

# **Selling brands while staying “authentic”: Instagram influencers’ negotiation of the imagined audience**

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the position of Instagram influencers within the new media landscape. These influencers started out as ordinary people documenting their everyday life through a stream of photographs (Abidin, 2016b; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). However, they are increasingly emerging as an intermediary between advertisers and consumers. This leads to tensions, as influencers find themselves in a position where they need to present an authentic and trustworthy version of themselves to their audience, while also keeping in mind the demands of the advertisers that they wish to work with. Furthermore, these relationships do not take place in a void, rather they are mediated by the platform Instagram, which, as a corporate entity, shapes the behaviour of its users.

This study shows *how Instagram influencers negotiate the relationship with their audience, advertisers and the platform Instagram itself*, using data from 11 interviews with travel influencers, combined with a visual and textual content analysis of their twelve most recent Instagram posts (N = 132). The paper suggests that, in negotiating their newly professionalised position within the media landscape, these influencers need to present themselves as authentic whilst creating content that meets the standards of their imagined audience. On the one hand, they adopt a range of personalisation strategies to interact with the audience, while on the other hand the content which the social media influencer produces is becoming increasingly standardised. Thus, these influencers carefully curate their self-presentation in order to build a loyal audience that is attractive to advertisers.

Key words: Instagram; social media influencer; social media; self-branding; presentation of self

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## Introduction

Although social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram were originally developed as spaces for sharing user-generated content, the content on these platforms is now becoming increasingly professionalised (van Dijck, 2009). On the one hand, content uploaded by corporations is becoming more prevalent (C. Fuchs, 2017). On the other hand, amateur content producers are starting to commodify their audience (Smythe, 1977), and advertisers are keen to take advantage of this. Even seemingly personal content can be interspersed with advertisements, and users are carefully planning what they share online in order to attract the interest of advertisers (Abidin, 2016b; Carter, 2016; Hunter, 2016). Thus, these content producers are repurposing the uses of platforms like Instagram, which were originally designed for sharing spontaneous, unplanned content (Abidin, 2016a). These online content producers increasingly work together with advertisers to market products and services (De Veirman et al., 2017). Previous research has shown that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing through these so-called online influencers is often considered to be more trustworthy than traditional forms of marketing (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017; Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013). These developments in the media landscape are affecting the relationship between consumers of media products, media producers and advertisers. As users of social media platforms are given increasing opportunities to produce their own media content, the boundaries between the categories of consumer and producer are becoming disputed (van Dijck, 2009).

The position of social media influencers, who commodify their audience by interspersing their regular posts about their everyday life with advertorials (Abidin, 2016b), shows evidence of these changing relationships. As the content these influencers produce is located amongst the amateur-created material that populates user-generated content platforms, they can be seen as users who have made the shift towards professional content production. This position can become problematic, as followers expect the social media influencer to be authentic, and to present themselves as part of the online community. Yet, at the same time, the influencer has to meet the demands of the advertisers they wish to work with (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Increasingly, social media influencers openly reflect on the issues that come along with their position within the media landscape. For example, on Instagram, @kaptain.kenny asked her followers to understand that sponsored content is an 'integral part' of an interesting and successful feed, and that it also serves to generate her income. But she also wonders how this 'advertising can be done well', in order to avoid losing followers who do not appreciate the presence of sponsored content (@kaptain.kenny, 2017).

Besides considering the position of the influencer in relation to their audience and the

advertisers they wish to work with, it is also important to recognise the extent to which platforms, as corporate entities, steer the behaviour of their users. These platforms are socio-technical systems that are embedded in our social and political world. Thus, the relationships between social media influencers, advertisers and the audience do not occur in a void. Rather, they are mediated by the platform on which they take place. Therefore the influence of these platforms on the behaviour of content producers needs to be studied from a critical perspective (C. Fuchs, 2013, 2017).

This leads us to the following research question: ***how do travel influencers on Instagram negotiate the relationship with their audience, the advertisers they work with and the platform Instagram itself?*** By scrutinising the position of and self-presentation of social media influencers on Instagram, the current study will add to the literature that critically assesses the power structures in the new media landscape, how these are changing and what this implies for the different actors in the field. Furthermore, this research will also add to the limited body of research on Instagram, which lags behind the research on text-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The reason this study focuses on travel influencers is that previous research has already established that people often come across user-generated content platforms when searching for travel information online (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The content encountered on these platforms is often perceived as more trustworthy than mass media advertising and the content found on official tourism websites (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). However, thus far this research has focused on less professionalised forms of user-generated content, such as reviews (Cox et al., 2009), rather than on the more professionalised content produced by social media influencers. Furthermore, by exploring a different genre the study will add to the existing literature on Instagram influencers, which has predominantly been focused on general lifestyle influencers (Abidin, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

## Theoretical Framework

### The social media influencer

Before outlining the existing literature discussing social media influencers, it is important to clarify the definition of the term. According to Abidin, who has carried out insightful ethnographic research about influencers on Instagram, the social media influencer is someone who

‘accumulate[s] a following [...] through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday [life], upon which paid advertorials – advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions – for products and services are premised’ (Abidin, 2016b: 86).

The advertisements shared by the social media influencer are often described as more effective than traditional advertising. On the one hand, these influencers can target audiences that are hard to reach with traditional advertising techniques (Carter, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017). On the other hand, consumers often see these influencers as a more credible source of information than regular advertisers (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). They are also considered to be more credible than traditional celebrity endorsers. Where traditional celebrity depends on an enforced separation from the audience, the popularity of the social media influencer is premised on a connection with their audience (Senft, 2008). Thus, although the use of opinion leaders as a medium to access the masses is not new (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper, 1964), the social media influencer actively works to construct an “authentic” persona with the purpose of attracting an audience that is of interest to advertisers and thus can be commodified (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Thus far, most research on the social media influencer has been carried out in the realm of marketing. This literature discusses lessons for marketing professionals, and how these lessons can be implemented in their marketing strategy. This includes, for example, how marketers can identify important influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017), how influencer marketing can be integrated into a company’s social media strategy (Booth & Matic, 2011), or the effects that influencers can have on brand publicity (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Although this literature provides valuable insights with regards to the advantages of influencer marketing, it lacks a critical approach and therefore will not be discussed in depth here. Nonetheless, in recent years, a literature embedded in a more critical perspective has started to develop. This literature focuses on the notions of self-branding and the presentation of self. Although much of this research has focused on blogs (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Hunter, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2010), several scholars have studied self-branding strategies on Instagram (e.g. Abidin, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Marwick, 2015). However, the body of research studying blogs or social media outlets other than Instagram also provides us with useful insights which can be extended to the study of Instagram. It is the visual nature of Instagram that sets this medium apart from blogs and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Thus, studying influencers on Instagram can serve to further our understanding of how individuals develop and commodify their personal brand through the use of a highly visual platform.

The strand of literature discussing self-branding focuses on how social media influencers create an authentic persona. Authenticity is one of the markers that is used to differentiate the content produced by the social media influencer from the strategically planned content provided by the mainstream media (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Hunter, 2016). However, the “authenticity” of the social media influencer is a paradoxical one. It is an authenticity

that the influencer carefully produces by selectively sharing snippets from their everyday, personal life (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). Thus, it can be questioned whether the social media influencer's persona is authentic at all. In order to build a loyal audience, the social media influencer works to create what Abidin has dubbed perceived interconnectedness, a seemingly intimate relationship with their followers. Although Abidin differentiates this perceived interconnectedness from the more commonly used parasocial interaction by describing the former as a more democratic and equalised relationship than the latter (Abidin, 2015), it is nonetheless a relationship that is highly strategic and serves to maintain the loyalty of the audience.

It is this expectation of authenticity that creates a tension when the social media influencer wishes to commodify their audience. When an influencer starts writing about commercial products they are often perceived as having lost their authenticity. This can lead to the audience accusing the influencer of selling themselves out, and writing for the money rather than for the community (Hunter, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2010). As commodifying their social media feed is often one of the main goals of the social media influencer, they have adopted a range of strategies which serve to balance the expectations of the audience with those of the advertisers they work with. As Kozinets and colleagues have shown, some bloggers work to conceal the presence of advertisements on their page, whereas others choose to openly evaluate the implications of sharing sponsored content (Kozinets et al., 2010). The latter strategy was used by Instagrammer @kaptain.kenny in the quote discussed earlier, as she asks her followers to understand the role of sponsored content on her feed. Focusing on Instagram specifically, Abidin has shown how influencers strategically integrate commercial products into their signature selfies (Abidin, 2016a). Her work has shown that, although the work of influencers often appears to be effortless, behind the scenes they invest large amounts of time and money in creating an "authentic" persona which meets the demands of both their followers and the advertisers they work with (Abidin, 2016a; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Hence, it is clear that being an influencer on Instagram is about more than just posting selfies. It is now time to position the labour of the social media influencer within the larger media landscape, and assess the implications of their professionalisation. In doing so, the current study will add to the existing literature by linking the body of literature that analyses the strategies of the social media influencer with that discussing the supposed power held by the creators of user-generated content, or the so-called prosumers.

### The politics of user-generated content

As their content professionalises, social media influencers are becoming both production and distribution channels – they are creating content for advertisers and distributing it to a large audience (Carter, 2016). To better understand the implications of this position we can turn to the

literature on user-generated content. Chia has argued that studying blogging can serve to shed light on the sociotechnical system of user-generated content (Chia, 2012) – that is, the study of blogging can shed light on both the technological aspects of blogging as well as how people interact with this technology. Naturally, this argument can also be extended to the practices we witness on social media platforms other than blogs. Overall, the academic discourse discussing user-generated content has been characterised by an ‘infectious rhetoric of empowerment’ (Chia, 2012: 422). The idea persists that the roles of advertisers, media producers and content consumers are converging (Deuze, 2009), and that the content on web 2.0 is increasingly being produced by so-called ‘prosumers’. It has been argued that this prosumption combines the best of production and consumption by giving the consumer the power to shape the product that they are consuming (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012). According to Ritzer and Jurgenson, these prosumers largely encounter themselves outside the control of capitalists, and they cannot be described as exploited due to ‘the fact that prosumers seem to enjoy, even love what they are doing and are willing to devote long hours to it for no pay’ (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010: 21-22).

Nonetheless, although the web was originally celebrated as a place of freedom, it is in fact embedded in capitalist systems (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Companies can profit from free labour by piggybacking on user-generated content (Petersen, 2008), for example by using this content as a channel for advertisements, or by collecting valuable data about their consumers. Furthermore, van Dijck argues that, although most people do not actively participate in media content production, all users qualify as potential consumers. Hence, TIME magazine’s prediction of the many wresting the power from the few has not materialised. According to van Dijck the notion of the prosumer, in overstating the ease of producing and sharing content, exaggerates the extent of user agency and ‘disregards users as objects of targeted advertising’ (van Dijck, 2009: 46). This is important in light of the discussion on the social media influencer, especially as these influencers start to consciously create an audience that can be targeted with advertisements (Carter, 2016). Thus, rather than collapsing the different roles, van Dijck highlights the triad of producers, consumers and advertisers that constitutes the media landscape (van Dijck, 2009). It is this understanding of the relationships in the media industry as functioning in a triad that can help us better understand the position of social media influencers, and the implications of their increasing professionalisation. In fact, in creating an environment that is conducive to the formation of a particular audience that can be subsequently commodified (Caraway, 2011), the social media influencer is becoming increasingly like the professional media producer from which they had initially been differentiated.

When studying the position of the social media influencer within the media landscape, we also need to consider how the relationships between advertisers, producers and consumers are mediated by the platform on which they take place. Not only does the social media influencer need

to negotiate their relationship with their audience and the advertisers they wish to work with, they also need to negotiate the platform that mediates these relationships. Social media platforms are corporate entities that serve as vehicles for content, and in doing so they position themselves strategically (C. Fuchs, 2013, 2017; Gillespie, 2010). In fact, the technology behind these platforms steers human agency through the use of algorithms (Beer, 2009). Whilst the social media influencer needs to develop an audience that engages with their content, there is the constant threat of invisibility resulting from the algorithm that determines which content is shown to which users. Although discussions on how Instagram uses an algorithm to steer the behaviour of its users are limited, the algorithms of other platforms have been studied in some detail. For example, Bucher has described the EdgeRank algorithm of Facebook as a disciplinary technique, which leads to the visibility of content becoming a reward (Bucher, 2012). Thus, those who want to be visible on the platform have to work hard for it. As previous studies on social media influencers have often overlooked the importance of the platform in mediating behaviour, the current study will build on the existing literature by not only looking at how social media influencers negotiate their relationships, but also at how they negotiate the affordances and limitations of Instagram itself.

### The presentation of self

While negotiating the relationships resulting from their position in the media landscape, the social media influencer actively engages in constructing and curating an “authentic” persona. In fact, according to Carter, the social media influencer carefully manipulates their content in order to strategically shift the demographics of their audience. In doing so they work to position their network of followers in relation to the perceived needs of brands (Carter, 2016). Hence, although it is impossible for the social media influencer to know the individuals that make up their audience, they do create an imagined audience, a mental conceptualisation of who it is that they are creating content for (Litt, 2012). Thus, being famous on Instagram is about catering to an audience, and in order to do so the Instagram influencer carefully curates their posts in order to perform a desirable lifestyle and maintain the persona they have chosen to present (Abidin, 2014).

In order to understand the strategies that the social media influencer uses to position themselves in relation to their audience we can turn to Goffman’s theories on the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). Some have argued that, due to the presence of multiple audiences separated in space and time, online content cannot be understood as a performance in Goffman’s sense, but rather should be seen as a carefully curated exhibition (Hogan, 2010). Nonetheless, Goffman’s theories remain applicable to the content of social media influencers. Just like the performer described by Goffman, the social media influencer cannot deviate too much from the persona they have chosen to present (Goffman, 1959; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). As a result, the social media

influencer is highly selective with regards to the content they choose to share, as well as the content they choose not to share (Abidin, 2014).

The social media influencer needs to carefully manage the ways in which they present themselves in order to be attractive to brands (Duffy & Hund, 2015). As mentioned before, one of the key attributes that differentiates the social media influencer from the mainstream celebrity is the perceived interconnectedness that the influencer has with their audience. This perceived interconnectedness is developed by actively rejecting the status elevation and distance that characterises mainstream celebrities, and emphasising the ordinariness of the influencer. The social media influencer achieves this by referring to their audience as followers rather than as fans, by sharing snippets from their backstage, everyday life and by creating a sense of reciprocity by interacting with their followers (Abidin, 2015). In doing so, the social media influencer presents an effortless aesthetic, and obscures the labour necessary to develop and maintain this persona (Abidin, 2016a; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Hence, by presenting themselves as a trustworthy friend (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), the social media influencer makes it attractive for brands to advertise their products through them. Therefore, the social media influencer can be understood as actively positioning themselves between the audience and advertisers, just like traditional media content producers have done for years. The current study will take this understanding and further analyse its implications on the behaviour of the social media influencer and the strategies they develop to present themselves as “authentic” while selling brands.

## Method

In order to investigate how influencers on Instagram negotiate their relationship with their audience, the advertisers they work with and the platform Instagram itself, this study combined in-depth interviews with a visual and textual content analysis of Instagram posts. These two methods complement each other: the interviews provide an insight into how the influencers conceptualise their own role within the media landscape and how they take their self-presentation into consideration, while the analysis of their Instagram feeds shows how they put this into practice. The sample for this study was obtained through purposive sampling and consisted of 11 Instagram influencers whose focus is on the theme of travel. Participants were recruited by searching Instagram for potential interviewees and contacting them directly via e-mail or the Instagram direct messaging system. The study defined influencers on the basis of their follower count, as well as the presence of sponsored content on their feed. The participants had to have at least 5000 followers, as the status of an online influencer is often determined on the basis of their number of followers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). This is also the cut-off point that is often used by influencer marketing agencies when setting up influencer campaigns for brands (e.g. Brand Ambassadors, 2018). The presence of

sponsored content is more difficult to determine, as there is very little regulation of sponsored content on user-generated content platforms (NOS, 2017). Nonetheless, the study sought to include influencers that had worked together with companies or brands, regardless of whether they were paid to create a post or whether they only received a product free of charge. The presence of sponsored content was judged by the researcher by looking for indications like the presence of the hashtag #sp (sponsored post) or #spon, or even the explicit mentioning of a brand name in the caption. Content that was created as part of a press trip was not included unless organisations or brands were explicitly named in the caption. Finally, as the theme of travel is highly international, and many influencers in this domain share English content, the sample was not limited to influencers from a specific country. As a result, the study included participants from the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovenia and Australia. Ten interviews were carried out by calling the participants through Skype or Facebook Messenger, and one interview took place in person. Giving participants the option of completing the interview online made it easier to access a wide range of people, including those who are travelling long-term or are not based out of the Netherlands.

Once the interviewees had been recruited, the first part of the study consisted of a visual and textual content analysis of the feeds of these participants. This analysis encompassed the twelve most recent posts on each influencer's feed as of the date of analysis (N = 132), and looked at both the image and the caption that make up a post. By carrying out a content analysis the researcher studied the manifest meanings present in the images and captions, and classified these into previously defined categories (Bell, 2000). As the aim of this study is to unveil how influencers negotiate their position within the larger media landscape, this analysis focused on the strategies of self-presentation employed by the influencers. This analysis was based on the previous literature discussing online self-presentation, as well as the observations of the researcher in her own use of Instagram. Specifically, the analysis focused on the thematic consistency of the Instagrammer's feed (Abidin, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017), the development of a relationship between the influencer and their audience (Abidin, 2015), and the integration of advertising into the feed (Kozinets et al., 2010). The visual analysis considered the subject and colours of each image, and the positioning of any sponsored products. The textual analysis coded for the style of the caption, whether it was written in the first person, and whether the audience was addressed, and for sponsored content considered at what point in the caption the product was mentioned. A template showing the different elements of this content analysis can be found in Appendix A.

The second part of the study consisted of interviews with the influencers. The nature of these interviews was based on Holstein and Gubrium's premise of active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Hence, although the interviews were based on a set list of topics, the order of these topics was moved around whenever the researcher deemed it fit to do so. In this way, the researcher

attempted to turn the interview into a conversation with the influencer, during which the researcher could provoke responses where necessary, thus contributing to the meaning-making process. In order to shed light on the newly professional position of the social media influencer, the interviews were structured around the following topics: the development and changes in the influencer's Instagram use as they become more professional, their advertising practices and decisions, and the ways in which they negotiate the affordances and limitations of the platform Instagram. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded using qualitative analysis software QDA Miner. Deductive coding was used to divide the text into segments, enabling comparisons and the finding of links between the different interview transcripts (Fielding, 2008; Saldaña, 2009). By using deductive coding the researcher imposes theory onto the data. Thus, the codes used were based on the prior research on social media influencers as discussed above, as well as the topics around which the interviews were structured. As the goal of this study is to understand how the social media influencer negotiates their audience and potential advertisers in their use of Instagram, the following codes were used to organise the data: production, audience, advertising and Instagram. Each of these codes had various sub-codes which broke the data down into manageable sections. The codes and their sub-codes can be found in Appendix C. This coding process helped the researcher identify and compare topics that recurred throughout the interviews. These findings could then be used to build up the analysis, using salient quotes to illustrate the findings.

## Analysis

### Participants

Before discussing the insights obtained in this study, it is important to provide some context to these results by introducing the participants. The travel influencers who were interviewed and whose feeds were analysed as part of this study had varying follower counts. Whereas some had just over 5000 followers when the interviews took place in March and April of 2018, others had over 100,000 followers. It proved difficult to access those Instagrammers with a very large following, and one request for participation was answered by the Director of Brand Relations of the Instagrammer. This already hints at the move towards professionalisation, which, as will be discussed below, was a recurring topic in the interviews, overarching the tensions the participants experienced in developing their self-presentation strategies.

As mentioned in the previous section, the researcher sought to include participants who had been involved in at least one campaign with a brand. Although only 23 of the 132 posts analysed in this study were identified as advertisements, all participants said they had collaborated with a brand

at least once in the past, or they were currently involved in a campaign that had not been shared yet. Furthermore, as will become clear in the analysis, the limited presence of advertisements in the sample may also result from these influencers consciously reducing the presence of sponsored content on their feed.

A total of 11 interviews were carried out, and in total 13 people participated in the interviews as two of the accounts studied were run by a team of two people. A list of the participants is provided in Appendix D. In terms of gender, the sample was highly biased, as besides one male participant, who ran an account together with his girlfriend, all the participants were female. Although several male influencers were contacted to take part in the study, they either did not reply to the request or were not available for participation. Four different nationalities were represented in the sample: seven interviewees were Dutch, two were Belgian, two were Australian and two were from Slovenia. Aside from one interviewee who wrote her captions in both English and Dutch, all of the participants posted solely English language content on their feed. The interviews with the Dutch and one of the Belgian participants were carried out in Dutch, whereas the rest were carried out in English. Any Dutch quotes have been translated to English by the researcher. For the sake of anonymity, all participants have been provided with a pseudonym.

### Negotiating tensions

The discourse of the participants reveals that they are continuously negotiating tensions which affect the ways in which they choose to present themselves to their audience. As will become clear from the analysis, the tensions stem from the various power dynamics experienced by these influencers as a result of their increasing professionalisation as producers within the changing new media landscape. The expectations of the influencers' followers are intertwined with those of potential advertisers, as in order to collaborate with brands one needs a large and loyal following, however, these followers might not appreciate the presence of advertisements on an Instagram feed (Kozinets et al., 2010). These dynamics lead to changes in the behaviour of the influencer, which is evident from the strategies of self-presentation that they choose to employ. In order to ensure continuously high levels of engagement from their following, these influencers imagine an audience and they tweak their self-presentation strategies to align with the expectations of this constructed audience. In doing so, the influencers need to negotiate a problematic tension that arises from these expectations. Although authenticity remains one of the most important markers of value which differentiates the social media influencer from the producers of the mainstream media (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016), the content on Instagram is becoming increasingly standardised. The influencers feel they need to adhere to these standards in order to meet the expectations of the audience and be successful. They therefore need to carefully plan their content

and the way in which they present their persona in order to maintain consistent engagement. Thus, as mentioned briefly above, these influencers are increasingly repurposing the uses of Instagram, which was originally designed for sharing spontaneous snapshots (Abidin, 2016a), and in doing so they are becoming more like the professional content producers of the traditional, mainstream media.

In analysing the strategies the participants employ to negotiate these clashing expectations, this paper will first consider how these influencers imagine their audience, and how this may affect their self-presentation strategies. This will then serve to unveil how these influencers, despite their vocal concerns about authenticity on Instagram, carefully work to present a strategically authentic persona and feed that meet the expectations of that imagined audience. Finally, the paper will discuss the different forms of power experienced by these influencers, and how their personal wants and needs are increasingly in tension with their professional ambitions on Instagram.

### Imagining an audience

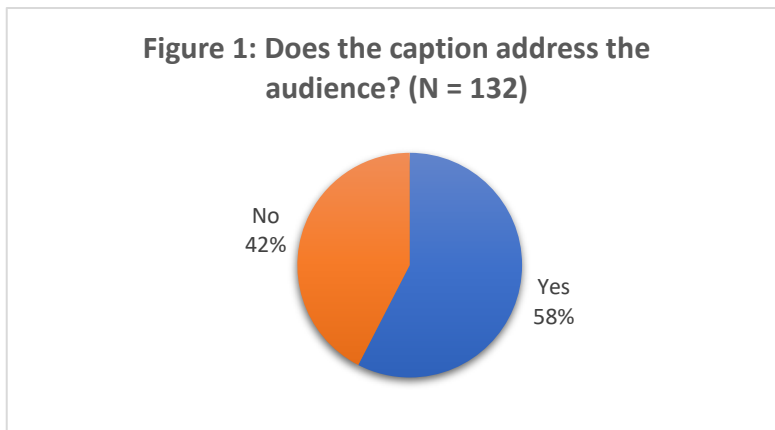
The audience of the social media influencer is often so large and diverse that the influencer cannot possibly know all of the individuals that make up this audience. Hence, they have to create their own mental conceptualisation of their following (Litt, 2012). As the social media influencer desires to commodify their audience by working together with advertisers, the construction of their imagined audience is often guided by this goal (Hunter, 2016). The influencer's conception of who their audience is, or who they would like their audience to be, affects the choices they make with regards to their self-presentation strategies. For example, Nina explained that her audience is 'pretty evenly split between boys and girls' and she thinks the reason for this is that she does not post pictures of herself in 'floaty dresses', but rather presents herself as 'an ordinary person who likes to go hiking and likes to go into natural areas'. Similarly, Elisa said she denied a request to create an advertisement for a bathing suit because she does not want a whole hoard of 'horny men' following her, and she would rather focus her feed on the scenery she encounters during her travels than on her face or body. Thus, these influencers attempt to guide the demographic of their audience by adapting their self-presentation strategies.

Once the influencer has built up an audience, they need to maintain the loyalty of this following. The continuous engagement of the audience with the influencer's content is key in negotiating the threat of invisibility caused by the algorithm (Bucher, 2012). Hence, in order to ensure a constant level of engagement, the content shared needs to meet the expectations of the audience. The influencers in this study are generally aware of what it is that people are 'following them for' (Nina), and when they share a new post they carefully consider whether 'people will really like it' (Elisa). However, it is these expectations of the audience that create tensions which need to be

carefully negotiated by the social media influencer. On the one hand, the audience expects them to be authentic, and present themselves as if they were a trustworthy friend of the audience (Abidin, 2015; Kulmala et al., 2013), whereas on the other hand they expect consistency in the influencer's content and presentation of self (Khamis et al., 2017). Thus, once the influencer has chosen and developed a persona to present, they cannot deviate from the performance of this persona too much or they will be seen as inauthentic (Goffman, 1959). The strategies employed by the influencers in negotiating the paradox caused by these tensions of presenting the self as an authentic persona whilst also creating highly planned content that meets the expectations of the audience will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

### Presenting an authentic persona

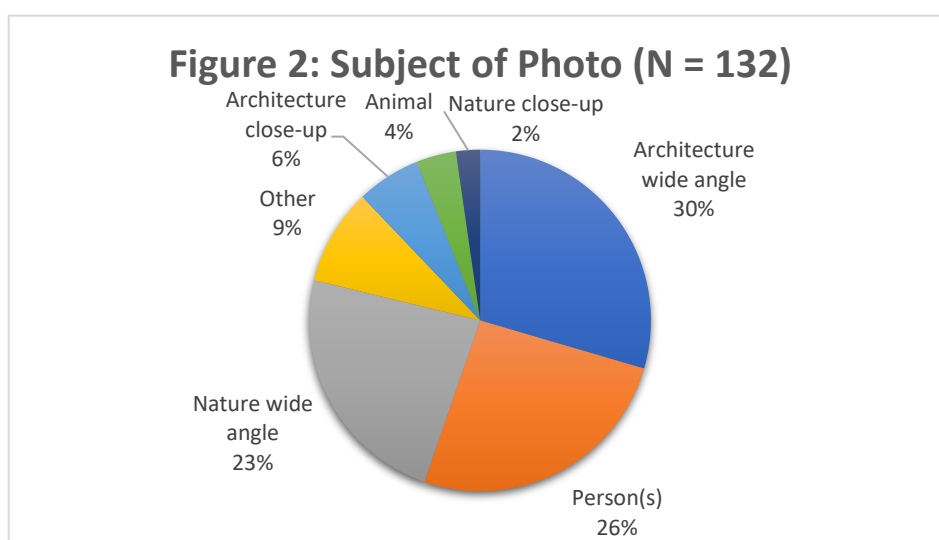
The interviews revealed that coming across as a 'genuine' personality (Amy) remains an important marker of the value of an influencer (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). As discussed earlier, the authenticity of the social media influencer is premised upon the honest communication of their own opinions (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014), as well as the perceived closeness to their audience (Abidin, 2015). However, this authenticity is paradoxical and highly strategic, as it is shaped by the influencer's goal of developing a commodifiable audience. As Nina explained, this strategic authenticity is part of the influencer's self-branding strategy, a being 'seen as a nice person' forms 'a positive connection to your brand'. Furthermore, Amy noted that personal interaction with your followers is important, because the audience becomes 'more interested, [more] engaged with the content when they feel like they know you'. The engagement of the audience with the influencer's content in the form of likes and comments can be used to prove the loyalty of their audience to potential advertisers. Besides this, it can also be used to negotiate the threat of invisibility that results from the algorithm (Bucher, 2012), as it seems that the current algorithm prioritises posts with higher engagement levels.



The interviews, as well as the analysis of the content of the participants' Instagram posts, gave rise to several strategies that these influencers employ in performing an authentic persona. Some of these strategies work at developing a perceived interconnectedness between the audience and the influencer (Abidin, 2015), whereas other strategies aim to ensure honest and transparent communication between the influencer and their followers (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). In the first of these two categories, one of the most simple and frequently used strategies is addressing the audience in the caption, often in the form of a question. As can be seen in Figure 1, within the sample of posts analysed more than half of the captions addressed the audience. As Karen explained, addressing the audience with a question can serve to 'generate engagement'. A simple question like 'whose also ready for spring?' (Sanne) ties in to a current topic, making it more enticing for people to leave a comment. Another strategy which serves to develop a connection with the audience is the sharing of snippets from the influencer's backstage, everyday life in order to create a persona that the audience can relate to (Abidin, 2015). These snippets that the influencer shares have to align with the persona they have chosen to present. For example, Amy and Stephanie announced their engagement by posting several photos of the occasion on their feed, which aligns with their thematic focus on being a travel couple. But an influencer may also choose to simply share some of their feelings. By talking about 'being homesick', Martha shows that she is also just a normal, relatable person, and her life is not as perfect as her Instagram feed might suggest. Even those participants who value some extent of anonymity share some personal elements in order to please their followers, a strategy which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. For example, Elisa said that she prefers to stay anonymous, but she does post a photo of herself every once in a while because she found that those posts tend to receive the highest levels of engagement. As shown in Figure 2 below, despite their focus on travel, the participants frequently post images with a person as the subject, adding a personal element to their feed. Finally, although the content the participants posted to their Instagram stories was not analysed as part of this study, some

participants said they use this feature to share moments from their everyday life. Eva said she uses the feature to share ‘more personal things’ and ‘random stuff’ that does not fit within her feed, for example by showing herself cooking dinner. By posting this content to Instagram stories, the influencer can keep their main feed tidy – the importance of which will be discussed below. It is by adding these details from their everyday life that these influencers give the audience the impression that they know the person behind the feed.

However, this feeling of community and authenticity may be affected when an influencer starts working together with brands, and they may be accused of selling-out (Kozinets et al., 2010). The question of how to maintain authenticity while selling brands remains disputed amongst the participants of this study. As will be discussed in the next section, some prefer to embed sponsored content in such a way that it does not stand out too much. Others, however, argue that one has to be ‘transparent’ and ‘honest’ about working with brands (Nina). Therefore, when they work together with advertisers, these influencers attempt to select only those brands that align with what their account ‘stands for’ (Esther). By maintaining this consistency in their presentation of self they can also maintain their authenticity. Thus, it is clear that the social media influencer has to make careful decisions in order to construct and maintain their authenticity, and ensure that their audience remains interested in their content. These considerations also affect the kind of content that the influencer creates, as the expectations of the audience have led to the increasing standardisation of content on Instagram.

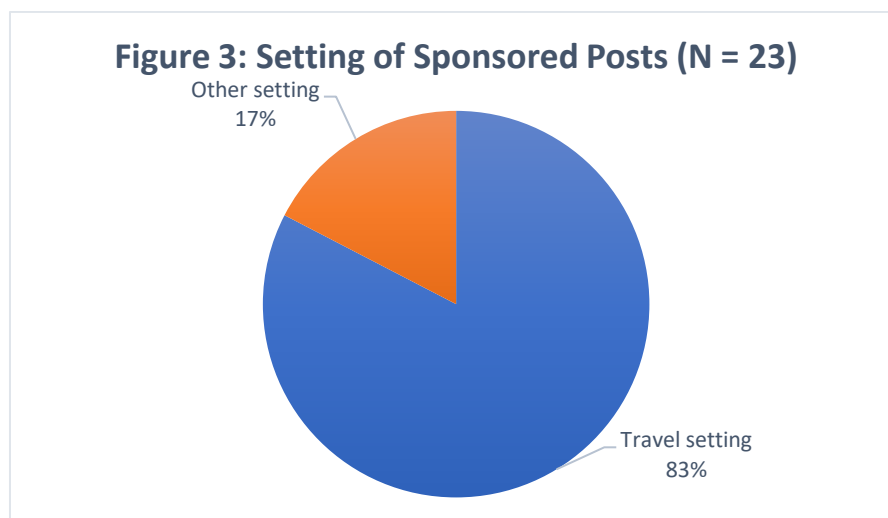


### The standardisation of content

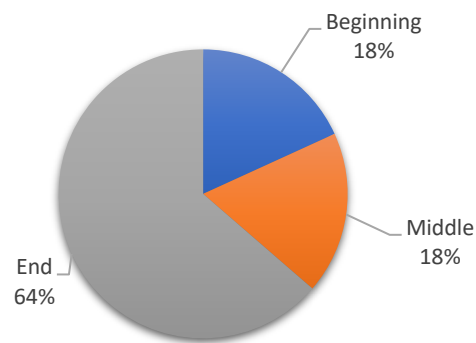
In direct opposition to the expectation of authenticity stands the increasing standardisation of content on Instagram. As influencers are becoming more professional, those with large followings are setting the standards for those trying to grow their account. According to Nina, ‘over-curated

scenes that would just never happen' are now becoming the norm on the platform, and people are responding 'well to things that are quite clearly edited'. Although the participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of being real and authentic, and they lament the increasing standardisation of content, they feel the need to carefully plan their content in order to be successful. In order to meet the expectations of the imagined audience, the participants need to maintain a sense of homogeneity, not only in their authentic self-presentation as described above, but also in the content they share on their feed (Khamis et al., 2017). This is reflected in their posting behaviour, which they adapt accordingly.

One of the ways in which the participants adapt their behaviour to the expectations of the audience is by posting regularly. For example, Sanne explained that when she first started using Instagram she 'posted randomly' and when she felt like it, but now that she is using it more professionally she 'post[s] at least three times per week', something she 'would not stick to' if her account were private. The expectations of the audience are not only taken into account when choosing when to share something, but also when determining what to post. Several participants admitted that they had changed the style of their posts in order to appeal to their audience. For example, they may choose to post solely landscape photography and not share detailed close-ups, which are often found to receive less engagement. This thematic and stylistic consistency was also reflected in the outcomes of the visual content analysis of the posts. As shown in Figure 2, more than half of the 132 posts in the sample were wide angle shots of landscapes or buildings, whereas only 8 percent were close-ups. Furthermore, in order to ensure that a new post fits within the existing feed, some of the participants use a second account or a dedicated app to check the fit of their photo before publishing it. Eva explained that she 'started a second account' where she posts 'all the photos that are also on [her] Instagram account now', and whenever she wants to post a new photo, she posts it to the private account first 'to see how it looks in [her] feed'.



**Figure 4: At what point in the caption is the product mentioned? (N = 23)**



The need for consistency also extends to the sponsored content created by these influencers. Although most interviewees said they try to keep sponsored content to a minimum, when they do collaborate with a brand they do not ‘want the post to look too sponsored’ and they still want it to be ‘a nice photo for [their] followers’ (Sanne). Going somewhat against the importance of transparency discussed above, most interviewees feel that sponsored content should be properly integrated into the feed, as ‘you can immediately see [it]’ when someone is ‘really selling themselves out’ (David). Nonetheless, this thematic integration can also help the influencer in carefully selecting those products that align with the consistent, and therefore authentic, persona that they aim to present. One of the ways in which sponsored content can be integrated into the feed is by using a slider, where the first photo shows the product in a ‘subtle’ way and the second photo shows it more ‘zoomed in’ (Esther). Although the sample of posts analysed in this study contained relatively few sponsored posts, the results suggest that photos of sponsored products are often taken in a travel setting in order to maintain continuity in the feed. As can be seen in Figure 3, more than three quarters of the sponsored posts were photos taken in a travel-related setting. Besides the visual element, the caption may also be used to integrate a product into the narrative of travel. Figure 4 shows that the product is often not mentioned until the end of the caption. The following caption written by Karen, accompanying a sponsored post for a pair of shoes, shows how this can serve to integrate a product into the feed:

‘Nothing better than a morning stroll in the old medina of Rabat to test my new shoes from @bonbaisersdepaname’.

Thus, although several interviewees mentioned a desire to move away from the increasing standardisation and curation of Instagram content, in order to create a successful self-branding

strategy these influencers need to maintain consistency in their feed and their self-presentation (Khamis et al., 2017), and this requires careful planning of content. Hence, these influencers need to find a balance in creating the content that the audience expects from them, while also presenting themselves as a seemingly authentic persona.

## Discussion

The analysis above shows that the increasingly professional position of the social media influencer leads to tensions which need to be carefully negotiated. As their goal is to develop a commodifiable audience which is attractive to advertisers (Hunter, 2016), most participants have a clear conceptualisation of who they want their audience to be. They then internalise the expectations they believe this audience to have, which are often based upon the content produced by more successful influencers. Thus, although no one actually tells these influencers what content they should be producing, they feel the need to adapt their content to certain standards in order to build a loyal audience. The platform Instagram, on the other hand, represents a power that actually acts upon the influencer. Through the constantly changing algorithm the platform creates a threat of invisibility (Bucher, 2012). Of course, if the social media influencer is to work together with advertisers, their content needs to be seen by as many people as possible. Although the participants were aware of the practice of buying followers in order to bypass the difficulty of accumulating them organically with the current algorithm, they did not approve of this practice. As Sanne explained, people like her ‘work very hard’ to build their following in an honest way. She does not think it is fair towards brands that people pretend to have a certain number of followers, and that that ‘leads to collaborations’. Hence, in the case of the participants of this study, the power created by the algorithm pushes them even more in the direction of creating content that appeals to as large an audience as possible. In order to negotiate these different power dynamics, the interviewees develop strategies to maintain a loyal audience through strategic authenticity, while also creating content that aligns with what they believe it is that their audience wants to see. As a result, the content these influencers are producing is becoming more highly planned and curated, thus bringing them closer to the position of traditional media producers (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). And as they consciously start to create an audience that can be targeted with advertisements (Carter, 2016), these influencers highlight the importance of understanding the separate roles of the producers, the consumer and the advertiser within the media landscape (van Dijck, 2009).

As these influencers are becoming more professional, they should be seen as producers rather than as prosumers. Nonetheless, the advertising industry often still sees influencer marketing as a freebie, and the influencers receive very little compensation for their labour. The participants are starting to become critical of their position in the media landscape and the implications this

position has for them. They are, in fact, not 'willing to devote long hours to [their work] for no pay', as Ritzer and Jurgenson assumed of the prosumer (2010: 21-22). As Nina explained, creating a post is

'not as simple as just uploading [...], you have to think about a scene where [the product] would work [...], then there's editing, and then there's a caption, looking for hashtags, engaging with people who engage on the photo. [...] It's not as simple as just uploading one picture'.

Although many started out using Instagram as a hobby, once these influencers reach a certain level of success they feel that their use of the app is 'not free from obligations anymore' (Elisa). Some interviewees even admitted that creating content during their travels has now become a stressful experience for them, rather than something that they enjoy doing. Thus, the increasingly professional position of the social media influencer within the media landscape leads to a number of tensions that can sometimes be difficult to overcome.

## Conclusion

Returning to the research question, these travel influencers negotiate their relationship with their audience, advertisers and the platform Instagram by developing a strategic authenticity (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014) while posting content that meets the expectations of their imagined audience. These strategies serve to negotiate the pressures felt by the influencers. If the goal of the influencer is to commodify their audience and work together with advertisers they experience two forms of power resulting from the need for a loyal and active audience. On the one hand, there is the internalised power of the audience – by creating an imagined conceptualisation of their audience (Litt, 2012), the social media influencer internalises the expectations of this audience, which are shaped by the content created by more successful Instagrammers. On the other hand, the platform Instagram has power over these influencers through the algorithm, which directly affects the engagement an influencer receives on their posts. And once they start working together with advertisers, in order to avoid being accused of selling-out (Kozinets et al., 2010), the influencer needs to carefully integrate the sponsored content into their already established strategies. Although this authenticity still seemingly differentiates the social media influencer from the traditional media producer, it is in fact planned strategically so that advertisers can benefit from it. Therefore, the social media influencer now encounters themselves in a position between advertisers and the audience, where they are increasingly taking the role of a professional content producer (van Dijck, 2009). Thus, what in many cases started as user-generated content has now become embedded in the structures of capitalism, as influencers are targeting advertisements at a purposefully built

audience. Therefore, this study has further confirmed the increasingly professional position of the social media influencer (Abidin, 2016a), providing these insights with theoretical grounding by critically assessing the power structures in this new media landscape. Once building an audience becomes a goal, the influencer loses a part of the freedom they had in creating the content on their feed and becomes a ball directed by the expectations of other players in the field.

Although this study has unveiled some of the strategies employed by influencers in negotiating their position in the media landscape, the sample of sponsored posts was somewhat limited. Further research is necessary to explore how the creation of sponsored content differs from that of regular content. Although some participants were sure that their audience is aware of the presence of sponsored content, others said that the advertisements they post are so similar to their regular content that their audience probably does not see a difference. It is thus important to study how the audience perceives this content. Furthermore, as several participants mentioned their use of Instagram stories to share snippets from their daily life, an analysis of content posted there could improve our understanding of the connections that these influencers make to their audience, and therefore how they negotiate the tensions experienced.

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## Appendix A: Template For Visual and Textual Content Analysis

<b>Visual Content Analysis</b>	
Subject of photo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature wide angle</li> <li>• Nature close up</li> <li>• Architecture wide angle</li> <li>• Architecture close up</li> <li>• Person</li> <li>• Animal</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
Colours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most salient colours in image noted down</li> </ul>
Positioning of product (sponsored content only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central</li> <li>• Peripheral</li> <li>• Product not shown</li> </ul>
Setting (sponsored content only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel related</li> <li>• Not travel related</li> </ul>
<b>Textual Content Analysis</b>	
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal</li> <li>• Informal</li> </ul>
Written in first person?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
Audience addressed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
When is the product mentioned? (sponsored content only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning</li> <li>• Middle</li> <li>• End</li> </ul>

## Appendix B: Interview guide

### 1. History of Instagram use (start, early posts, gaining an audience)

- When did you start using Instagram and why?
- What did you post in the beginning? Do you remember your first posts? How were they?
- How did you start building an audience? Who were your first followers? How did you grow them? (Probe: Did getting new followers have an impact on what you posted?)
- Who is your audience now?

### 2. Current practices of Instagram use (routines, decision-making process, presentation of the self)

- What are you posting now? Does it differ from what you posted in the beginning? How and why?
- How do you see your Instagram feed? (probe: is it a reflection of who you are or more of an outlet for professional skills?)
- How often do you post? Do you have a routine, what is it?
- Do you see differences in how your photos perform? Does this play a role in what you choose to post?
- Do you like other people's posts? Do you follow a lot of other people? When do you decide to follow someone?

### 3. Discussion of two posts selected by the researcher

- Let's take this post: tell me how it came about (probe: photo, composition, caption, timing of posting)

### 3. Advertising (history, practices, concerns)

- How did you get involved in advertising specific products?
- Can you tell me more about how such sponsored posts work? Do you get in touch with the advertiser? Do they contact you? (Follow up: how many requests do they get, how many posts are they asked to put up, are they given any guidelines, are the guidelines strict etc.)
- How do you choose who to work with?
- Do you feel more conscious of what you are posting when it's a sponsored post? (Probe: do you think your followers treat your sponsored posts differently?)
- What are your biggest worries when you post sponsored content?

### 4. Platform (advantages of Instagram, constraints/limitations)

- What do you like about Instagram? What don't you like?
- How do you cope with the constraints of the platform? (e.g. dimensions of photo)
- How do you deal with the constantly changing algorithm?

### 5. Ending

- What is your favourite post and why? (how was it produced, for what purposes, how was it received)
- Is there anything you expected me to ask but I didn't?

## Appendix C: Coding scheme for interviews

Code	Sub-codes
<b>Production</b>	Production of posts
	Development of production
	Routine
<b>Audience</b>	Who is the audience
	Growth of the audience
	Interaction with the audience
<b>Advertising</b>	How it starts
	Who to work with
	How it works
	Production of sponsored posts
	Worries
<b>Instagram</b>	Why they use Instagram
	Limitations of Instagram
	Development of Instagram

## Appendix D: Participants

<b>Name of interviewee(s) (Note: all names are pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Follower count (as of June 20, 2018)</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
Barbara	5568	Dutch
Esther	6821	Dutch
Nina	22 100	Australian
Sanne	20 200	Dutch
Karen	38 100	Belgian
Elisa	107 000	Dutch
Amy and Stephanie	20 100	Australian and Belgian
Jessica and David	6981	Slovenian
Eva	35 500	Dutch
Martha	7834	Dutch
Iris	18 100	Dutch