Social Media Influencers: Identity, Power, Authenticity and Their Consequences

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“A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.” (Arendt, 1958, 70-71).

Introduction

It seems that the emerging realm of social media has not received adequate attention in contemporary philosophical debates. Social media has, in a sense, become an extension or counterpart of the modern social sphere. It could be an interesting exercise to estimate how historical philosophers would respond to this technologically changing world. Some brave researchers have attempted to analyse how certain philosophers from the past might respond to our experiences in the second decade of the 21st century.

For instance, Anne Granberg has argued in her paper that, through the Arendtian lens, social media could be seen as the fulfilled dream of a cyber agora. In this vision, every individual can be seen, heard, and participate in discussions and the exchange of ideas, bringing together people who are otherwise separated by distance. However, this dream has faced a harsh reality check. The nature of online communication tends to operate on emotions and quick reactions rather than on elaborate, deep discussions. As a result, populist or even authoritarian regimes can utilise social media as a means of power, control, surveillance, and propaganda, exploiting quick emotional reactions through the simplicity of liking, disliking, and subscribing. As Granberg puts it: *“Rather than the promised cyberspace Utopia, the new digital era appeared as a political nightmare; a confusing hellscape of disinformation, “fake news” and conspiracy theories.”*(Granberg 2023, 2) The sobering realisation of the inherent features of online communication leads Granberg to argue that social media cannot become a genuine public sphere according to Arendt. She contends that the primary issue is the impossibility of regulating communication on social media by introducing necessary rules.(Granberg 2023, 3-5) Although our analysis will not focus on social media as a new form of the public sphere or its potential to become one, it is worthwhile considering Granberg's words as an introductory context. Like Granberg, we aim to demonstrate the lack of coherence between the realm of social media and the traditional public, physical sphere, which has been well understood and analysed by many great minds in the past, before these technological changes in the functioning of our society and communication were introduced.

In the emerging realm of social media, a distinct group has mastered the dynamics of this virtual sphere: social media influencers. Their presence in this new domain has garnered significant recognition from the audiences they inspire through the content they share. One could define this unique group as follows, utilising the words of Crystal Abidin: *"Influencers are shapers of public opinion who persuade their audience through conscientious calibration of personae on 'digital' media such as social media, supported by 'physical' space interactions with their followers in the flesh to sustain their accessibility, authenticity, believability, emulatability, and intimacy. Emically, these five qualities are encapsulated in what Influencers refer to as 'relatability', or Influencers' ability to captivate their audience and evoke in them the desire to identify with the Influencer."*(Abidin 2016, 3) Influencers occupy a unique position in today's digital landscape, possessing the ability to reach vast numbers of people directly through social media platforms without intermediary agents. Their direct interaction and readiness to engage with the audience through comments, likes, and direct messages foster a bond between influencers and their followers, leading to the emergence of online communities. However, this definition overlooks a crucial aspect of being an influencer: it is a profession. Influencers earn income by collaborating with brands, often through product or service reviews and recommendations.(Wellman et.al. 2020, 68-70) Some influencers create their own brands, shaping an online image associated with that brand. This results in the influencer's own brand collaborating with another brand, leading to a marketable exchange. One might ask where the problem lies, considering we live in a free market society where companies can purchase services from other companies and freelancers. Our intuition suggests that the main issue is the overlap between mere economic transactions and the psychological, friendship-like bonds connecting followers and influencers. On the other hand, one could argue that this is not necessarily a problem, as trustworthiness and morality are essential to a flourishing business.(Mackay 2021, 148-150)

However, this answer seems inadequate in light of the fact that many followers do not perceive the influencers they follow as businesses. Many questions arise in this context: Are influencers indistinguishable from ordinary individuals in the physical realm? Should their online presence be characterised in terms of market dynamics

or societal influence? What genuinely motivates them to engage in social media activities? What drives their interactions with their audience? Is it possible for influencers to maintain authenticity? What tangible power do influencers possess, if any? If so, what is the essence of this power? It appears that the crux of any discussion related to social media stems from attempts to describe it using traditional frameworks, drawing on analyses predating the technological era, treating the virtual realm as merely an evolutionary extension of the social realm. This paper will focus on identity and power-related issues concerning social media influencers. To narrow our analysis, we will address the research question: To what extent can social media influencers be considered authentic in terms of their identity? How does this authenticity, or lack thereof, impact the power dynamics in which they are involved, and what constitutes the essence of their power?

Our intuitions are that authenticity is not a framework special to influencers and they do indeed hold a significant power in today's digitalised, constantly changing world. The first chapter will be dedicated to influencers' identity and the attempt to answer the first part of the research question. The subsequent chapter will focus on influencers' power.

The significance of this critical research is grounded in several ways. Firstly, a more in-depth understanding of influencers' identity can improve our knowledge of how they impact trends and public opinion, especially since the identity influencers construct is inseparable from gaining online recognition and attention. Subsequently, if influencers cannot be seen as authentic,then it is crucial to underline this aspect of their identity, because followers often trust influencers' product recommendations without realising potential biases due to sponsorship.
Similarly, the potential inauthenticity of influencers could lead to unrealistic expectations regarding their health and appearance, which could improve the understanding between the impact of social media on people's self-perception. Additionally, this topic promises to offer a case study of how digital identities are constructed and the questions that such raises regarding the connection between online and real-life selves, or whether we could speak of real identities in the digital landscape at all. On a more general level, one could ask whether we can speak of

anything being real on social media platforms, or whether this virtual realm is merely a means to show off an idealised, non-existing version of ourselves.

Consequently, analysing the nature of influencers' power can contribute to understanding how influencers' position might be exerted or even manipulated beyond the realm of social media alone. This analysis could catalyse further research, particularly in exploring ethical issues such as moral responsibility in social media, transparency and honesty in influencer marketing, and the ethical obligations that influencers owe to their audience. The powerful position of influencers among their audiences implicates possible regulatory actions that ought to be taken in the future in order to prevent potential abuse of their power for negative ends and to protect consumers from deceptive practices. If deceptive practices and misinformation are allowed to proliferate, questions may arise about the legitimacy of democracy, especially considering that social media is likely to play an increasingly significant role in the lives of future voters. Ultimately, our research will stimulate discussions on the evolving nature of digital influence, the formation of power structures in social media, and the characteristics of digital identities.

1. Chapter One: Social Media Influencers' Identity - Can an Influencer be Authentic?

1.1. The Meaning of Authenticity

What is authenticity, and why is it relevant for social media influencers? How do influencers perceive authenticity? It is crucial for the purpose of this paper to pose these questions first in a general sense. We shall begin with the first question, namely understanding what it means for a human being to be authentic.

In order to understand the notion of authenticity, we shall use Charles Taylor's contribution to conceptualising this notion. Even though authenticity has been a part of philosophical debate for centuries, including existential thought on this subject, Taylor provides us with a contemporary approach which we believe grasps the currently extant nuances regarding authenticity.

In his influential work "The Ethics of Authenticity," Taylor explores the concept of authenticity in the context of contemporary society and individual identity. According to Taylor, authenticity involves living in accordance with one's own values, beliefs, and aspirations, rather than conforming to external expectations. Taylor says: *"[...]each of our voices has something of its own to say. Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity, I can't even find the model to live by outside myself."*(Taylor 1991, 29) He believes that being authentic requires a sense of self-integrity and self-awareness in one's identity. To be authentic means to live in accordance with what I require from myself, so in a sense it requires coherence between one's beliefs, actions and what one feels inside. How does one know which part of the self is authentic? According to Taylor, one must listen to one's inner voices, and not let others simply define one's identity. One cannot find a recipe for action by following someone else's authority; true authority lies within each of us. There is only one authority - myself.(Sidorkin 1997, 1) Taylor emphasises the importance of self-discovery and self-expression in the pursuit of authenticity. He argues that individuals must engage in a process of introspection and self-reflection to uncover their true selves and understand who they are. Individuals should define

themselves, know who they are, and maintain that what they believe is right. He says: *“Defining myself means finding what is significant in my difference from others [...] Each of us has an original way of being human. [...] There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me”.* (Taylor 1991, 29-35) Taylor acknowledges that authenticity is not a fixed state, but rather a dynamic and continuous journey. It involves the ongoing process of self-discovery, where individuals delve into their essence and uncover their unique originality. Being authentic means staying true to this intrinsic essence - myself. As humans, we change and grow, and our perception of ourselves transforms alongside our experiences.

One may wonder why authenticity is relevant for social media influencers. Influencers are an emerging profession without a clearly-stated guideline of how to behave or not behave, and they lack a preeminent professional organisation.(Wellman et al. 2020, 69) Some refer to influencers as quasi-journalists, as they are something between a journalist and an advertiser, yet this quasi element is crucial. Journalists within organisations like the Society of Professional Journalists have clearly stated ethical guidelines for their profession.(Mackay 2021, 151) Despite the absence of ethical guidelines for influencers to guide their moral decisions within this emerging profession, the ethics of authenticity occupies a significant place in current discussions.(Wellman et al. 2020, 68-72) Authenticity is present in this debate and has its relevant place not only according to scholars but also influencers themselves. Authenticity is believed to build trust with audiences, foster deeper engagement with them, and enhance credibility in their niche.

Let us now inquire - what does it mean for an influencer to be authentic? Influencers probably see authenticity as sharing true stories, beliefs, and experiences with their audience, producing content that they believe is useful and interesting for their followers. However, for many, the core of what it means for an influencer to be authentic is uncovered when it comes to collaborating with sponsoring brands. Being authentic for them is to be truthful about the product experience they review. To be authentic for an influencer means according to the recent research in Media Ethics:

“to be true to one’s self, and by extension, one’s brand; (2) being true to one’s audience by providing it with the content it seeks”.(Wellman et al. 2020, 72-77) However, it remains problematic to speak of the authenticity of an influencer. The influencer as a person seems to be different from the influencer as a brand collaborating with sponsors. Is the influencer's authenticity their own as a person or as the brand's authenticity? Can a brand be authentic? In the influencer’s understanding of authenticity, there are visible identity issues. For the purpose of this paper we will put aside what influencers believe about their authenticity and we will follow Taylor’s analysis of authenticity, which suggests that authenticity is one’s own personal journey, one’s own pursuit of originality and what differentiates us from others.

The core focus of this chapter is whether we can speak of authenticity in the case of social media influencers. Can an influencer be authentic? We shall analyse social media influencers’ identity to determine an answer to this question. Our intuition here is that we cannot speak of the authenticity of an influencer. It seems that the nature of an influencer's identity might prevent them from being authentic in Taylor’s understanding. The rest of this chapter will attempt to analyse the characteristics of influencers’ identity.

1.2. The Dual Identity of an Influencer

In this section, we aim to illustrate the dual nature of influencers' identities and recognize how this duality complicates discussions of authenticity within the realm of influencer identity. First, we will explore why influencers' identities might be seen as dual, then we'll delve into why a dual identity can't be authentic.

The first aspect that is significant about online influencers’ identities is that they are dual in the sense that one identity is assumed in the non-virtual world and one in the virtual world. Note that we deliberately avoid using the expression ‘real identity’, because who (or what) is really real, i.e., presumably the other identity, is often problematic. The ‘real identity’ might well be somewhat virtual, too, or we might have two real identities since these identities are generally complementarities. But for

some influencers, it might be the case that their real identity is predominantly associated with virtuality, since they mostly exist online, which translates into the fact that, if certain (virtual or non-virtual) elements of themselves are physically hidden from the followers present on their social network, they have effectively vanished. This can also go in the other direction: for other influencers, the identity that is present offline is the “real” one as they managed to balance their work in such a way that does not affect their private, non-virtual well being. However, we cannot answer which identity is the real one in general, since it may differ in the case of each influencer. Even though the real identity of an influencer poses a limitation to our analysis, this tension suggests that the identity of an influencer has this dual character.

The main idea here is that influencers have a dual identity because they operate in two different environments, each with its own expectations. As a result, they may present themselves differently and behave differently online compared to offline. This phenomenon isn't unique to influencers; studies have shown that people generally portray themselves differently online compared to their “real-life” identities.(Parab 2021, 1987) This phenomenon is visible in the case of profile pictures on social media, where users often make a concerted effort to present themselves in a more favourable light than they usually perceive or present themselves in everyday non-virtual reality. Profile pictures are not random pictures from our phones - they are selected and enhanced visions of ourselves. It seems that in the case of social media influencers this effect is more visible as they spend more time on social media than other users, not only to create their image and set new trends but also to know already existing ones. Their knowledge of trends is as important as a salesman's insights regarding his competition. Opening a computer or smartphone to social media is for them tantamount to entering the workplace. Moreover, entering such a workplace or workforce can require a certain change of clothing and behaviour even when we still remain in the physical non-virtual reality. Influencers exist in two realities, which creates a dual identity paradigm for them. We will now proceed to more concrete reasons for this duality.

The first reason why influencers' identity has a dual character is that in the realm of social media the audience of influencers’ posts has certain expectations from them.

They often feel under pressure to maintain a certain image of themselves. This can be seen in the example of adjusting the type of posts to what gives influencers the best views. Most influencers achieve their position on social media by the method of trial and error - asking themselves why a certain post has more likes than another. The reasons why certain posts receive more likes than others may include the way influencers present themselves, both in terms of behaviour, such as appearing more energetic and optimistic, and visually, such as enhancing their appearance with filters and posing, or editing the content until it achieves perfection. These gradual changes can culminate in enhancing their identity to the extent that it creates a completely new mode of presentation online - a new self.

Another reason why influencers have a dual identity has its core in their constant balancing between the online self and offline self. Thay have to navigate what they want to share from their personal life and what to keep to themselves. This process of selective self-representation may lead to crafting a new persona, a completely new version of themselves that appears in the virtual realm, presenting only some aspects of themselves while neglecting others. Influencers, according to Wellman et al.: *“think carefully about how they construct and project their personas for display to others”*(Wellman et al. 2020, 69). Dual identity can be shaped by an audience’s attention within a certain online context. In the case of the online phenomena of “that girl”, as one example that trended on the TikTok platform in 2021, this archetype represented ‘the version of you that would wake up at 5am to go to yoga, drink green juice, and watch YouTube videos of other influencers’. So, many look at that girl, becoming perfect and tireless (Carapellotti 2022). While influencers play this role of being the perfect person who can do everything, it’s hard to reconcile this performance with the reality of everyday life. It is probable that influencers who did not meet the standards of the “that girl” trend in their personal life kept these aspects of themselves private and did not share on their platforms when they wanted to meet the requirements of that trend. Even though the “that girl” trend was popular on social media because of its inspirational purpose, i.e., to create an ideal to which we should aspire, it also made influencers create completely new versions of themselves and in turn conceal aspects of their offline self not fulfilling the requirements of it. Here, once again, we see the tension and dynamics of the situation of dual identity.

Influencers impersonate their own brands, so their marketing strategies are focused on crafting themselves.(Mackay 2021,153-160) Influencers as brands collaborate with sponsors and because of these collaborations, their target audience may also include other brands in order to gain or keep sponsorships. So, their dual identity may also be due to creating content that appeals to potential advertisers - sometimes it may move away from their offline self, creating a clash between them virtually and non-virtually. Additionally, sponsoring brands may require a certain way of presentation from influencers, or they negotiate and establish together the type and tone of content to be produced. This collaboration may involve specific discussions and negotiations, culminating in the signing of the contracts that outline the specific duties and expectations of both the influencer and sponsor. Through this process, the influencer has to carefully navigate the interests of their personal brand, the goals of the commercial brand, and the preferences of their audience. These interests are not always fully compatible. In fact, as a result, the content has to be skillfully crafted so that the sponsored content performed by the influencer will match the preferences of their followers with the marketing goals of the brand they are promoting.(Wellman et al. 2020, 80-82). In this respect, an influencer’s dual identity comes about through the process of collaborating with brands, which transforms them into “reliable advertisers".

As a result of these various factors, in changing themselves for followers and sponsors to appear more appealing online, influencers effectively create a new self - an online version. Because this virtual version is different from themselves offline, their identity falls under the dual identity paradigm. This leads us to discuss why the dual identity of influencers cannot be authentic in Charles Taylor's understanding.

The primary reason why influencers' dual identity cannot be authentic pertains to the already discussed dilemma of “real” or “true” identity: which self is the true one, online or offline? In Taylor’s understanding of authenticity, one has to be true to oneself in such a way that their actions align with their true inner beliefs and values. Dual identity poses a challenge to the basic question that one has to ask oneself: Who am I and what makes me different from other people? In other words, getting to know myself, my beliefs, and desires fosters authenticity in Taylors understanding.

Influencers may have a problem answering this question as they have a dual self - offline and online, each of them fulfilling different requirements of its environment. The second aspect is that their actions in the virtual realm may be performed not in accordance with themselves but only in accordance with this environment's demands. Influencers must meet numerous expectations from their audience to gain recognition, from brands to begin earning compensation for their content, and from social media platforms, as well as from their own perception of their influencer-self. These expectations may sometimes conflict with each other - while influencers may seek compensation for their sponsored content, brands aim to reach as wide an audience as possible to boost their sales. Additionally, influencers want to be credible for their followers while meeting the expectations of commercial brands. It can be a difficult task to meet so many different expectations from different actors. This conflict of interest creates ethical issues.(Wellman et al. 2020, 69) One possible ethical concern would be potentially misleading practices - like not divulging the full experience behind a certain product review on a brand's request.

Being an Influencer in today's world is a profession. As already mentioned, influencers themselves are brands.(Mackay 2021,153-160) Their care for their image and online presentation can be treated like a brand's marketing strategy. An influencers' brand name can be the same as their real name, but not necessarily, as influencers can have a name not connected to their non-virtual life identities. The moral frameworks stressing the necessity of influencers' authenticity usually treat influencers as a brand and assume authenticity for this one-person online brand. (Wellman et al. 2020, 71) However, as mentioned before, speaking of the authenticity of a brand can be problematic, even if this brand has a physical counterpart. Taylor's understanding of authenticity refers to a human being and human originality. Can we treat a brand just like a human being and call it authentic? In Taylor's understanding of authenticity, as well as the traditional understanding of it, the necessary element of authenticity is subjectivity and self-awareness. In a brand as an economic concept, there is no subjectivity. This is problematic in the case of social media influencers because they are not only brands, but also subjects in their own private life. Influencers' dual identity does not fit the framework of authenticity. Assuming that influencers are brands themselves in the online realm creates an issue for how to treat influencers' identity. Brands cannot have identity, but

influencers can have an identity. Influencers are not only brands, but also human beings with subjectivity. Using authenticity as a moral framework for influencers' brands is problematic on two levels. The first level of problem is that it refers to influencers as brands, so it assumes only one aspect of their identity. The second level of an issue is that it prescribes to only brand, virtual aspect of influencer identity features of his non-virtual self - being a subject. Hence, due to the duality of their identity, influencers cannot be deemed authentic.

We have provided reasons to believe that social media influencers have dual identity and that dual identity paradigm is not compatible with Taylor's understanding of authenticity. However, one could argue to the contrary to what we have discussed that influencers see authenticity through being transparent about their partnership with sponsoring brands as they openly disclose sponsored content and maintain integrity in their product reviews. While influencers may seek compensation for sponsored content, transparent communication about brand partnerships can build trust with their audience and mitigate concerns about deceptive practices. Although this understanding of authenticity by influencers may indeed lead to an improved relationship with their audience via building credibility, it seems to conflate transparency with authenticity. While it's true that being transparent about brand partnerships can foster trust, authenticity goes beyond mere transparency. Authenticity is about being true to oneself, which means that influencers need to actually feel the same way about their values as they do in the posts. Authenticity involves aligning one's actions, beliefs, and values genuinely, not just being upfront about commercial relationships. This means that, while transparency of communication is important in the case of social media influencers, it might not be enough for the creation of authenticity when influencers are not genuinely motivated by the products, or by connection with the content's message. In the next section, we will delve into the differences in influencers' identities in relation to others.

1.3. Different Identities - Influencers and other Online Users

Online users can be completely different: This sentence could and should apply to social media influencers as much as to the rest of us. The fact is that on social media

sites, if users are creative, they can act as someone completely different to how they act in the real world. Current opinion in psychology stresses that there are very specific diffrencers between online and offline interactions: *“(1) fewer nonverbal cues, (2) greater anonymity, (3) more opportunity to form new social ties and bolster weak ties, and (4) wider dissemination of information. Each of these differences underlies systematic psychological and behavioural consequences.”*(Lieberman and Schroeder 2020, 16) Therefore, people can adopt different online behaviours that they wouldn’t feel comfortable expressing out loud, or face to face. In conjunction with this concept of ‘otherside’, the second way in which this change of identity could manifest is via the projection of very different bodies. And this has a host of opportunities in itself. An immeasurable dimension of behaviour is influenced to some extent by people looking at you, scrutinising you or even just listening to your voice. Going online allows people to tempest around unwrapped, free from their physical limitations. The number of people now dating online is growing year by year, because it’s easier to talk to someone through their social media profile or on a dating app than to ask their number on the bus. Shyness is banished in this digital playground as users craft personas that appeal to them. The difference in online versus offline interactions may lead to fostering different behaviours in the online realm and, as a result, the online identity may be completely different to the one in the physical world. This phenomenon of creating different identities does not apply to all online users, only some influencers and some users. Our limitation here is precisely that we cannot estimate to whom a different identity paradigm applies and to what extent. Nethertheless, such cases are worth analysing with reference to the problem that we cannot speak of authenticity when online identity is fundamentally different from Taylors understanding of authenticity. We will first analyse cases of different identity of online users, including influencers, and attempt to answer how these cases generate a different identity, a completely new persona. We will then proceed to proving why these different identities cannot be authentic.

Firstly, in order to identify different identity paradigms in the case of social media influencers, one could imagine a scenario of a dual identity that is taken to extremes. An online user or influencer presents himself in a completely different light than in the non-virtual realm in such a way that most of his features are different than offline ones. This disconnection from reality may create a new persona. Our limitation here

is that we cannot know which influencer and to what degree creates a new persona online using filters, acting etc. - changing themselves piece by piece for the purpose of platform views, likes. Why is it a different identity than the one from their non-virtual world? This gradual change of self may create a new identity. Identity features differ to the extent that the original self is not visible in its true colours anymore, and people recognising that person online would fail to recognise them in the real world.

The most extreme scenario of a different identity in the realm of social media, one that has become notorious, is the act we call catfishing – creating a fake identity online in order to trick someone else. Catfishing can take several forms. It can be someone who wants to stalk or track another (think Manti Te'o), someone looking for life satisfaction or fame (Wilson's ex in *The Hoax* might be the best known case), or even the impersonation of a celebrity, allowing them to leverage this clone's perceived status to garner attention or followers. Both creating a fake identity online to deceive someone and impersonating celebrities, i.e., stealing someone else's identity, are cases of different online identities. In those cases, individuals are assuming identities that are different from their true selves, presenting themselves as someone they are not - different from their true self that they are in a non-virtual realm.

Another case showing a different identity paradigm that is worth discussing is the online influencer Miquela Sousa. Miquela Sousa is presented as the perfect woman with a perfect body, with a life story - she is a young art student, aspiring musician, and advocate of minority rights.(Robinson 2020, 2) She is the dream of every man and woman. Brands wish to be her sponsors due to her popularity as an online influencer. She advertises luxury brands like Prada. The problem is that she is too perfect; in fact, she does not exist in non-virtual reality. She was created by a group of informaticians specialising in artificial intelligence to gain profit from Miquela online's fame. Many issues arise in this case. Who is the real influencer: Miquela or her creators? Who should take responsibility if Miquela does something wrong? With the emergence of AI tools, akin to those utilised by Miquela's creators, opportunities have arisen to leverage AI for generating income. For instance, there are AI generated YouTube videos describing certain topics in art, science, psychology, etc.

Those accounts become something like an influencer. However, who is that influencer? We may never know, as even voice in the content might be AI generated. YouTube has declared a regulation regarding AI content: *“We’re not requiring creators to disclose content that is clearly unrealistic, animated, includes special effects, or has used generative AI for production assistance.”*(The YouTube Team 2024) This information would otherwise help users distinguish between enhanced content using modern technologies and content that has been entirely done by a person. How are there fundamentally different identities at stake here? In the Miquela example, a group of informaticians hide their true identity behind a fully AI generated body. They use a different identity than their true selves. In the different identity case, the true or real self is the non-virtual identity and there seems to be no issue with distinguishing them as they hide themselves behind someone completely different. Similarly, in the content generated by AI on YouTube platform producers hide their face and voices behind AI avatars or AI-generated audio. Their online identity is different in that they do not show themselves as they are in the offline realm. Additionally, using AI-generated voice is easier with the rise of technology - it requires merely pasting text, whereas the use of a real voice requires reading, recording, cutting, and repeating the process. Both Miquela and AI-generated content are examples of a different identity of social media influencer, an identity that is completely created for the needs of online trends.

However, if some influencers and online users exemplify a different identity paradigm, can they be deemed authentic in Taylors understanding? Can an influencer like Miquela or any other influencer change their identity to such an extent that they no longer resemble most of their original features and still be considered authentic?

Different identities cannot be authentic because authenticity stems from aligning one's actions and expressions with their true self or inner values. Authenticity involves the evolution of the self through constant self-discovery rooted in personal integrity. We may be evolving, but still be deemed authentic as long as our actions align with our beliefs. Beliefs may change, but personal integrity is here and now in responsibility for the alignment or recognising a lack of alignment. When someone adopts a different identity online, they are intentionally presenting themselves in a

way that deviates from their true self. This intentional difference creates a clash between their online persona and their true self as they seem to be intentionally hiding behind someone else - even a totally fake persona. Therefore, different or sometimes fake identities cannot be authentic in Taylor's understanding insofar as adopting different identities undermines fundamental aspects of authenticity, such as personal integrity.

Additionally, if our online interactions indeed differ from our offline interactions in the case of adopting a different online identity the effect may probably deepen. We mentioned that among other differences, online interactions have greater anonymity. If we chose to be someone completely different from our true self the anonymity is at its full level. Possibly this anonymity together with fewer nonverbal cues online than offline could lead to a change in the online behaviour of self totally. If we take for instance, the example of an AI-generated influencer like Miquela, who is completely different from her creators, her behaviour online may be a composition of a fantasy of female behaviour on the part of her creators. Resembling completely different behaviour online due to the change of identity seems not to fit into Taylor's understanding of authenticity. The way we act is the moment of exercising authenticity, as in this very moment we can either do something in accordance with ourself, our inner beliefs and values, or not, and consequently not be authentic. Therefore, influencers' adoption of a different identity excludes them from being authentic insofar as they fail to act in accordance with their inner self.

Contrary to our previous argument, one could contend that authenticity requires redefinition in the context of influencers, suggesting that traditional understandings are outdated in the era of social media. Maureen Ebben and Elizabeth Bull propose a new definition of authenticity tailored specifically for social media influencers: *"In social media, authenticity is often understood as the performance of a persona. That is, authenticity is mediated through digital tools and social media affordances to produce an "edited persona". In this formulation, authenticity takes the form of a public "face" or personality that is socially constructed and put forth in digital interactions often by a social media influencer. [...] As part of a marketing apparatus, social media influencer authenticity is defined as the extent to which a commercial brand's products and services match the expectations of the consumers who*

purchase and use the products that are promoted."(Ebben and Bull 2023, 2-3) In other words, an authentic influencer, according to this understanding, would be promoting beauty products if their niche is beauty, or sports equipment if they are a fitness influencer, and not vice versa, as products have to match the influencer's area of expertise to be considered authentic. However, this perception presupposes that authenticity is relevant, which undermines Ebben and Bull's position on authenticity that it *"cannot be objectively determined and is impossible to define because it is context-dependent and ideologically driven."* (Ebben and Bull 2023, 2) Social media influencers seem to redefine the traditional understanding of authenticity to include trustworthiness, accuracy, transparency, credibility, and claim that those features together may form an authentic online persona. Furthermore, it is argued that fostering those features makes them appear as "moral" to their audience. Jen Mackay views authenticity as an advantage that enables influencers to maintain their position on social media: *"It is advantageous for SMI to make ethical decisions that will help followers to view them as trustworthy. [...] Being ethical does not make one less competitive - the opposite - if you do the right thing, you will connect with your client in a positive sense".*(Mackay 2021, 151)

On the other hand, one could argue that influencers' understanding of authenticity is more like a marketing strategy of a brand than authenticity. One might question whether a marketing strategy can truly equate to authenticity. Additionally, defining authenticity as coherence in content, credibility, and transparency about collaborating with brands seems problematic as it defines authenticity by other notions, while it seems apparent that authenticity and, for example, trustworthiness are different frameworks. Authenticity may be context-dependent, but it seems that this context is the difference between each individual person. Authenticity as being true to myself is determined by the context of "myself" and how I differ from others, and may be determined by different societal contexts, but those are the societal contexts of where my life is placed as a persona. Therefore, changing understanding of authenticity and claiming that it is due to different contexts of authenticity seems to create an issue. Influencers do have power in our societies, such as the power to influence others; however, the power to transform the meaning of authenticity seems to be beyond what they can do. Changes in the very meaning of words and concepts are gradual and usually take more time than a decade of social media. Hence,

insofar as they resemble features of different identities, influencers cannot be deemed authentic. Influencers change their identities for a certain purpose, such as financial gain or recognition among brands and people, i.e., fame. This different identity of influencers brings us to the topic of the next section, namely the commodification of the identity of online persona.

1.4. The Commodification of Influencers' Identity

In this section, we will pose the question of whether an influencer's identity is commodified and, if so, can a commodified identity be authentic? If influencers do indeed fall under the category of commodifying their persona, what is the reason behind this process? When does it start?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes commodification as: *"The action or process of treating a person or thing as property which can be traded or whose value is purely monetary."*(*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023) In a sense, this process begins with a thought of how much one can gain from something that was not originally for sale. This thought starts a process of transformation of an intrinsic property of a certain thing or even an idea into a marketable concept that can be sold or bought. This transformative process disregards the original quality of something in favour of its monetary or capitalistic value, raising questions about its price or worth rather than its inherent, non-monetary characteristics. For instance, the commodification of holidays, such as Easter, begins when the intrinsic value of these traditions is transformed into marketing campaigns or new ways to earn money. Instead of celebrating the beginning of new life, the resurrection of Jesus, and spending quality time with loved ones, these holidays become commercialised events focused on profit.

To answer why influencers' identity is commodified, we shall ask why they change or enhance their identity in the first place. The "self"' of social media influencers is modified or sometimes changed completely for a very specific purpose, namely to bring profit through gaining attention from followers. Influencers' identity becomes an object that is marketed by the influencers themself. As Wellman and others put it:

”Becoming a successful influencer depends on a person’s ability to brand themselves by creating a consumable online identity that appeals to potential audiences and commercial brands who seek them out for promotional opportunities.” (Wellman et. al 2020, 69) Sometimes, influencers do not have to change drastically to gain followers’ attention, as a part of the identity that they are presenting towards their audience is based on their non-virtual identity. However, as discussed before, influencers live in a sort of dual identity: the non-virtual and virtual. The virtual identity differs from the non-virtual one, as the online realm has different requirements and consequently necessitates a distinct mode of self-presentation compared to the physical realm where people interact in person. The online realm operates differently, demanding specific behaviours and modes of communication that primarily involve quick, emotional reactions. Just as social media trivialises human interactions by making them superficial, it can also simplify the presentation of oneself, aiming only for others to like it. This reveals why influencers might be tempted to enhance or alter their identities to meet the demands of the virtual realm, which operates on basic human emotions to garner likes. These likes are directly connected to purchasing behaviour, as one must like something before buying it. Therefore, it becomes evident that our analysis of dual and different identities is closely intertwined with the commodification of identity.

It seems that sponsoring brands begin the process of the commodification of identity by commodifying the attention to the influencer’s identity. In other words, brands already discern an identity to be a space or means for profit in relation to the attention paid to it and an entity with which they can engage in business transactions. Attention from followers significantly influences the level of interest shown by sponsoring brands, as it directly correlates with the potential reach and engagement that brands seek to leverage for their marketing efforts. These brands bring monetary gain to influencers in exchange for their audience’s attention. The more followers an influencer has, the more profit they can gain by offering followers' attention to brands. In this sense, more attention equals more profit. From an influencer's perspective, attention becomes a commodity, and the entities that commodify it are the sponsoring brands. Sponsoring brands commodify followers' attention through the transactional relationship with influencers, leveraging the quantity of followers as a measure of individual attention. Given the value placed on

attention in social media realms, a pertinent question arises: What specific factors or content strategies effectively capture attention across various social media platforms? It appears that the answer lies in anything that is interesting and appealing within any conceivable niche. To make their content interesting for their followers, influencers make it funny, aesthetically pleasing, etc. Influencers' work focuses on gaining visibility in the online world of social media. What is crucial here is that this attention is already part of the influencer's identity for all the interested parties. Citton offers a philosophical formulation of this situation: *"[...]everything rests on an ONTOLOGY OF VISIBILITY which measures a being's level of existence by the quantity and quality of its perception by others. [...]This (very effective) reign of appearances leads to a second, more surprising and more interesting, economic consequence, that brings to light a PRINCIPLE OF VALORIZATION THROUGH ATTENTION: the simple fact of looking at an object represents a labour which increases the value of that object."*(Citton 2017) In the case of influencers, how they are perceived (quality of perception by others) and by how many people (quantity of perception by others) measures their existence in the online realm. Their worth is measured by the engagement and attention they receive from their audience. Berkeley's principle of "*esse est percipi*" truly takes on meaning today in the age of social media, because if you are not perceived, you do not exist in this online realm. Without this visibility, becoming an influencer is impossible.

This leads us to a form of marketable transaction where influencers sell their mode of online presentation in exchange for the attention of followers. This attention becomes a new form of currency. The more engaging a certain influencer is, the more attention a follower can "pay" by spending time watching, subscribing, and liking the content. We can speak of followers purchasing an identity in this manner. Therefore, followers' attention turns an influencer's identity into a commodity. It is precisely because of this act of purchasing identity with commodified attention that an influencer's identity becomes commodified by the followers themselves.

This process of commodification of identity would not be possible without this online presentation of self, without the work that influencers perform to enhance their identity to gain more attention, more profit, so without treating oneself online as a

commodity in the first place, without the willingness to be purchased with followers' attention. In this context, influencers' identity is being commodified by the influencer himself. Commodification of the very essence of identity is driven here by a motivation to attract attention, with the ultimate objective of maximising profit from manipulation of the attention economy through their digital social media presence. Social media influencers have honed the ability to project a personality, a facade, as a means to be listened to: meaning, content, and inspiration on the one hand, while on the other, feeding a longing for commercially driven products and brands. It is a carefully staged performance, through which influencers cultivate a bubble of life online shaped by the contours of their chosen specialism or interest area. Content, filters, captions, 'live' information sessions all contribute to the narrative of a projected life - one that is supposed to be more glamorous, successful or aspirational. Influencers are selling a kind of a story together with their online identity. This story itself is a commodity, as is the identity that is its subject and the attention that is its object.

From the sponsoring brands' perspective, influencers' online identity becomes a commodity as well. Brands pay influencers for product recommendations and advertisements utilising their unique position among their audience to reach new customers. Brands pay influencers for the exchange of their online identity with its trustworthiness and credibility. In contrast to conventional advertising, the influencers are seen as credible.(Cirklová 2020, 108) Followers belong in a sense to the influencer's social circle, which lends a sense of trustworthiness to any recommendations proposed by the influencer. Additionally, followers want to be at least partially like their online star, and purchasing an item that an influencer recommends gives them a sense of being a celebrity as well. Research has demonstrated that social media influencers have the ability to affect consumers' decisions to buy a certain product.(Lim et al., 2017) Brands utilise this unique position of an influencer, and this utility is already part of the noticeability and successful commodification of their online identity. Whether promoting exclusive handbags, craft beer, cosmetics, holidays or beauty products, influencers present themselves in a way that brands want to invest with their backing. This investment is monetary and treated by sponsors as a marketing strategy. In sponsors' eyes, the bigger the audience of influencers, the more new customers can purchase their

product. Through influencers' identity there are thousands of possible new profits for a sponsoring brand.

In essence, what we have discussed here is that sponsoring brands are responsible for the act of commodifying attention. Sponsors, by intervening in the relation between influencers and followers, become commodifying actors of the followers' attention. However, the commodification of identity is not only done by sponsoring brands, but by the influencers themselves and their followers. With this recognition, we can now proceed to showcase why commodified identity cannot be deemed authentic in Taylor's understanding.

Firstly, commodified identity cannot be deemed authentic in Taylor's understanding because it is shaped significantly by market demands and external pressures, such as trends, audience preferences, and sponsoring brand requirements. This constant adaptation to external factors inhibits a genuine connection to an authentic inner sense of the self. In Taylor's understanding of authenticity the model of life has to come from within and be in accordance with our true inner self. In the case of influencers, commodified identity adjusts itself via behaviour, appearances and even changing inner values to meet what is desirable by followers and what is marketable for sponsors. This process of adjusting the self to "sell" better emphasises external validation of self rather than internal self-awareness and self reflection in action. A possible example could be an influencer making a spontaneous or abrupt comment that does not meet with the acceptance of their followers, and then being forced to retract the statement and apologise. One recent example that shows how influencers have to take back what they said in a spontaneous manner would be the "scandal" with Haley "Baylee" Kalil, who in the context of protests against Israel's treatment of Palestinian civilians made a very controversial claim: "Model and influencer Haley "Baylee" Kalil has apologised after receiving backlash for posting a video of herself shortly after the Met Gala lip syncing to the infamous alleged Marie Antoinette quote "let them eat cake," leading users to block her and other celebrities in an attempt to reduce the amount of money they earn on social platforms [...]"(Johnson 2024) The scene was strikingly direct: a famous influencer dressed for the Met Gala, where tickets cost more than the average person would consider reasonable, in a dress worth thousands of dollars; behind her, protesters held banners reading "Free

Palestine." This precise scene highlighted her controversial claim, which she posted on social media.

The conclusion may be drawn that Haley “Baylee” Kalil’s identity as an influencer cannot be deemed authentic because it is commodified. She acted to retract her statement and apologise only because otherwise she would have lost followers, not because she is genuinely sorry for what she said in the context of global poverty, starvation, and the war in Gaza. On the other hand, one could say that she was indeed sorry for what she said and replied in accordance to her inner sense of self, so authentically. The main issue is that we can never know what she truly believes authentically as her actions are dictated as a direct response to trends and her followers' response to her posts. In Baylees' example we see that an influencer's identity cannot be authentic due to its inherently commodified position and nature.

Furthermore, Baylees' example clearly shows how commodified identity functions as an instrument, which as a property cannot be authentic. When an identity is commodified, an individual uses their self-expression as a tool to achieve economic gain. This instrumental aspect of influencers identity shows that it is constructed as a means to an end - to gain more. For Taylor, being in connection to one’s true self is a continuous ongoing process that develops alongside our experiences. Individuals strive to be authentic for the sake of such alone, for being true - in a sense living in accordance with our self is performed in order to understand who we truly are. Therefore, living authentically has no exterior end - the only point is to live authentically. The instrumentalization of identity contradicts Taylor’s understanding of authenticity. Since influencers use their online identities to gain from them, they cannot be deemed authentic.

Influencers pay attention to the interests of their followers by shaping their content to their reaction. It is important for their online star status that the audience sees them as trustworthy and credible regarding, e.g., product recommendations. In the framework of authenticity proposed by Wellman et al., to be authentic for an influencer means to: *“be true to one’s self, and by extension, one’s brand; (2) being true to one’s audience by providing it with the content it seeks.”*(Wellman et al. 2020,

72-77) In this sense, influencers may be seen as authentic for their followers. One could argue that in this emerging profession authenticity is understood according to the context of social media, not in general terms proposed by Charles Taylor. In this understanding of authenticity on social media, to be authentic means to be sensitive towards the audience reaction and how they feel about the influencer himself. If the audience trusts the influencer's opinion, meaning the majority of reactions are positive and not negative in comments, then the influencer has done their job as an authentic online figure.

However, this social media understanding of authenticity seems to have a performative character, meaning that expressions of authenticity are shaped by social media context and expectations, and can be seen as actions that perform a certain identity rather than reflecting the genuine inner truth. Being authentic, even in the terms proposed by Wellman et.al., appears to be done for gaining even more attention or keeping attention. It is part of an online performance that seeks acceptance by being perceived by others. This focus on being perceived as authentic by influencers has a lucrative reason behind it: in a sense, trustworthiness sells better in the online realm. Followers trust influencers with their product recommendations if they genuinely show themselves, even if this authenticity is just a part of a performance. Influencers that are authentic are more likely to sell the product that they recommend, since in the long run being authentic in this sense pays off.(Mackay 2021) It is worth posing the question of whether someone can be deemed authentic if this authenticity has a performative character. In this context, it is more probable that authenticity itself has been commodified. If authenticity is commodified - that is, if it takes on a monetary character and becomes a means to gain more attention and profit - then it loses its intrinsic qualities of being genuine. In Taylor's understanding, authenticity by definition cannot be commodified or take on a performative character. In his understanding authenticity involves living in accordance with one's own values, beliefs, and aspirations, rather than conforming to external expectations.(Taylor 1991, 29) Therefore, it cannot be a part of an online performance to appear more trustworthy in the eyes of others. Thus, once again, influencers cannot be authentic in Taylor's understanding.

1.5. Conclusions and Implications of Chapter One

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that influencers cannot be authentic in terms of the framework of authenticity proposed by Charls Taylor due to the inherently problematic dimensions of their identity, namely the dual, different and commodified self of these online celebrities. The dual identity paradigm of influencers' identity prevents them from being authentic in Taylor's understanding, as influencers have both online and offline selves, each tailored to different environments and expectations. This dichotomy makes it challenging for influencers to know their true self and maintain consistent beliefs and desires across both realms. Likewise, the very situation of having different identities cannot be deemed authentic. When influencers adopt a different identity online, they intentionally present themselves in a way that deviates from their true self. This intentional deviation creates a clash between their online persona and their true self, undermining their authenticity. Finally, as we have discussed, commodified identity cannot be authentic because it is shaped to meet the demands of the market, trends, and followers' interests. This makes it a performance rather than a genuine expression of self. True self-expression and self-discovery occur for their own sake, not to fit external expectations.

Now, one may ask, what does this lack of authenticity affect our understanding of influencers as personas? Perhaps influencers themselves prefer functioning in an inauthentic manner in the online realm because it brings them profit and a sense of control over their self-presentation. By crafting an online persona that caters to market demands and audience preferences, influencers can potentially increase their income through sponsorships and brand deals. This strategic self-presentation also allows them to protect their privacy, as they can choose which aspects of their personal life to share and which to keep hidden. This separation can create a buffer that shields their true self from public scrutiny and criticism. From the audience's perspective, this lack of authenticity might not be an issue either. Many followers enjoy the curated and often idealised content that influencers provide. They may be more interested in the entertainment, inspiration, and aspirational value that these online performances offer rather than the authenticity of the influencer's identity. The audience's engagement and enjoyment are driven by the quality and relatability of the content, not necessarily the authenticity of the person behind it.

Influencers' inauthenticity cannot be ignored because the reason why influencers' marketing works is precisely what makes it dangerous - the fact that the market-like sphere overlaps with private life and simulates friendship-like bonds between influencers and their audience. Followers trust influencers as if they were friends, believing in their genuine intentions of maintaining the bond between them. So, in followers' eyes, it may be the case that influencers are not marketers making a living from utilising the friend-like relationship with them, but rather idols or friends. This relationship is utilised by both brands and influencers themselves. The relevance of this phenomenon is obvious due to the sheer scale of its popularity: in 2023, about 82% of influential brands in the US took influencer marketing into account in their budgets.(Darlington 2023, 36) One may wonder whether this inauthenticity of influencers could be utilised against followers in a manner not focused on making them to purchase a product by influential brand, but rather as a means of spreading disinformation, or political extremism which provide fuel for populisms or, even worse, fascistic regimes. If followers believe in influencers to this extent, and the claims they make regarding product recommendations are convincing enough, one could claim that a similar case would hold with moulding influencers' audience in the case of political beliefs or other consequential convictions. Can we speak of a beginning of the end of democracy in view of the possibility of the negative utilisation of influencers' position?

In the preceding, we expressed the intuition that authenticity as understood by influencers themselves could be seen as a marketing strategy to build trust, but what if followers are not aware of this mechanism? What if they believe in the influencer's authenticity, even though it may only be an illusion? What if followers falsely believe that an influencer is someone that they are not? Maybe an influencer could be seen as a deceiver, who makes people believe that he is someone else, someone authentic? What if an influencer is engaged in immoral behaviour, yet followers still treat him as trustworthy, or even as an online "god"? In posing these questions, we notice that influencers' lack of authenticity is the beginning of multiple ensuing issues whose implications are consequential insofar as influencers really do hold the power of influence over their followers. Bearing this in mind, the next chapter will examine the essence of influencers' power.

2. Chapter Two: The Power of Influencers and Its Consequences

What is the nature of influencers' power, and how does it relate to their lack of authenticity? In this chapter, we will attempt to answer this very question, exploring the essence of influencers' power and its connection to their authenticity. We will begin by defining the nature of influencers' power, examining what allows them to shape the opinions, purchasing decisions, and behaviours of others. Following this, we will investigate the correlations between their power and inauthenticity of their identity and consider the roles of other actors, such as sponsoring brands and followers. Through this analysis, we aim to uncover the intricate dynamics that underpin the influence of social media personalities and determine whether this influence extends beyond the virtual realm.

2.1. Influencers' Power to Influence

Social media influencers seem to be defined by the power to influence others - such seems to be uncontroversial given the very synonymy between the notion of power and the notion of influence. However, Peter Morriss in his work on power has argued that, although these words appear to be synonyms, they refer to different phenomena. The meaning of the noun power can be understood as being able to act upon a person or a thing. However, the notion of influence is a verb that derives from *influere*, a term that originally in Latin described an astrological theory that some kind of energy from starbursts flowed into individuals and involuntarily impacted them and their actions.(Morriss 2002, 9) So, if we argue that someone has the power to influence, we mean precisely that someone has the ability to have an impact on someone else. We will therefore showcase in this section how the essence of influencers' power is influencing others following Morriss' distinction.

Firstly, let us note that influencers' power comes from the very definition of being an influencer. An influencer is an *"individual who leverages their social and cultural capital on social media to shape the opinions and purchasing decisions of others"* (Wellman et al. 2020, 68) This means that they possess the ability to influence their

followers in a certain way with their knowledge of trends and with their connections, particularly regarding what they buy or how they act in general. Influencers may do so through product recommendations, reviews, or simply by showcasing certain lifestyles or preferences that others might want to imitate. However, influencers may shape people's beliefs and actions as well, not only purchasing decisions. One example is the Polish influencer named "@meta_queen" who is completely AI-generated and encourages her audience to vote in the European Parliament elections. In one of her videos, she attempts to take control of the world through her computer, but an error message appears, stopping her. She then points out that she cannot influence the course of politics because she is an AI-generated persona, but "you" can. She calls people who do not vote "NPCs," referring to "Non-Player Characters" in games, which are controlled by the game's programming rather than an actual player. In this context, it means someone who blindly follows trends and does not take control of their own life. According to this AI-generated influencer, if you do not vote, you do not count - just like an NPC in a game.(Mizerska 2024) This example demonstrates that influencer power extends beyond influencing what the audience purchases; influencers can also shape their audience's actions and engagement with social, cultural, and political phenomena. In this case, the influencer highlights the importance of voting and encourages people to vote, but other examples may vary. Influencers can impact the worldview of their audience as well as encouraging their audience to act in a certain way that substantially impacts their belief system. Therefore, the essence of social media influencer’s power comes from the meaning of what it is to be an influencer in the contemporary sense - to have impact on their audience.

Subsequently, we ought to understand the reason behind this power of influencers. Namely, what precisely allows them to influence opinions, such as the purchasing decisions of their followers? We see two reasons here. The first reason why influencers possess power to influence is because of the characteristics of their identity. Their power comes from their ability to shape and change how others perceive them for the purpose of their platforms’ views. In our preceding analysis of social media influencers’ identity, we showed that they live in a dual identity paradigm - one offline and one online presentation of self. Some online personas change themselves completely, and then we may speak, as already discussed, of a

different identity paradigm. Because influencers have the ability to adjust their virtual presentation of self, they can adjust it accordingly to what the majority followers wish to see. Influencers know what their followers like by engaging with them. As Sneha Chugh pointed out: *“People are more likely to follow and engage with influencers who are relatable and with whom they can engage. Most popular influencers on social media interact with their followers through comments, live sessions, giveaways, and reposting their followers’ stories.”*(Chugh 2023) Additionally, influencers may know what appeals to their followers and shape their online identity and their content accordingly by monitoring the reaction of their audience. Social media platforms give influencers tools to observe followers’ perception of given posts. Instagram, for instance, allows influencers and brands to see trends among followers and how content resonated with them by the accounts a certain post reached, engaged with by likes, comments, saves, shares and replies.(Instagram Help Centre) Apart from shaping influencers’ online identity, there is a second reason behind influencers’ power: followers treat them as a kind of “authority" in a given niche. They produce content that is focused in a given direction, e.g., baking or fitness. Even though some influencers may lack theoretical knowledge on a certain subject, they are still being followed, as the content they produce is funny and pleasing to watch for their audience. There are influencers, however, who are professionally specialised in a given niche, such as dieticians who post content about nutrition or personal trainers who post on social media about working out. In other words, influencers are not necessarily theoretical “authorities in the position to provide reasons to believe”(Wendt 2018, 2), but they may be seen as quasi-authorities because they know a certain niche enough to appeal to it as well as to make it appealing to others. Influencers who are professionals with expertise in a given area might be theoretical authorities, but this is not a strict requirement for gaining virtual fame. It is worth remembering in this respect that social media platforms are not regulated. Everyone can become an influencer if their content is appealing enough to other users of social media platforms. For an influencer, gaining online recognition may be seen as becoming a kind of authority for their followers. Therefore, influencers may have the power to influence their followers to buy or believe something.

The final reason why the essence of influencers’ power is to influence others is due to their ability to make something fashionable or important in a given niche. In this

case, we could refer to influencers as trendsetters. Because of their access to relatively broad audiences, influencers may encourage people to like or support a certain pattern of being - like wearing a certain piece of clothing or having given routines. However, in order to set a new trend, influencers have to persuade their audience in favour of it. Karima Lajnef has analysed distinctive features of social media influencers which make them especially effective among young people. The results of her study have shown that not only the fact of having a certain degree of experience in a given niche makes influencers so effective, but also their trustworthiness and the originality of the content they post. The originality of influencers is the reason behind setting a new trend. She writes: *“Generally; influencers that produce different contents have a great popularity because they produce new trends. Therefore, our results indicate that young people want to be one of their fans just to feel their belonging. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the originality of content can be a source of digital distraction. Teenagers spend a lot of time on social media to keep up with new trends.”*(Lajnef 2023) Consequently, the most prone to social media influence are young people who are easily convinced in favour of a certain content due to it being original or interesting. Those trends often can go beyond the online realm and influence social context as well. We can see this phenomenon in the “Clean Girl” trend that not only dominated the internet in 2023, but also has become a fashion statement on the societal level. This trend was originally started by TikTok influencer “xolizahbeauty”, who instructed her followers on how to achieve a “put-together look” to imitate the broadly understood elite. In 2023, an increasing number of young women bought into this trend to the point that it dominated the fashion and beauty industry generally. "Clean Girl" was not only about fashion to look put together; it also created the ideal of a healthy, organised lifestyle. Taking care of one's health and fitness was a part of this trend.(Gaylor 2023) One could say that this trend also impacted people's everyday routines and, in this sense, their behaviour. This example shows how influencers' power to affect others extends beyond social media and can influence the broader social context. Some trends originally created by influencers have the incredible ability to shape the everyday lives of average people. Therefore, an influencer's true power lies in their ability to influence others.

Contrary to this view, one could argue that influencers do not have the power to influence others because they themselves are subject to influence. This can be seen in the example of setting trends. Influencers not only set new trends but also need to be aware of existing ones. Without this knowledge, trendsetting would not be possible, as one must understand what is popular and fashionable to make a new, original statement. Additionally, true trendsetting is quite rare in social media; repeating and showcasing a new trend requires reliance on others and being influenced by existing trends. For instance, the "Clean Girl" trend was started by one influencer but was imitated and spread by others.(Gaylor 2023) This example suggests that most influencers depend on societal context and only rarely impact it themselves. Furthermore, influencers are influenced by their followers, as their status depends on what their audience likes and whether they engage with their content. Without their followers' impact, influencers would not gain brand recognition, showing that they are, in fact, influenced by their audience.

However, even though influencers rely on their followers' preferences and existing trends, they indeed have the power to influence others. If this were not the case, sponsoring brands would not choose to include them in their budgets to recommend or advertise new or hitherto unpopular products. Social media marketing is a powerful and effective tool precisely because it utilises influencers' positions among their audiences, who view them as authorities or role models they can trust.(Darlington 2023, 43) This trust enables influencers to shape opinions, behaviours, and even societal context. As a result, their impact extends far beyond mere product endorsements.

We have shown that the essence of social media influencers power is to influence others, including their followers and sometimes even the broader social context by setting a trend that others wish to imitate. One may, however, wonder how influencers give the impression of being under the influence of others when they are the ones supposed to be influencing? It seems that influencers' inauthenticity may be the answer. In the next section, we will show that the impression of influencers' power dependency on others, such as sponsors, followers, trends, and social media platforms, is connected to their lack of authenticity.

2.2. Power and Inauthenticity

There appears to be a connection between the power dynamics among influencers, sponsors and followers, and the perceived lack of authenticity in influencers. In this section, we will demonstrate that the impression of influencers' dependency on other actors stems from their lack of authenticity. As discussed in previous sections, influencers lack authenticity due to the nature of their identity characteristics. Their identity and online behaviour are shaped by their desire for online status enhancement and the monetary gain that accompanies their growing fame.

Firstly, we shall see that the impression of power that followers have over influencers is due to influencers' lack of authenticity, and in fact followers do not have power to influence influencers to the extent that influencers have over followers. Inauthentic influencers are seen as prioritising external validation and their commercial gain over their genuine self. As already mentioned in previous sections, external validation of the quality and quantity of audience reaction translates into the commercial gain from collaboration with sponsors. The reason is that the number of followers directly impacts the effectiveness of their product recommendations. Sponsors prefer to collaborate with influencers who can ensure a positive return on investment in influencer marketing.(Leung et. al. 2022, 7) The dynamic between the number of followers and commercial gain results in influencers' focus on adjusting content for the audience preferences rather than the pursuit of authenticity of their identity. This lack of authenticity as a result creates an impression that followers have power over influencers because influencers appear to be tailoring their behaviour and content to please their audience rather than being true to themselves. Nethertheless, this impression of power is illusory because, while influencers might adjust their content to maintain their follower base, they are often still the ones who set trends, create content, and shape the narrative. This means that, in reality, the influence tends to flow more strongly from influencers to followers. Consequently, the impression of power that followers have over influencers comes from influencers' inauthenticity.

Secondly, one could argue that sponsoring brands hold power over influencers since they pay them and thus can demand their content and behaviour align with brand

goals. However, this impression of power also appears to stem from influencers' lack of authenticity, similar to the case with followers - inauthentic influencers may listen to sponsoring brand suggestions regarding content because of the monetary gain they have from that collaboration. Additionally, sponsors' success in accessing their target group depends on the influencers' position. Thus, influencers' power is beneficial for sponsors. Inauthentic influencers, who prioritise monetary gain over genuine self, can engage in varied sponsorships, sometimes promoting products from competing brands. This might suggest that, in some sense, successful influencers have power over sponsors insofar as they can always choose to collaborate with their competition. One could also say that if it was the case that sponsors have power over influencers, it would be beneficial for them both to always reveal their collaboration. However, this is not often the case, as companies tend to claim that revealing the sponsorship may negatively impact the trustworthiness of their product. Similarly, from the influencers' point of view, revealing sponsorship is not always beneficial.(Mackay 2021,155) This reluctance to disclose sponsorships comes from the fear that transparency regarding sponsorship might reduce their position among followers, which would negatively impact both influencers and brands. Therefore, the success of influencer collaborations with brands depends on how followers perceive the influencer and whether they maintain their status among them. Brands do not actually have power over influencers to the extent that influencers have to influence others; this impression arises from influencers' inauthenticity. Influencers often seek external validation and strive to maintain their status, rather than expressing their true selves, leading to the perception that brands control them. Consequently, the impression of brands having power over influencers comes from influencers' lack of authenticity.

2.3. Conclusions and Implications of Chapter Two

In this chapter, we have explored the characteristics of influencers' power and how it connects to their lack of authenticity. Firstly, we have demonstrated that the core of influencers' power lies in their ability to influence others. They shape their followers' purchasing decisions, opinions, and behaviours, and at times, they even impact the broader social context by setting trends. This influence stems from their online

identity and the perception of being authorities or trendsetters in specific niches. We provided examples illustrating how influencers can shape actions and support beyond mere product endorsements. Subsequently, we discussed that the possibly perceived power that sponsors and followers have over influencers arises from the influencers' lack of authenticity. Influencers often adjust their content to maintain their follower base and commercial success, prioritising external validation over genuine self. We could bring our analysis a bit further by posing the question of what consequences could arise from influencers' power to influence and the illusion of influencers' power dependency on sponsors and followers due to influencers' inauthenticity. It appears that the latter factor actually makes influencers' power even more nuanced and, in a sense, amplified. Consequently, it becomes evident that in the realm of social media, influencers hold more power than both sponsors and followers. Neither followers have the power to influence others to the same extent as influencers, nor can sponsoring brands achieve such influence without the involvement of influencers.

This power, however, lies in followers' perception of influencers as trustworthy, reliable, credible and genuine, as if more of a friend or a kind of authority for followers rather than marketers. It seems that another question arises here: does the effectiveness of influencers in fact depend on selling themselves to followers as someone who they are not? In followers' eyes, influencers are not mere marketers. Otherwise, social media marketing would not be such a powerful tool nowadays in the age of automation compared to traditional marketing, and brands would not decide to dedicate their budget to it. Additionally, it would not be the case that both influencers and brands often feel that revealing their collaboration to followers would have a negative impact on both - trustworthiness of the product and trustworthiness of an influencer. This might suggest that the image of influencers which brands utilise comes from their audience's belief in a false picture of an influencer as someone interesting to watch, reliable, trustworthy, having authority, and caring for their audience genuinely. In fact, this is not the case, as influencers are not authentic - their identities are commodified, shaped for the purpose of followers liking them and engaging with them to bring profit both in monetary terms and status enhancement. We have doubts here that followers' belief in a false image is something positive, as it seems that the power of influencing followers to buy or support something can lead

to a negative utilisation of such influence. When influencers wield their power irresponsibly, it can have broader societal impacts, leading followers not only to make unnecessary purchases but also to adopt harmful behaviours, such as spreading health misinformation or developing eating disorders. For instance, the promotion of unrealistic body images by influencers can contribute to body dysmorphia and eating disorders among impressionable audiences. Studies have shown that exposure to idealised images of social media influencers, regardless of gender, can lead to increased body dissatisfaction and lower confidence levels in both women and men. Moreover, the impact extends beyond body image concerns. For example, new mothers exposed to pictures of idealised motherhood are more prone to develop anxiety.(Powell and Pring 2024, 7) This illustrates how influencers' portrayal of unrealistic standards can negatively affect individuals' well-being in general, perpetuating harmful societal norms and unrealistic expectations. Therefore, it has to be stressed that social media influencers possess significant power in today's digital landscape, which has the potential to go beyond the virtual realm to influence the broader societal context as well.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have demonstrated in the first chapter that social media influencers cannot be authentic within the framework of authenticity proposed by Charles Taylor. Influencers hold identities that are commodified, leading to the adjustment of their online selves to meet the demands of their environment, sponsoring brands, trends, market forces, and audience preferences. This results in their identity being treated as a commodity, purchasable in terms of the attention paid to their platforms. Together with this commodified identity, influencers live with a sort of dual identity: one that is moulded to fit the online realm and another that they possess in the physical realm. The online and offline spheres have different requirements, leading to different communication patterns and self-presentations. This duality complicates their ability to become authentic in Taylor's understanding, making it impossible for influencers to determine their true, authentic selves. Moreover, influencers often enhance their identity to such an extent that they create a completely different persona or adopt a completely different online self from the very beginning. This leads to a complete disconnection from their authentic selves. Therefore, these different identities cannot be deemed authentic according to Taylor's understanding of authenticity.

In the second chapter, we demonstrated that influencers do hold power in today's world, and the essence of this power lies in their ability to influence others. Firstly, influencers' power to influence stems from the very definition of what it means to be an influencer today - someone who impacts the purchasing decisions, opinions, and sometimes even beliefs of their followers. We showed that one reason behind this power is influencers' ability to shape their online identity to align with what their audience seeks, making it more presentable and appealing. Another reason for their influence is their perceived authority among their audience, positioning them as figures of authority. Additionally, we identified their trendsetting ability as another manifestation of their power to influence. Influencers create new fashion statements and lifestyles that extend beyond social media, impacting societal norms and everyday lifestyle decisions of ordinary people.

Next, we provided a counterargument to the belief that influencers possess the power to influence others, arguing that influencers are themselves subject to external influences such as trends, their followers' tastes, and the economic desires of sponsoring brands. However, we demonstrated that this counterargument fails to understand one of the essential aspects of influencers' function and identity: If influencers lacked the power to influence others and were merely subjects of influence, sponsoring brands would not seek collaboration with them, nor would influencer marketing be such an effective tool today. This realisation led us to explore the connection between influencers' inauthenticity and their power to influence. In the final section of the chapter, we demonstrated that the impression of influencers' dependency on other actors stems from their lack of authenticity. We showed that followers do not have the power to influence influencers to the extent that influencers wield influence over them. Similarly, the perception that sponsoring brands have greater power over influencers is also a result of influencers' lack of authenticity. Both influencers and brands benefit monetarily from their collaborations. It is actually advantageous for sponsors that influencers hold the power to influence, as this enhances the brands' gains from collaborations. Furthermore, the success of influencer marketing and the collaborations between sponsors and influencers hinge on the perception of influencers by their audience. Therefore, it is in the interest of sponsoring brands for influencers to maintain their position and power to influence.

Several important implications follow from our finding that influencers cannot be authentic in Taylors understanding of authenticity and that they hold a significant power nowadays, primarily through their ability to influence others.

Firstly, we see from the practical standpoint that if influencers cannot be authentic, then the ethics of authenticity cannot be a moral framework for their online actions. In a certain sense, this represents a philosophical disagreement with recent papers in media ethics studies, which tend to utilise authenticity as a guideline for influencers (like Wellman et at 2020). When we speak of influencers' authenticity in such terms, we are actually dealing with a marketing strategy to keep the customer satisfied, and this has nothing to do with authenticity understood in a traditional philosophical sense. It is a philosophically problematic situation to call a marketing strategy a moral framework primarily because of their different objectives. A

marketing strategy aims to maximise profit, therefore the main objective is an economic gain. On the other hand, a moral framework's objective is to guide actions - what is right and what is wrong so as to maintain the wellbeing of the society and individuals that participate in it. Of course we can speak of the ethics of economics to guide a marketing strategy to maintain morally acceptable practices, but in the context of influencers it seems that these distinctions have been blurred or are used interchangeably, which in our understanding both of authenticity and marketing strategy creates an issue.

Secondly, we notice that influencers' power to influence could be problematic as the essence of that power seems to be rooted in the follower's false belief, i.e., the perception of influencers as trustworthy, reliable, credible, and genuine - akin to friends or authorities rather than mere marketers. This perception raises an important question: does the effectiveness of influencers depend on presenting themselves as someone they are not, someone authentic more like a member of a private life than a marketer? If this is the case, then it seems that maintaining this false belief is in influencers' and sponsoring brands' interests, as it is the reason behind the effectiveness of influencers' marketing. In reality, influencers' identities are commodified and shaped to attract followers and generate profit, both monetarily and in terms of status enhancement, so they are not friends, nor are they authentic in their online actions as the relationship with their audience is in their best monetary interest.

Subsequently, when influencers' inauthenticity is viewed as authentic by their audience, the power that they hold could lead to the dangerous utilisation of their position directed at their audience, namely to impact behaviour in a sense that goes beyond purchasing decisions. If followers believe influencers' product recommendations, they might similarly be swayed by their political beliefs or other opinions. This raises concerns about the potential negative utilisation of influencers' positions, possibly undermining democratic processes. If someone is an authority in a given niche and comments on political situations without adequate knowledge, the audience might subconsciously perceive that opinion as a genuine fact. Social media can thus become a realm that fosters disinformation, blurring the line between facts and opinions and promoting false beliefs. This raises the concern that if these false

beliefs become normalised, political debates might be reduced from discussing different opinions to debates between truth and falsity. This tendency is becoming evident in the distinction between populist parties and democratic ones. It could be argued that social media contributes to the rise of populism in today's digital world, as it operates on quick emotional reactions and simplifies elaborate debates into mere acts of liking or hating.

Additionally, there is yet another ethical issue arising from influencers' inauthenticity and power: whether influencers can be deemed guilty if they do something wrong publicly. This issue stems from their dual role - they have the power to influence contexts and trends, yet they are also shaped by the same contexts and trends they must understand to remain relevant. Would they be held accountable if a trend they started had negative consequences or proved harmful to others? This question remains ethically unclear, as there is not enough research on the subject to provide a definitive answer.

Therefore, understanding the essence of influencers' power and its implications is crucial. Influencers' lack of authenticity is a significant issue, as they wield considerable power over their followers, which often constitute a numerous group of people. This power has the potential to extend beyond the virtual realm, impacting broader societal contexts. However, our analysis has limitations that cannot be overlooked. Firstly, our analysis of authenticity is limited to Charles Taylor's understanding of authenticity, and we evaluate influencers' authenticity solely based on his framework. Subsequently, in discussing influencers' identities in the first chapter, we could not determine which identity - the online or the offline one - is the true identity within the dual identity paradigm. This poses a challenge to determining how to assess the authenticity of individual influencers, as it varies case by case and lacks a clear measurement method. Similarly, we cannot definitively identify which influencers create completely different online personas or to what extent. In the second chapter, regarding influencers' power, we are unable to precisely estimate how their power operates or how influential their position is in today's world. Lastly, there may be other consequences of influencers' power and their lack of authenticity that we have not identified. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for a

comprehensive understanding of the subject, and further research is needed to address these gaps.

To conclude our findings, it seems that our study has raised more questions than it has answered, highlighting the need for further research in the area of social media. The rapid technological changes in recent years have brought about numerous challenges, not only regarding influencers and their impact on followers and the social context, but also in areas such as the power and responsibility of social media platforms, the role of governments, and the complex relationship between governments and the owners of these new social realms. Social media platforms represent a new counterpart to the traditional social sphere, and understanding their implications is crucial for addressing the emerging dangers and ethical concerns.

Those dangers likely stem from the disappearance of genuinely private life and the emergence of social media platforms as a new form of social sphere. By sharing every moment of our lives for public approval through comments and likes, we risk disconnecting from our true selves - our private journeys, beliefs, desires, and opinions. The loss of private life, which provides time to reflect and consider opinions present in the world, reduces us to seeking shallow approval. To preserve the benefits of social media while ensuring its safety for users, we might need to reintroduce and prioritise private life. This would involve dedicating time to reflect on the information encountered each day, comparing it with our belief systems, and selectively integrating useful insights while discarding others. This time and space for reflection, along with a reinforced private sphere, could help us avoid oversimplifying life’s complexity into mere likes and dislikes, allowing for deeper, more original thoughts that seem to have been lost. Social media influencers struggle with authenticity because they seek approval on social media platforms and live in the duality of virtual and non-virtual life. However, we can strive for authenticity by maintaining our private spheres. Commodification is impossible in the genuine privacy of our inner lives, where thoughts and beliefs are not subject to market valuation. Just as a home's market value is determined only when it is put on the market, our private thoughts remain invaluable when kept away from public scrutiny. The currency on social media is attention, but some aspects of our lives should remain private, away from this attention. Social media is unlikely to disappear, but as

users, we can learn to use it wisely, preserving the sanctity of our private lives and sharing only what is necessary.

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