. This again showcases the complexity and intricacy of (seemingly simple and mindless) social media features, further suggesting that the new media cannot be relegated to the duality of McLuhan's hot and cool media percept.

The dynamism and unpredictability of social media and social media content due to the user-led nature of the media is an additional contributor to the fluctuation in content temperature insofar as users regularly create with both hot and cool media. Such user-generated hybrid content, coupled with the newsfeed format of social media and the addition of algorithms, punctuates the complexity and hybridity of new media.

As established, there are infinite ratios of hot and cool media that one may encounter when using social media. This stems from the overabundance of content; the multimodality of platforms; and the algorithmically-informed, consumer-driven nature of the media, combined with the dynamism and perpetual progression of the industry and technology. This in-flux ethos is central to the intrigue of social media, offering an

endless stream of new, fresh, and engaging media content and indicating the unconfined nature of both the media itself, and of the content it circulates. The degree of “completeness” and participation required is thus equally in flux—underscoring the ‘warmness’ of the media.

Aldardasawi explains: “Cool Media requires the individual to participate perceptually by filling in the missing data” (2017, p. 14). But what if the incomplete, cool media content is presented via a traditionally hot media format, such as a photo or video? Similar to previous rhetorical questions posed, this question is intended to highlight the coexistence of hot and cool media within social media. This apparent hybridity solidifies the recommendation of ‘warm’ as the most suitable category for social media within the confines of McLuhan’s mid-1900s percept—encouraging re-evaluation of the distinct duality. Although Aldardasawi makes an argument for the coolness of Facebook (which can be extended to social media) at the outset of their article, following their review of the new media, they reach a similar conclusion to the perspective presented in this chapter: “The internet doesn't really fit into McLuhan's ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ dichotomy. It encourages participation but it also sucks up our attention and dominates our senses.” (2017, p. 14). Aldardasawi’s observation of the coexistence of hot and cool media encapsulates the uniqueness of social media—its hybridity and complexity, and thus its inability to be accurately categorized within McLuhan’s simplistic binary, while also aligning with Logan’s observation that “the use of computers is both hot and cool” (2016, p. 442).

This new, converged, and complex form of media displays unmatched growth and development within the larger media landscape since the inception of McLuhan’s binary percept approximately 60 years ago. Such shifts and advancements (e.g., consumer capabilities and user-driven design) outlined and reviewed above through a series of miniature case study examples reveals key ways in which social media has outgrown McLuhan’s basic hot and cool media categories. The perpetually progressing nature of social media, coupled with its multimodality, multidimensionality, and multifunctionality is opportunistic for facilitating a review of McLuhan’s mid-1900s percept—suggesting a ‘warm’ median category be introduced to the duality to more accurately embody the complexity, intricacies, and hybridity of social media and new media communication technologies, thereby creating space for the spectrum of media.

If Aldardasawi can argue for the coolness of social media, an argument of equal strength can be made for the hotness of the media. Individual perspective and point of view enters the picture here—as cool as social media is, it can also be described as hot in its use of photos and videos. As McLuhan suggests, they “do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience . . . [photographs and videos] are, therefore, low in participation” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 23). In this respect, a significant portion of social media content is ‘hot’ with many social media platforms, such as Instagram for example, primarily functioning as photo and video sharing platforms, a consideration that presents a counter argument to Aldardasawi’s categorization of Facebook (social media) as cool. This suggests these binary categories of ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ are no longer useful; a separate, median category is needed to accurately represent social media. In other words, it is pointless to try to apply McLuhan’s measure to the complex, hybrid matter at hand; thus this paper subscribes to a third category: ‘warm’.

The hot elements of social media “sucks up our attention and dominates our senses. When we gaze into a computer screen, we tune out everything else” (Aldardasawi, 2017, p. 72). A trance-like state unique to the new media, users often find themselves endlessly and aimlessly scrolling, “well filled with data” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 22), but only passively participating—absorbed rather than actively engaged.

Given the multidimensionality and multimodality of social media, it is typical for more than one sense to be engaged simultaneously. But if more than one sense is engaged with complete concentration, is each sense truly fully engaged? Is it even possible for more than one sense to be fully and completely engaged at the same time? Such questions are purposefully posed to demonstrate the depth, dimension, and complexity of social media, advancing: (1) the rationale as to why social media cannot be reduced to comply with McLuhan’s simple hot-cool dichotomy, (2) the proposal for social media as a form of ‘warm’ media, and (3) the agenda for expansion and modernization of McLuhan’s percept via the addition of an unrestricted ‘warm’ median category. Such expansion and modernization would not only more accurately represent social media, but it would also serve to demonstrate McLuhan’s awareness that media can become hybrid.

McLuhan also discusses the differing effects of hot and cool media citing the explosivity and intensity of high definition, hot media content in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964/1994, p. 23). Such explosivity and intensity are apparent within social media and social media content, providing further evidence for the hotness of the new media.

Returning to the chapter's premise and proposition to categorize social media as 'warm', the majority of complete, high definition, and explosive (i.e., hot) photo and video content circulated on social media is shared in an incomplete (i.e., cool) manner and/or in conjunction with cool media elements, thus prompting participation and engagement. This is illustrated in the case study example of Instagram Stories with the layering of cool media elements (e.g., participation- prompting "stickers") on top of traditionally hot forms of media content (i.e., photos and videos). The pivotal element of engagement identified in Chapter 1 re-emerges here. As a KPI within social media and social media influencing, engagement (i.e., audience participation with one's content) is highly sought after; such engagement is encouraged through the creation and distribution of incomplete content, requiring the consumer to participate to complete the message. However, in today's consumer-led mediascape, participation with incomplete, cool media content is not guaranteed. In addition to aforementioned factors of content overload, inundation, oversaturation, and exhaustion, social media presents a fundamental shift in power (from producer to consumer) with consumers now wielding the ultimate power, dictating the extent of their engagement and participation with each piece of social media content they encounter (regardless of the hot or cool media characteristics it presents). This user agency and the autonomy to self-regulate media content temperature and participation is (understandably) not accounted for in McLuhan's thinking, and this is an important way social media departs from the traditional media and media structures McLuhan's binary percept is based on.

In response to this shift, social media influencers have been forced to strategically leverage the hybrid of hot and cool media elements available to garner and cultivate sustained engagement. This is often done through the creation and distribution of high definition and sensory-rich, incomplete content, i.e., a hybrid of hot and cool media. Engagement and participation with hot media signify a merger of traditionally opposing concepts which McLuhan's hot and cool media binary presents as independent of each other. Given that McLuhan supported the idea of hybrid media, as evidenced in

Chapter 4: “Hybrid Energy” of his text *Understanding Media*, it is perplexing to comprehend why this mixing (1964/1994, p. 53) and “fusion” (1964/1994, p. 48) that McLuhan speaks of is not included in his hot-cool media percept. Social media has fundamentally reshaped, reconfigured, and recalibrated society’s understanding of mediascapes and associated structures, processes, boundaries, content, engagement, and behaviour patterns.

The recent growing trend of “photo dumps” can be examined here to further illustrate this fusion of hot and cool media within social media. In her April 2023 *Later* article “Everything You Need to Know About Photo Dumps”, Amanda Demeku explains: “A photo dump is a collection of photos and videos gathered together in one post on Instagram . . . Rather than perfectly edited photos and videos, a photo dump is a low-effort collection that conveys a story or mood” (para. 5). As the name suggests, photo dumps are random and unrelated pieces of visual content presented with little context, their relation often broadly referenced with a short, fleeting, incomplete caption/title: “[t]hink a blurry selfie followed by an image of a half-eaten sandwich, a video at the beach, and a comical meme or GIF” (Demeku, 2023, para. 6). This style of content sharing is a prime example of the synergy of hot and cool media that social media houses insofar as photo dumps are essentially a collection of hot media (e.g., photos and/or videos) compiled and shared in an incomplete, cool media format, requiring the viewer/consumer to engage with the content and participate by “completing” the story/mood being conveyed.

Despite appearing carefree, photo dumps are undeniably curated in an attempt to portray a specific story or mood, as Demeku suggests; this form of social media content is therefore inherently paradoxical. The attempt to convey a particular story/mood through one’s photo dump resurfaces themes of prescribed cool media message completion. As pointed out earlier, this process encourages one to question if the ‘cool’ media they are consuming can truly be categorized as ‘cool’ and incomplete given the predetermined narrative of completion. The necessity of such considerations also underlines the merging of hot and cool media within social media. And thus, it is increasingly evident that McLuhan’s distinction between hot and cool media does not (and frankly could not) account for such complexity and convergence. Spotlighting this new style of content sharing poignantly illustrates the reformatting and reconfiguring of traditionally independent, opposite forms of media, thereby further justifying the proposal

for the categorization of social media as ‘warm’—demonstrating advancement within the field and the development of a spectrum of media and media communication technologies. This further suggests modernization and expansion of McLuhan’s percept more accurately represents modern media and embraces its progressive agenda.

Although a less salient principle, McLuhan notes that “the hot form excludes, and the cool one includes” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 23). Social media, however, is both exclusive and inclusive, supporting the case for the hybridity of social media and categorizing the multimedia as ‘warm’. Fundamentally participatory (i.e., cool), social media is inclusive, inviting and inciting participation, engagement, sharing, and connection. However, through the forms of hot media it circulates (e.g., photos and videos), social media is equally exclusionary; such exclusion is apparent and strategically leveraged within social media influencing. As explored in Chapter 1, tactics of exclusivity, scarcity/limitation, and/or qualification are regularly employed due to their increased likelihood of being shared. Associated with value and superiority, these exclusionary elements generate social currency and create a have/have not divide, garnering buzz, interest, and intrigue. So then, is social media, and more specifically, social media influencing hot or cool? It can be categorized as cool because it is incomplete—it demands engagement, participation, and completion; however, elements of social media and social media influencing are also hot—highly visual, high definition, and complete—illustrating the dialectical tension that social media and social media influencing perpetuates. This is why social media influencing is most accurately categorized as ‘warm’.

Considerations

While Robert K. Logan recognizes the hybridity of social media, concluding “the use of computers is both hot and cool” (2016, p. 442), he goes on to suggest that, due to this hybridity, McLuhan’s hot and cool media percept is *not* useful for understanding new media (2016, p. 442). This is where Logan’s work diverges from the premise of this analysis. As this chapter establishes, regardless of its simplistic duality, McLuhan’s mid-1900s hot and cool media percept is still an effective pedagogical tool for studying modern media (i.e., social media) insofar as it provides a clear and well-established starting point for review and analysis; a framework to build upon. Furthermore, by

utilizing McLuhan's static and dated percept to examine dynamic new media, gaps and opportunities for modernization and expansion of his mid-1900s work become clear.

Rather than disregard the percept as Logan suggests, McLuhan's dichotomy can be employed to reveal the ways in which media has developed and advanced, and understand how social media departs from traditional, simplistic media binaries. In other words, McLuhan's percept can be used as a fixed point of reference indicating progression and expansion within the field, offering valuable insight regarding industry growth, trends, and the future of the discipline.

Conclusion

Through an examination of social media and social media influencing elements, this chapter argues for the hybridity of social media by showcasing the ways in which hot and cool media coexist within social media and individual social media features. Such apparent hybridity presents a solid case for categorizing social media as 'warm,' suggesting the dynamic and complex new media cannot be reduced and relegated to the simplistic hot and cool media binaries of McLuhan's mid-1900s percept. Moreover, 'warmness' is arguably more compelling than 'coolness'. There is an intellectual and psychological element associated, requiring a deeper level of engagement. As mentioned, 'warmness' introduces dialectical tension—"this" *and* "that"—a recurring theme resulting from the dialectical tension within social media influencing and marketing.

Nevertheless, as this chapter demonstrates, McLuhan's hot and cool media percept remains an effective pedagogical tool for examining new media insofar as hot and cool media and media elements not only persist but coexist—no longer independent from one another—reflecting the multidimensionality, multimodality, multifunctionality, complexity, and dynamism of social media. Considering social media and social media influencing within the context of McLuhan's percept is perhaps most productive for discussions than conclusions.

Chapter III.

Social Media as an Ampli(fyre)

Social media is not selective—if the given content satisfies the basic characteristics of shareability, it will be shared.

Introduction

Following Jonah Berger’s recommendation introduced in Chapter 1 “to look at both successes and failures” (2013, p. 17), to facilitate a comprehensive review of social media influencing, this chapter adopts a critical analytical lens by examining social media influencer-based scandals and failures. This alternative perspective on the new media communication technology is intended to complement issues presented in the previous chapters, spearheaded by two case studies: (1) beauty YouTuber and social media influencer Olivia Jade’s involvement in the Operation Varsity Blues college admissions scandal, and (2) Fyre Festival, an exclusive promotional luxury music festival turned fraudulent false alarm, the “brainchild” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 138) of co-founders American entrepreneur William (Billy) Z. McFarland and American Rapper Ja Rule.

This chapter examines social media and social media influencing as an ampli(fyre)¹; repercussions and ramifications of scandal and scandal spillover; the deep and unavoidable embeddedness of social media in everyday life; and the unique relationality between the online and the offline.

With reference to celebrity culture, which is commonly viewed as the precursor to social media influencing, scandals and failures are regularly foregrounded as various media outlets can be prone to fixate on celebrity and public scandals due to their inherent shareable qualities. Beyond thriving as an archetype of shareable content and a natural topic of interest, as Berger advocates, it is the collapse, breakdown, scandal, and

¹ A play on the word “amplifier” incorporating McFarland’s spelling of the word “fyre”.

failure that are oftentimes an opportunity for additional learning and deeper understanding.

Through a review of social media influencer-based scandals and failures, this chapter demonstrates the infiltration of social media (and thus social media influencing) in modern society, and chronicles the impacts and implications of such complex, inescapable integration.

While these two cases are negative instances insofar as they foreground scandal, fraud, and failure, I am equally aware of how social media influencers can use their skills and platform for socially productive purposes. Oftentimes we require cases that profoundly demonstrate the opposite behaviour to fully understand the average action. Thus, such an examination of these extreme cases in turn demonstrates the potential value of social media influencing when executed responsibly—e.g., advancing societal interests for public good. Social media influencer content and influencer-brand partnerships focused on mental health during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic are a prime example of social media influencing for positive social change. Many social media influencers partnered with such online counseling platforms as BetterHelp and TELUS Health in an effort to increase transparency, diffuse stigma, and shift the narrative associated with mental health challenges and counseling—positioning mental health struggles as common and relatable.

If Chapter 1: “Influencer Instruments” serves as a survey and synthesis of social media influencing elements, Chapter 3 acts as an *application*, a practical chapter demonstrating *how* these fundamental elements of social media influencing and shareability are not only prevalent, but heightened in the case of social media-based scandals and failures.

Due to the embeddedness of social media in society, there are consistently online *and* offline implications to consider, while the perpetual progression of the media means regulations are constantly trailing. As evidenced in this chapter’s case study examinations, this dynamism, coupled with the capabilities of social media, is often exploited. There are countless social media influencer scandals and failures ripe for critical analysis; these two infamous cases were selected based on their popularity, relevancy, timeliness, direct applicability to the topic of study, and comparability. Further

substantiating the selection of McFarland's and Rule's Fyre Festival for critical analysis, Gilbert et al. in their 2020 article "Fyre Festival: The good, the bad, the ugly and its impact on influencer marketing," note the opportunity for trend analysis, explaining: "The rise and fall of this event can be seen through the lens of social media to observe trends in . . . influencer marketing" (p. 9).

Defining Scandal

Prior to examining each of these scandals and their respective social media and social media influencer relations, an understanding of "scandal" and the parameters of the term within the context of this chapter's analyses must first be established. According to Belinda Kintu's and Karim Ben-Slimane's 2020 *International Journal of Market Research* article, "Companies responses to scandal backlash caused by social media influencers,"

scandal can broadly be defined as a publicized instance of transgression, either real or alleged, that runs counter to social norms, typically resulting in condemnation and discredit . . . A defining feature of scandals is their ability to contaminate select others, with particular reference to 'those associated personally, institutionally, or even categorically with the suspect'. (p. 667)

Seeing that scandals run counter to prevailing norms, it is interesting to consider how social media influencing and social conventions intersect. As evidenced below, in the cases of Jade and of McFarland/Fyre Festival, both public figures were "contaminated" (Kintu and Ben-Slimane, 2020, p. 667) due to their personal involvement in their respective scandals; scandals serve important communicational functions.

Social Media and Social Media Influencing

Social media serves as a site of intentional and unintentional amplification. The virtual echo chamber is a prime platform for scalable content dissemination, with social media influencers acting as an accelerant. Such amplification has ramifications, however, demonstrating the integration and infiltration of social media in everyday life.

As suggested in Chapter 1, amplification of content is increasingly imperative within the oversaturated, content-driven, always-on virtual environment of social media.

However, as desirable as virality is, it can be equally detrimental, harming one's brand, identity, reputation, career, and livelihood if the amplified content is negative. This is evident in both cases examined here where unregulated and uncontrollable amplification resulted in undesirable repercussions and ramifications that negatively affected the relevant stakeholders. The multifactorial impacts and implications of social media-based amplification stems from the immersion of social media in society and the increasing overlap between the online and the offline.

Parameters and Scope

On April 6, 2023, Billy McFarland, was released from prison after serving approximately four years of his six-year sentence (Keith, 2023) for two counts of wire fraud associated with his failed Fyre Festival. The Operation Varsity Blues college admissions scandal, made public in March 2019, involved comparable legalities with 33 parents (Jaschik, 2019) charged in association with William (Rick) Singer's intricate "side door" (Sandel, 2020, p. 15) entry scheme—an illegal method circumventing traditional college admission entrance criteria, enabling wealthy parents to secure their children college admission. The legalities associated with each case demonstrate the magnitude of the respective scandals. Although necessary to acknowledge, for the purpose of this critical analytical chapter, the legal matters of each case will be set aside to ensure a focused examination.

Although there were dozens of families involved in the college admissions scandal, I am going to focus on the case of Olivia Jade, social media influencer and daughter of fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli and actress Lori Loughlin who were both charged with fraud in the college admissions bribery scandal. I will focus on Jade chiefly because she is well-known. This targeted approach will also facilitate a more comprehensive review of the issues even as it represents a situation that neatly parallels a separate scandal that engulfed the ill-fated Fyre Music Festival.

Case Overviews

a. Olivia Jade - Case Details

Youngest daughter of American actress Lori Loughlin and fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli, American beauty YouTuber and social media influencer, Olivia Jade, was entrenched in the (now) infamous and highly publicized 2019 college admissions scandal. The sophisticated conspiracy dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” culminated in the charging of “thirty-three wealthy parents with engaging in an elaborate cheating scheme to get their children admitted to elite universities, including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, and the University of Southern California” (Sandel, 2020, p. 13). In the case of Jade and her older sister Isabella (Bella) Rose, their celebrity parents paid college-counseling consultant William (Rick) Singer “\$500,000 to get their two daughters admitted to USC [University of Southern California] as bogus recruits to the crew team” (Sandel, 2020, p. 13). Singer “ran a business that catered to anxious, affluent parents” (Sandel, 2020, p. 13), providing “side door” acceptance to top US universities. Despite being illegal, Singer’s “cost-effective alternative . . . of bribes and fake test scores” (Sandel, 2020, p. 15) guaranteed admission.

Addressing the gravity of the college admissions scandal, Michael J. Sandel, in his 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* says that:

The admissions scandal provoked universal outrage . . . But the outrage expressed something deeper than anger at privileged parents using illicit means to help their kids get into prestigious colleges . . . it was an emblematic scandal, one that raised larger questions about who gets ahead, and why. (p. 14)

Sandel’s observation highlights broader themes of wealth, privilege, power, and inequality. And, given the title of his book: *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* it is worth noting that the idea of merit itself—i.e., who deserves what in a capitalist society—was a subject of significant concern here, too.

The scale of Singer’s “side door” operation and its sharable characteristics (with reference to Chapter 1) resulted in professional and legal repercussions. Involvement in the elaborate scandal cost Jade, “a successful beauty YouTuber, with more than 1.3 million followers on Instagram, 1.9 subscribers on YouTube, and her very own makeup

collaboration with Sephora” (Lubitz, 2019, para. 6), numerous career-defining collaborations and brand partnerships which also illustrates the interwovenness of social media and social media influencing in society.

Referencing this overlap between the online and the offline, Kintu and Ben-Slimane note: “With the ever-increasing use of alternative methods of marketing coupled with the popularity of social media and the appeal of influencers, many organizations have entered into partnerships with social media personalities” (2020, p. 666). Such partnering creates a natural, informal association between the influencer and the brand. Thus,

[w]hen a brand partners with well-known personalities, the brand is in essence associating that person’s public persona with the values and reputation of their brand’s intrinsic [sic] along with the reputation that the brand has worked so hard to build up. (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020, p. 666)

Therefore, “[n]egative press around a partner can put an organization’s brand at risk for being ‘guilty by association,’ leaving the organization’s brand vulnerable to any criticism that the influencer may face” (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020, pp. 666-667). Fear of being “guilty by association” prompted many popular international brands including Sephora, Princess Polly, Amazon, Estée Lauder Companies Inc., and TRESemmé, among others to publicly cut ties with the young social media influencer, rescinding partnership agreements when reports of Jade’s involvement in Singer’s college admissions scandal were publicized. These contract cancellations were further motivated by the notion “that ‘the internet never forgets’” (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020, p. 667).

This unwritten association between partners, e.g., brand and social media influencer, (and thus “guilty by association” in times of negative press) highlights the unique positionality and embeddedness of social media and social media influencing in modern society, and the ramifications of scandal spillover, i.e., “effects they [brands] may face arising from the actions or behavior of an influencer, associated or partnered with them for influencer marketing purposes” (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020, p. 667).

The increasingly blurred lines between the online and the offline results in both online *and* offline implications when events occur. For Jade, such overlap meant losing significant brand partnerships and collaborations, and, at least temporarily, her career as a social media influencer. Sephora, for example, cut ties with the beauty influencer,

ending its partnership with Jade and discontinuing her exclusive six-shade eyeshadow palette, stating: “After careful review of recent developments, we have made the decision to end the Sephora Collection partnership with Olivia Jade, effective immediately” (France, 2019, para. 12). Princess Polly (an online Australia-based fashion boutique) responded similarly when the scandal was publicized, withdrawing Jade’s limited edition capsule clothing collection, and ultimately dropping the influencer (*Gold Coast Bulletin*). Providing further insight on public declarations of brand-influencer disconnect and dissociation, Kintu and Ben-Slimane explain:

the behavior and actions of influencers and the public condemnation of such actions can spillover to the brands they are associated with. As negative sentiment grows following a scandal, consumers begin attaching negative associations with the brands linked to the tarnished influencers, calling for brands to end their partnerships or face loss of support by consumers. (2020, p. 668)

What is Brand and Why is it so Important?

Synonymous with economic success, brand is the cornerstone of a company’s public image and identity, both foundational features in today’s reputation-obsessed society. The pervasiveness of this identity-based fixation informs and guides corporate practices. Brand is based on sets of relations and the creation of both real and perceived connections. Branding involves meaning making, and the development of linkages and associations. At its core, brand is fixated on creating and maintaining brand image and brand identity, i.e., “the associations that a brand holds for consumers” (Lury, 2004, pp. 9-10).

Building on shareability- and amplification-related findings from Chapter 1, and as established above, the public revelation of Olivia Jade’s involvement in the college admissions scandal tarnished her brand, reputation, career, and livelihood, for she was now associated with the “largest college admissions scandal ever prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice” (Nadworny & Treviño, 2020, para. 3). These consequences show the truth of Kintu’s and Ben-Slimane’s observation “that ‘the internet never forgets’” (2020, p. 667). They further demonstrate the impacts and implications of social media-based amplification while also justifying the dissociative actions and redacting of partnerships by brands in an attempt to safeguard brand reputation, image, and public perception from scandal spillover and “guilty by association” tendencies. Such urgency

initiated by pillar brand conglomerates to publicly divorce Jade is again indicative of the embeddedness of social media and social media influencing in today's society, the overlap between the online and the offline, and the impacts and implications of these modern realities.

With a career and livelihood founded on social media, this abrupt slaughtering of brand partnerships considerably impacted Jade and forced her to navigate career-altering withdrawals and terminations. This review of such repercussions exposes: (1) the amplification properties of social media, (2) the dominance of social media and social media influencing in everyday life, (3) the implications of the blurring of lines between the online with the offline, and (4) the innate associative tendencies related to brand-influencer partnerships. These four core themes can be equally extracted from the Fyre Festival case. Social media influencers are so deeply and fundamentally embedded in the modern marketplace that their fall, or rather "contamination" (2020, p. 667) as Kintu and Ben-Slimane refer to it, due to scandal association, is less of a fall in the moral sense than it is a falloff in terms of sales, promotions, partnerships, and credibility. This calls for consideration of the connection between markets and personalities as a modern phenomenon.

b. Fyre Festival - Case Details

Similar to the way that brands recognized the extent of Olivia Jade's online reach and acted accordingly, in 2016, Billy McFarland and Ja Rule strategically leveraged the reach and influence of A-list celebrities and social media influencers to promote their exclusive luxury music festival: Fyre Festival. The elite event was intended to promote their talent booking app FYRE, which was "designed to help customers book celebrity guests for private events, something typically done through agents and high-level contacts" (Newton, 2020, p. 1), redefining "how we engage audiences, consume media and share content by connecting consumers, celebrities and brands through live experiences" (Bilton, n.d., slide 4). Slated to take place on the Bahamian island of Great Exuma, Fyre Festival promised an "experience exceed[ing] all expectations . . . [that] will ignite that type of energy, that type of power" (Bilton, n.d., slide 14).

To launch the promotional event, McFarland and Rule enlisted 400 celebrities and social media influencers with well-established and sizable social media followings.

As designated “Fyre Starters”, the engaged influencers, including such notables as models Kendall Jenner, Bella Hadid, and Haley Baldwin, would “ignite the Fyre Festival” (Bilton, n.d., slide 21) through a highly coordinated influencer marketing campaign. Such calculated marketing efforts by the cofounders demonstrates their awareness of social media influencing and its critical role in successful promotion.

With a multiannual vision and direct access to A-list celebrities and influencers, the “coordinated influencer marketing campaign” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140) flaunted a collective reach of 300 million people in just 24 hours (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 12). This swift and sizable reach was achieved via the engaged influencers each simultaneously posting an “ambiguous orange tile” (Bilton, n.d., slide 21) to their static Instagram feed. This vague visual content, coupled with the considerable scale of the coordinated dissemination created buzz by garnering attention, interest, and intrigue—the key objectives of the Instagram-based influencer marketing campaign.

Fyre Festival was quickly deemed a false alarm, however, since from the outset it “was promoted . . . based on false claims” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140). Warning signs included festival producers quitting “when they realized the enormity of the task to get the site ready” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140) and, although not initially apparent to the public, advance payments (due to the cashless and cardless nature of the event) were

needed in order to present a stopgap solution to Fyre’s cash flow problems. Fyre received almost \$2 million from its guests putting money on their wristbands that was used, in part, to pay back a \$3 million loan and cover other short-term cash flow needs. [Furthermore] . . . Fyre employees started receiving their pay late and then were not given the full amount. As the date of the festival became closer, employees received no pay. (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140)

Adding fuel to the fraud, the empty promises the promotional event was founded on became instantly apparent when celebrities and influencers arrived “on a totally different island” (Newton, 2020, p. 1) than originally advertised and were greeted *not* by luxury villas and gourmet meals, but by “emergency tents left over from a hurricane . . . [and] a prepackaged cheese sandwich in a Styrofoam container” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 138). With insufficient basic necessities and a collective concern for general safety and well-being, some studies even categorize the failed event as a “crisis” (Gilbert

et al., 2020, p. 11), citing the “dangerous and panicked situation among attendees . . . stranded on a remote island without basic provisions—that was closer to ‘The Hunger Games’ or ‘Lord of the Flies’ than Coachella” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 142). This movie-like disaster—an archetype of viral social media content—presented key characteristics of shareability and buzz, including: remarkability, exclusivity, ambiguity, and elitism.

Moreover, due to the status of McFarland’s and Rule’s invitees, “[t]he events of the night . . . reported by attendees on their personal social media profiles” (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 11) quickly garnered attention and widespread dissemination—again underlining the amplification capabilities of social media and social media influencers. In the same way the engaged “Fyre Starters” had a combined launch reach of 300 million people in just 24 hours, their sharing of the festival’s failures to social media was naturally received by an audience comparable in size, sparking attention and kindling further circulation. As the title of Gilbert et al.’s article “Fyre Festival: The good, the bad, the ugly and its impact on influencer marketing” suggests, social media is *not* selective, for if the given content satisfies the basic characteristics of shareability, it will be shared.

The Result: Repercussions and Ramifications

McFarland’s and Rule’s promotional event ultimately back(fyred)². The quick collapse of Fyre Festival spotlighted McFarland’s poor professional conduct and questionable ethics, while also adding to his “history of being a fraudulent entrepreneur” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 142). The elaborate ploy resulted in a six-year prison sentence for McFarland on two counts of wire fraud.

Beyond McFarland’s jail time, the failure and fraudulence associated with Fyre Festival had negative repercussions for many of the high profile “Fyre Starters”. Kendall Jenner, for example, received significant backlash for her involvement in the event and was sued for failing to adhere to Federal Trade Commission (FTC) laws which require “influencers . . . to explicitly identify any posts that they been [sic] paid for by including ‘#ad’ in the post” (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140).

² A play on the word “backfired” incorporating McFarland’s spelling of the word “fyre”.

Discussion and Analysis

Labeled “the cultural experience of the decade” (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 12) by cofounders McFarland and Rule, Fyre Festival relied primarily on social media influencer marketing for promotion; the extravagant case is thus an obvious choice to contemplate when critically examining social media influencing. The case exemplifies the amplification capabilities of social media and social media influencing, while concurrently highlighting the importance of consuming social media content with caution. This need for caution, awareness, and informed engagement also reinforces the unrealistic, and at times ambiguous, false, and/or deceptive nature of social media and social media influencer content as introduced in Chapter 1.

Further advancing the discussions from Chapter 1 related to the demanding, calculated, curated, and jealousy-inducing nature of social media influencer content, Fyre Festival’s misleading marketing and promotional content rife with empty promises showcases how social media users “are now [more] vulnerable than ever to falling victim to these unethical deceptive representations” (Pacifico et al., 2019, para. 1). Jenner alludes to this in her response to

criticism about her involvement in the event . . . [sharing:] You get reached out to by people to [sic], whether it be to promote or help or whatever, and you never know how these things are going to turn out, sometimes it’s a risk. I definitely do as much research as I can, but sometimes there isn’t much research you can do because it’s a starting brand and you kind of have to have faith in it and hope it will work out the way people say it will. (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 21)

Like Jenner’s notes concerning risk, lack of information, and trust, Olivia Jade’s audience was similarly naïve, innocent victims of unethical, deceptive, and ultimately inaccurate representations of the beauty YouTuber and social media influencer regarding her admission to USC. The misrepresentations and falsehoods present in both case studies punctuate the meticulously crafted, highly curated, highlight reel style of social media and social media influencer content and its perpetuation of a fabricated version of the self.

In the case of Olivia Jade’s college admissions scandal, such public deception and “side door” entry was necessary since she would not otherwise have been accepted

to USC. Beyond the classic college experience persisting as a personal desire for Jade (Mauch, 2020), the common milestone is also a relatable topic and point of connection; it is therefore a prime angle for content creation. The value of such relatability has a dual purpose: (1) for Jade, and (2) for brand partnerships, and would have allowed her to create content that resonates with her audience demographic. This resurfaces key social media influencing elements of authenticity, relatability, engagement, and connection introduced in Chapter 1.

Rather than being served (understandably) curated college content by the social media influencer, Jade's audience received false and deceptive content. With social media functioning as an echo chamber and an amplifier of the good, the bad, and the ugly (as the title of the article by Gilbert et al. suggests), when Jade's "side door" admission to USC was publicly exposed, it quickly made international headlines insofar as the story satisfied key characteristics of shareability.

As discussed in Chapter 1, sharing on social media is motivated by a myriad of factors. Key drivers of shareability prevalent in both case studies include remarkability and exclusivity. The remarkability of Fyre Festival is underscored in Mark Abadi's *Insider* article, "This leaked Fyre Festival pitch deck shows how Billy McFarland was able to secure millions for the most overhyped festival in history". Abadi tells his audience to "read on to see some of the most shocking, outlandish, and surreal slides from the Fyre Festival pitch deck" (2023, para. 6). His choice of such extreme adjectives calls attention to the remarkability of the case. Further remarkability and elements of exclusivity stem from the social status of the individuals involved, i.e., the extensive collection of A-list celebrities and social media influencers ("Fyre Starters") that McFarland and Rule amassed to launch and promote the elite luxury music festival. In Jade's case, the exclusivity is two-fold: (1) her family's ability to utilize Singer's costly (i.e., exclusive) "side door" service, and (2) the inherent exclusivity and elitism associated with prestigious American colleges such as USC. As noted above, Sandel also alludes to this exclusivity in his 2020 book via references including: "privileged parents" (p. 14), "larger questions about who gets ahead, and why" (p. 14), and money overriding merit (p. 15). The remarkability of the college admissions scandal speaks for itself as an elaborate, covert multimillion dollar "side door" entry operation involving a host of celebrities and other notable individuals.

Fear of scandal spillover resulted in a cascade of repercussions in Olivia Jade's case. To circumvent "guilty by association" consequences which were quickly emerging, many brands that had partnered with Jade rescinded contracts and canceled collaborations. Such abrupt, simultaneous, and publicized disconnect by a series of popular international brands had significant and permanent implications for the young social media influencer and her career. This again illuminates the integration of social media and social media influencing in society and everyday life, and the impacts of the overlap between the online and the offline—a relatively new realm where brand image and reputation must be strategically maintained, constantly considered, meticulously monitored, and (pro)actively navigated.

Similar to brands terminating partnerships and publicly cutting ties with Jade to avoid scandal spillover, "guilty by association", and resulting repercussions, many Fyre Festival stakeholders became increasingly apprehensive as the date of the event approached and acted accordingly. As mentioned, festival producers quit, attendees became wary when forced to pre-pay to load festival wristbands in accordance with cashless and cardless event design, and employees' pay was delayed and then ultimately unfulfilled (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019, p. 140). Both cases demonstrate fear of scandal spillover and "guilty by association," while emphasizing the inextricable overlap between the online and the offline, and precautionary measures due to such blurring of lines.

The dominant role of social media influencing in society is illustrated in both case studies. In Jade's case, this is evidenced with major international brand conglomerates feeling compelled to publicly cut ties with the influencer. In the case of Fyre Festival, the power of influencers is equally evident: (1) with McFarland and Rule garnering massive reach and associated buzz by leveraging celebrity and social media influencer audiences, and (2) vis-à-vis the mass amplification of the festival's failures when celebrity attendees shared the catastrophes of the elite luxury event on social media.

Furthermore, while writing this comparative case study chapter, McFarland officially announced Fyre Festival II, which saw 100 presale tickets sell out in less than 24 hours "despite the event having no lineup of artists, exact date or location" (Compton, 2023, para. 4). McFarland's Fyre Festival II is classic—generating buzz with his "Announcing FYRE Festival II" promotional video. Rife with rhetoric, through ethos, the

video presents McFarland as an expert within the realm of luxury music festivals, that is—dressed in a plush white robe, wearing AirPods, clearly filming, as influencers do, from a hand-held device, etc. Here, a comment can be made on the culture of social media and social media influencing more broadly—i.e., the tendency of social media to have a rapid turnaround time—exhibiting the temporality of the media and its content, and the constant demand for new content to remain relevant.

Conclusion

Given the scale and elaborateness of each case, and the presence of key elements of shareability (i.e., remarkability and exclusivity), when met with mass publicization and international media coverage, significant buzz was generated, and the cases were naturally widely shared. This demonstrates the integration of social media and social media influencing in society; the amplification properties and echo chamber-like environment of the new media communication technology; and the complex interplay and increasingly blurred lines between the online and the offline, while revealing the extensive reach of repercussions. Together, these landmark cases of celebrity scandal, fraud, and failure provide a critical lens on social media and social media influencing.

With the naturalization of social media and its role as a virtual storyboard for everyday life, a number of questions arise: How does one best navigate the convergence of the online and the offline? How can one successfully determine the real from the fake; distinguish controlling curation from the underlying objective of the message; and recognize embellishment from outright lies? Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is challenging and critical questions such as these that invite and incite such investigation, study, and critical analysis.

Examining social media and social media influencing through this critical analytical lens, via scandal and failure, contributes to a comprehensive review of the modern phenomenon. As these case studies indicate, social media amplification is not selective, for if key characteristics of shareability are satisfied, the content will be shared. And, in the case of scandal and failure, this can have long-term and reverberating impacts and implications, thus underscoring the embeddedness of social media and social media influencing in society.

Further stressing the omnipresence of the new media communication technology in everyday life, it is as a result of this unavoidability that one must exercise a high degree of caution and awareness when interacting with the dynamic technology and consider the extent to which the affordances of social media are both used and abused. This will facilitate a critical understanding of the profound extent of both online and offline ramifications, while supporting informed engagement with the dynamic and perpetually progressing industry and practice.

Conclusion

Elusive and exclusive yet accessible; curated yet candid and authentic.

The influence of influencers is indisputable. Chapter 1: “Influencer Instruments” explores this through a survey and synthesis of: (1) the framing of social media influencing in mainstream literature, and (2) key social media influencing elements. Chapter 2: “Warm Doesn’t Conform” considers this through a historical, theoretical lens—examining social media within the context of Marshall McLuhan’s hot and cool media percept. And Chapter 3: “Social Media as an Ampli(fyre)” illustrates the influence of influencers through case study analyses of social media and social media influencer-based scandal and failure.

Through a multi-pronged approach, this thesis endeavours to present a well-rounded examination of social media influencing. Cognizant of the perpetual progression within the industry, this piece is intended to serve as a timestamp exploration—a multidimensional snapshot.

In this thesis, I have argued three main points. First, that social media influencing requires serious effort and entails more “hard work” than the fluffy labels and simplistic “how-to” presentation of the practice suggests. Second, I have shown that some of the main principles of social media influencing are prevalent in classic historical communication theory, although sometimes poorly defined and only vaguely articulated. And finally, through case study analyses of social media influencing scandal and failure, I have demonstrated the deep-rooted, inescapable integration and infiltration of social media influencing in society, and the significant impact it has on all aspects of daily life.

Accessible yet elitist, authentic yet controlled and curated, this tri-part study also introduces the fundamental paradoxes and dynamic interplays unique to social media and social media influencing.

This chapter-based investigation of social media and social media influencing is employed in acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of the field—offering three distinct perspectives with consistent themes.

Collectively, these three chapters present a state-of-the-market style review of the current social media influencing landscape and dominant themes. They demonstrate the interrelationality among social media influencing elements; the embeddedness of social media and social media influencing in society; and the overlap and blurring of lines between the online and the offline, and the associated implications and ramifications. Taken together, the chapters demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of the industry; the fundamental dynamism and in-flux nature of the new media communication technology; the substantial progression within the field offset by the persistence of traditional media characteristics; the role of imitation; and the prescriptiveness of the media and the content it circulates (paradoxical to the user affordances of choice, agency, and autonomy the new media communication technology is founded on).

Revisiting Hennessy's analogy that "Instagram is the Coca-Cola of influencer marketing, and it isn't going anywhere" (2018, p. 26), with social media and social media influencing embedded in society like the soft drink industry, routine exploration and examination of the ubiquitous, perpetually progressing phenomena through a variety of entry points is key.

Through this multi-entry point examination of social media influencing, I have raised more questions than provided answers. These questions, however, are indicative of the need and opportunity for further study and analysis of the dynamic modern communications phenomenon, and ongoing study of how marketing has changed and continues to evolve with the influence of social media influencers.

Indicating further relevancy, the recent development and rise of the "finfluencer" (financial influencer) can be touched on here. In Katie Bishop's September 2023 *BBC* article "Should you trust personal finance advice from a 'finfluencer'?", she examines if the finfluencer "is a modern approach to financial literacy – or a big red flag?" (para. 1). Bishop's guiding question also highlights the dialectical tension associated with this new niche of social media influencers; dialectical tension being a core theme throughout this thesis. As an "online friend, versus a faceless company" (Bishop, 2023, para. 5), finfluencers offer their audience (predominantly younger generations) a "human aspect" (Bishop, 2023, para. 5) to the "often-opaque world of personal finance – a world young people specifically are finding harder and harder to see into" (Bishop, 2023, para. 7).

This brief discussion of the recent development and rise of the finfluencer solidifies the sustained relevance of social media influencing as a site for academic study and analysis. The continuous progression and evolution of the social media influencer suggests, as Hennessy's analogy of Instagram to Coca Cola does, that social media influencer marketing "isn't going anywhere" (2018, p. 26).

Seemingly always relevant, and forever adaptable, (successful) social media influencers are able to morph into relatable experts on the latest trending topic—exhibiting further dialectical tension.

Questions of objectivity surface here as well, given that a significant portion of social media influencer content is endorsed and/or sponsored. Such an issue further highlights the vast realm of outstanding questions and considerations—sites for further study.

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